

Particular and Universal: Problems posed by Shaku Soen's "Zen"

John M. Thompson
Christopher Newport University

Shaku Soen (a.k.a. Kogaku Soen, 1859-1919; "Shaku" is a Japanese Buddhist honorific) was a tremendously enigmatic individual. A proponent of the "New Buddhism" (*shin bukkyo*) movement that arose in Japan during the Meiji period (1868-1912),¹ Soen was the first Zen master to travel to America where he spoke at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions. There he formed a close alliance with Paul Carus (1852-1919), who helped him and his protégé D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966) introduce Zen to a Western audience.² It is no stretch to say that Soen Roshi is largely responsible for common perceptions of Buddhism in general (a rational and scientific tradition rejecting ritual and theistic superstition) and Zen in particular (a path of individual effort culminating in a direct experience of reality). The latter view especially has shaped popular notions of "mysticism" in the 20th and 21st centuries. Indeed, when we examine Soen Roshi's life and writings, it becomes evident that in ignoring him, scholars have overlooked a significant source of material for the academic study of mysticism.

Background

As is often the case with practicing mystics and mystical thinkers, Soen's spiritual views were shaped by his personal life.³ Soen was trained in traditional Rinzai style by one of the most important figures in Meiji era Japan, Imakita Kosen (1816-1892), Dharma heir to the lineage of master Hakuin (1685-1768).⁴ Ordained at age 12, Soen zealously threw himself into Zen practice. Despite his Zen enthusiasm, however, he had ecumenical interests even in his youth, going even so far as to study at a Tendai temple for six months. He received the official seal of Dharma transmission (*inka shomei*) at the age of twenty-four and, with Kosen Roshi's encouragement, he left his home temple of Engakuji in Kamakura to enroll in the prestigious Keio University in Tokyo to study English and Western philosophy and religion, a major departure from the typical Zen monastic routine.⁵ Upon graduation, he embarked on an extended journey to Southeast Asia, where he ordained as a Theravadin monk and given the Ceylonese name Pannaketu. For two years he studied Pali and lived in monastic communities to learn first-hand the stringent discipline still practiced by followers of Theravada.⁶ He

returned to Engakuji in 1889, eventually becoming chief abbot after Kosen Roshi died.

Following the example of his master, Soen actively invited lay people to engage in Zen study at the monastery, especially *zazen* and *koan* training. He even revived a *zazen* society for lay people in Tokyo, the *Ryomokyo-kai* originally founded by Kosen Roshi in 1875. As a result, he attracted a large popular following, becoming a well known figure in Japan and being selected by a conference of abbots to help edit a book entitled *The Essentials of Buddhism – All Sects*. It was as a direct result of his fame that he was invited to speak at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 along with other luminaries such as Swami Vivekananda (1862-1902) and Angarika Dharmapala (1864-1933). Soen Roshi seized the opportunity in Chicago to begin propagating his new style of Zen in America. It was also at the Parliament that he forged a friendship with Paul Carus, a relationship that proved instrumental in both men's lives.⁷

Upon his return to Japan, Soen Roshi traveled throughout Japan's growing imperial domains, even serving as an army chaplain in the Russo-Japanese war. In 1905 Soen Roshi returned to the U.S. where he stayed for some nine months in San Francisco at the private residence of Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Russell. There he set up a small *zendo* and began to train the family in Zen, including *koan* study. During this time Soen Roshi also toured America extensively, giving public addresses to various audiences. In 1906 he returned to Japan by way of Europe, India and Southeast Asia. Back in his homeland he devoted himself to lecturing and training laity in Zen before resuming his official temple duties as abbot. He passed away in Kamakura in 1919.

On the basis of his many achievements alone, Soen deserves recognition as a major figure in the history of religions. He himself was an extraordinary individual (like many famous mystics): licensed Zen master before age twenty-five, Tendai student, genuine homeless *bhikku*, world traveler, army chaplain, international lecturer and celebrity, even a poet. He seems to have thrived on crossing boundaries and challenging many traditional ways of doing things. In fact Soen was the first licensed roshi to teach Zen to *gaijin*, much to the chagrin of the Zen establishment.⁸ Due to his cosmopolitan interests and evangelical energy he was instrumental in furthering the Pan-Buddhist movement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries that some scholars have dubbed "Modern Buddhism."⁹ By most accounts Soen was the prototypical Zen master

(stern, authoritative, exacting) who nonetheless evoked deep loyalty in his students, several of whom played major roles in the rise of Buddhism in America. As one scholar puts it, “What might have been lacking in the glamour of his external appearance was more than compensated for by the religious power of his personality.”¹⁰ Truly few people in the past century have left such a lasting impression on those who came under their sway. Yet Soen warrants careful consideration by scholars not just for his life and influence but also for what he wrote and said about mysticism and mystical experience.

“Theory” of mysticism

It is important to keep in mind that Soen never sets out an explicit theory of mysticism. He was not a scholar or theorist (although he did have formal university training) but a Zen priest, hence he gives no systematic explanation of “mysticism” or “mystical practice” *per se*. Instead we must piece together his views from his sermons, transcripts of lectures, Dharma talks etc., many of which were collected by Suzuki and published in a single volume entitled *Zen for Americans*.¹¹ This work clearly evinces Soen Roshi’s evangelical interests, as he focuses on introducing Zen to an audience not versed in the details of Buddhist history and practice, although he is not above the occasional polemic. Most of these pieces, though, are apologetic and/or corrective in nature, seeking to disabuse his listeners of mistaken ideas concerning the Dharma. Often he cites Western thinkers, quotes the Bible and even uses expressly Christian terminology to explain Buddhist teachings.¹² Moreover, as a leading advocate of “Modern Buddhism,” Soen was intentionally staking a claim for the East as a whole (and Japan in particular) as a force to be reckoned with – a point to which I will return.

Soen also never seems to have called himself a “mystic,” and in fact rarely uses the terms “mystic,” “mystical” or “mysticism.” In a few places, for example, he does use the term “mystic” but it is in a casual manner, as a synonym for monks (both Christian and Buddhist).¹³ However, he does speak of such things as “intuition,” “realization,” experience etc. as well as their metaphysical import (what they tell us about reality and the human condition). This experiential focus places him very much in line with the approach taken by many scholars of mysticism in the past few decades, although this prevailing approach certainly has its critics.¹⁴

A continuous theme in Soen Roshi’s sermons is the idea of a universal experience of enlightenment lying at the heart of all religion.

He writes, religion “is essentially founded on facts of one’s own spiritual experience, which is beyond intellectual demonstrability and which opens a finite mind to the light of universal effulgence,” adding that this enlightenment is “a man’s becoming conscious through personal experience of the ultimate nature of his inner being.”¹⁵ Elsewhere, he speaks of such insight as a stemming from a mysterious “religious sense” or “faculty,” *prajna*. This is a deep knowing that differs from the senses and reasoning in that it sees immediately, intuitively, non-discursively, and “will reveal to us the inmost life of the universe.”¹⁶

For Soen, *prajna* lays open the truth of existence, the truth taught by the Buddha. This is, moreover, “the highest reality that transcends the duality of body and mind as well as the limitations of time and space. . . it is an absolute unity, and there is nothing individual, particular, dualistic, and conditional.”¹⁷ When we are enlightened, we wake up to our essential unity with reality, seeing through the subject-object dualities that characterize normal everyday life.

Furthermore, according to Soen the awakening experience we have by means of *prajna*, the truth found in the teachings of Buddhism, is the ultimate truth of *all* religions. This is because, in his view, any religion worthy of the name aims “to see facts directly and to believe and to live them accordingly.”¹⁸ Seeing the truth directly is to become fully conscious of the single reality in which we all share. Soen declares that “there is but one reality and we can call it by any name. Buddhism is not particular in this matter of designation. You may call it God or reason or life or suchness or love . . .”¹⁹ Elsewhere he notes, “Truth, be it religious or philosophical or scientific, is universal and as such does not allow any modification or distortion.”²⁰ Truth is one and the same for all.

As perhaps would be expected, Soen maintains that the nondualistic “unity” experienced in flashes of enlightenment is closer to the final truth than what we typically find in theistic traditions, which place their faith in an external personal deity. This is not to say that he dismisses theistic faiths out of hand (he acknowledges Pure Land as a form of Buddhism and says some thoughtful things about the bodhisattva Guanyin/Kannon). However, he clearly views theistic conceptions of ultimate reality as being secondary or derivative (i.e. not the final ultimate truth), stating, “Buddhism rejects the existence of a personal God as he is ordinarily understood by some religionists.”²¹ Of course it almost goes without saying that Soen’s presentation of Buddhism and Zen, clearly pitched to a Western audience hungry for an exotic

alternative to mainstream Protestant Christianity, marks a major departure from the many forms of Buddhism (“Buddhisms”) traditionally practiced in his Japanese homeland and throughout Asia.²²

Analysis

As I have already stated, Soen, although by no means a scholar of mysticism, clearly had a “theory” of mysticism, however inchoate. While some may dismiss his presentation of Buddhism (and Zen) as “inauthentic,” there can be little doubt that he has some intriguing things to say about spiritual matters, the nature of reality and the place of humanity in the grand cosmic scene. Restating his views briefly, Soen Roshi maintains the unity of the absolute beneath the many particular things of the world. Such unity, which is the basis of all reality, embraces all things but finds its most obvious expression in the human spirit. For Soen, the truth can be glimpsed through intuitive, “pre-rational” means, and is accessed through a mysterious foundational faculty of humanity. Furthermore, the awakening to truth is the same truth found in all cultures and religions. This truth may be embodied differently in various guises, referred to through different symbols and metaphors (although it can never be fully described) but it remains the same. Perhaps just as important, the spiritual insight that characterizes full realization cannot be attained through intellection but requires the practice of meditation (*dhyana*), something central to Buddhism (especially Zen) although Soen Roshi offers little in the way of concrete details as to the exact procedures required.

From this brief outline it is relatively easy to tease out certain resemblances between Soen’s views of mysticism and those found in the work of more familiar theorists. To cite just a few examples, Soen’s explication of awakening experiences have strong resonance with William James’ discussion of the four marks of religious experience (ineffability, possessing noetic quality, transiency, passivity) and the authority that such experiences have for the mystic.²³ In addition, Soen’s views of awakening and the metaphysical truths realized have strong resonance with the ideas of W. T. Stace. In his landmark book *Mysticism and Philosophy* Stace distinguishes between introvertive (enstatic) and extrovertive (ecstatic) mystical experiences, as well as arguing for a “pantheist” view of ultimate reality.²⁴ Soen’s focus on experiences of spiritual enlightenment would certainly seem to be what Stace means by introvertive mystical experiences. Moreover, Soen while explicitly speaks of Buddhists as being “essentially monistic,”²⁵ and expressly denies that Buddhism is pantheism, he does suggest it can be understood

as “panentheism,” – which arguably is a more accurate term for Stace’s position.²⁶

The differences between Soen’s views and those of other well-known scholars of mysticism are equally intriguing and instructive. It would seem that Soen would be in agreement with R.C. Zaehner that there is an important distinction between theistic and monistic mysticisms but no doubt he would disagree with Zaehner’s insistence that there is an “unbridgeable gulf” between these two types of mysticism and that the former (particularly as articulated within Catholic tradition) is necessarily the true sacred vision.²⁷ Even more noteworthy, Soen’s insistence on the universal nature of mystical experiences as direct, immediate encounters with ultimate reality directly contradicts the constructivist perspective articulated most strongly by Steven Katz, who famously insists that, “There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences.”²⁸ Like Katz, though, Soen freely admits to the contextual nature of actual religious institutions, practices, doctrines etc.

Soen continually insists on the centrality of meditation practice (*dhyana*) in attaining spiritual awakening, something perhaps only to be expected from a Zen roshi who himself spent years of his life in *zazen*. It is only through meditation that one experiences enlightenment. Soen describes such realization as an event in which one breaks through “the wall of intellectual limitation,” thereby stopping the usual flow of discursive consciousness.²⁹ Anyone who is familiar with the scholarly literature on mysticism will note the affinities Soen’s view has with the work of Robert Forman who in several of works outlines a “forgetting model” for the mechanics involved in the arising of a “pure consciousness experience” (PCE).³⁰ Even more intriguing though, Soen also maintains that the Buddhist practice of *dhyana* is eminently practical in an everyday sense. As he puts it, *dhyana* “is one of the most efficient means of training oneself morally and physically,” and “is singularly effective in the tranquilization of the mind, the purification of the heart, as well as in the relaxation of the nervous tension.”³¹ If he were alive today, Soen Roshi might very well be doing a regularly column in “Shambhala Sun” or “Yoga Journal.” Although it may come as no surprise that we find these common themes in the work of Soen and that of well-known scholars of mysticism (to say nothing of contemporary spiritual “self help” gurus), we should not forget that Soen predates most of them by years if not decades.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Soen's views of mysticism, however, is the fundamental tension between universalism and particularism that lies at its heart. Interestingly, this tension directly reflects a metaphysical vision so characteristic of East Asian religious philosophies (e.g. Tiantai/Tendai and Huayan/Kegon Buddhism, the Neo-Confucianism schools of both Zhu Xi and Wangyang Ming, etc.) that simultaneously affirms both unity and difference, transcendence and immanence. For Soen, this identity-cum-difference of "the one in the many and the many in the one" is the true vision of Buddhism, and the final truth of Zen. As he puts it, "To state it more comprehensively, Buddhism recognizes the coexistence and identity of the two principles, sameness and difference. Things are many and yet one; they are one and yet many. I am not thou, and thou art not I; and yet we are all one in essence."³² Such a view is not rational in the ordinary sense, defying as it does the logic of our worldly intellects. In a word, it is mystical, the result of a direct encounter with what seems to be ultimate reality.

In some respects, this tension between unity and difference anticipates the conflict between advocates of perennialism (essentialists) and advocates of contextualism (empiricists) that has characterized the study of mysticism in recent years. Like the perennialists, Soen champions the universal: truth is one, absolute, available to all, the same for all although it may be approached by diverse means and understood through different concepts. Yet like the contextualists, Soen also repeatedly insists on difference and particularity; Buddhism is unique, different from other faiths. And Buddhism, especially as found in Zen, provides the most reasonable view of truth as well as the most detailed and effective methods for spiritual enlightenment. It does not appear that Soen ever sought to resolve the inherent tension between these divergent perspectives.

In fact, Soen's Zen particularism remained such a strong current in his life that it sometimes overshadowed his universalist sentiments. Throughout his life, Soen never forgot his Zen, even during his sorties far away from Japan. During his years as a Theravadin *bhikku* he was deeply impressed with the discipline of his fellow monks but, in keeping with Zen's proverbial iconoclasm, he remained dismissive of the more popularized aspects of Theravada practice such as the veneration of relics. For him Mahayana was always superior. He even maintained that Buddhism had reached its peak in Japanese forms of Mahayana, especially Zen, speaking of it as "more comprehensive, more religious,

more humanistic, and more satisfying to the innermost needs of the religious consciousness.”³³

His championing of Zen above other spiritual paths and his self-understanding as the Zen apostle to the *gaijin* comes out in other ways as well. For instance, in a poem he composed while traveling on a steamer to the United States, he explicitly compares himself to Bodhidharma, the mythic patriarch who brought Zen to the East.³⁴ In another poem addressed to Mrs. Russell, Soen likens himself to Huineng, the Sixth Patriarch who preaches the famous “Platform Sutra,” one of the seminal texts of Zen tradition.³⁵ Elsewhere in one of his essays Soen suggests Buddhism is the most direct path by which we can awaken to universal truth, retelling the legendary story of the Buddha’s famous “Flower Sermon” as the perfect example of intuitive realization.³⁶ The “Flower Sermon,” of course, is often regarded as the veritable fountainhead of Zen with its insistence on a “direct mind to mind transmission” beyond the reach of words and concepts. In Soen’s eyes this event is the paradigmatic instance of humanity’s spiritual awakening. It is an immediate realization and it is the quintessential *Zen* moment.

When looking at his life and work as a whole, it seems clear that the tension between the contradictory poles of universalism and particularism that is so strong in Soen’s views on mysticism also reflects the widely divergent influences on his life and thought. Among the most significant aside from his monastic training, of course, were his studies of the Modern West. In his many essays and address Soen constantly quotes Western thinkers (Schleiermacher, Goethe, Emerson), obviously as a way to help his audience grasp his points but also to place Buddhism (and Zen) securely in modern Western discourse. Like many Buddhist modernists, Soen also took great pains to reconcile the religion of Buddhism with science, the epitome of rational endeavors (he never questions role of science as method and discipline uncovering truth, at least in the physical world). We can see this stress on scientific rationalism clearly in his interpretation of Buddhist idea of “immortality,” which he contrasts with the Christian notion of an immortal soul. For Soen, the latter seems rather ridiculous, particularly when compared with the Buddhist teaching of the immortality of work or deed (i.e. *karma*), which he considers to be “more in accordance with the result of modern scientific investigation”.³⁷

Moreover, Soen extended his Kantian religious perspective (religion within the confines of reason) through his work in articulating

and even creating “Modern Buddhism,” a form of the Dharma that is remarkably Protestant (dismissive of ritual and supernaturalism) and, in the best tradition of liberal Protestant Christianity, is quite tolerant of differing faiths. He also in way that would make Rousseau proud speaks of the pursuit of truth as requiring that we “shake off all these prejudices and endeavor to comprehend the truth as a whole and be always humble and broad-minded and tolerant.”³⁸ In fact, in some respects Soen Roshi was so liberal that he saw all religions as true. Some scholars have even suggested that Soen was influenced by Theosophy, which itself is the product of the widespread romanticizing of the “mystical East” that developed as a result of Western colonial expansion.³⁹

Nonetheless, as we have already seen, it is undeniable that Soen invariably places Buddhism ahead of other religions, seemingly because of its unique ability to foster a direct intuition of universal truth. As he notes rather passionately:

Buddhists through dhyana endeavor to reach the bottom of things and there to grasp with their own hands the very life of the universe, which makes the sun rise in the morning, makes the bird cheerfully sing in the balmy spring breeze, and also makes the biped called man hunger for love, righteousness, liberty, truth, and goodness.⁴⁰

Other faiths (e.g. Hinduism) do not offer as clear a view or as effective a means of understanding reality.⁴¹ This is especially the case, it seems, for Christianity, which for the most part has lacked the systematic meditation disciplines found in Buddhism and which, even more seriously, is marred by superstitious belief in miracles to say nothing of a savior whose angry outbursts in the temple prove he had not “attained to the calmness and dignity of Buddha.”⁴²

Perhaps just as interestingly, this tension between universalism and particularism seems to reflect contradictory forces within Soen’s personal life. Indeed, it is hard to resist the conclusion that he harbored deeply embedded conflicts within his own psyche. Soen was a man trained in traditional Rinzai style who received official recognition from the Rinzai establishment, and going on to serve as abbot of both Engakuji and Kenchoji temples in Kamakura, the traditional “Rinzai heartland” for centuries. He thus was very much an “insider” in the Zen world of Meiji Japan – a fact that critical studies of Soen and his students

seem to downplay. Yet at the very same time he truly pushed the envelope, departing from the traditional Zen clerical path in numerous ways. Early in his monastic career he embraced Tendai training and Theravada monastic styles to help create a truly nonsectarian style of Buddhism. He also eagerly immersed himself in Western learning and took advantage of every opportunity to propagate the Dharma in the West, particularly America. Clearly he was not your typical Zen roshi.

As I have already indicated, this bipolar tension that looms so large in Soen's life and writings forces us to confront many of the vexing issues in the academic study of mysticism. I have already touched upon the conflict between perennialism and contextualism, but Soen's work also raises the issue of the role of language in mystical experience. As I mention, Soen often uses Western terminology to explain Buddhist points, including mystical realizations. Is it possible that in so doing he has distorted what these experiences really are like, fitting them into a procrustean bed better suited for post-romantic Westerners?⁴³ In addition, his case also raises issues concerning the merits of scholarly versus contemplative approaches. Soen, like many of his colleagues involved in establishing "Modern Buddhism," was university educated, devoting much of his life to expounding the Dharma in more or less academic contexts (conferences, speeches to learned bodies, etc.) Yet he was also fully ordained by the Rinzai establishment, oversaw the Zen training of numerous people, and spent large portions of his life in monastic settings, both Zen and otherwise. In other words, he was a genuine "scholar-practitioner," and the influence of both these milieus (academic and contemplative) on his work is palpable. In truth, Shaku Soen's work even prompts us to question yet again the very notion of "mysticism" itself. Is this thing we call "mysticism" a universal phenomenon (or class of similar phenomena sharing Wittgensteinian "family resemblances" – as much of Soen's universalistic views seem to suggest) or is it a scholarly construction, perhaps even an "illusory" category as Hans Penner, for one, has notably argued? Certainly we can make strong *prima facie* argument for the latter when we critically examine how Soen was shaped by Western influences, to say nothing of the modernizing and reforming tendencies that were so prominent in his work. Nonetheless, one suspects that as a good Buddhist, Soen would prefer to steer a middle way here.

The example of Soen Roshi also raises issues concerning the transmission of mystical experiences (or at least their accounts). Although he did personally train students in *zazen* and *koan* study, most

of the evidence for his mystical views and practices comes down to us through the medium of his writings. In this regard, we cannot overlook the roles of Suzuki and Carus in Soen's work. It is obvious that Soen and Suzuki had an exceedingly close relationship. Suzuki studied under him for several years, solving the infamous *mu koan* under his direction and having his own experience of *satori* validated by his master.⁴⁴ During his travels to America in 1893 and twelve years later Suzuki served as Soen's attendant and translator. There are also hints from some sources (including Suzuki himself) that Suzuki may have even ghost-written or at the very least exercised a strong editorial hand over the printed English versions of Soen's sermons and addresses.⁴⁵ In the case of Carus, while his influence on Suzuki has been well documented, his relationship to Soen is murkier. Soen certainly encouraged Carus to write his landmark book *The Gospel of Buddhism* (which became his most widely-read work), going so far as to write the book's introduction and even recommending it (with some reservations) for Japanese study.⁴⁶ Some scholars maintain that Carus actually wrote one of the letters attributed to Soen that was included in *Zen for Americans*.⁴⁷ While in absence of definitive evidence it is going too far to say that Soen merely served as the mouthpiece for the personal views of Suzuki and Carus, there can be no doubt that they all influenced one another profoundly. In the end, the tangled relationship between these three men, so important in the history of Buddhism in America, may never be fully sorted out. This very confusion, though, merely underscores how the case of Soen Roshi illustrates the complexities surrounding issues involved in the transmission of mystical experiences and/or their accounts. We do well to keep them in mind.

The dark side of Soen's "Zen"

It would not be honest to ignore some of the more troubling aspects of Soen's career and writings, as these do seem to have some bearing on his ideas concerning "mysticism." In particular these concern the intertwined aspects of Japanese nationalism, militarism and the prominence of *nihonjinron* sentiments in his work.⁴⁸ This is such an important issue that it warrants extended examination. Recent studies of 19th and 20th century Japanese Buddhism (especially the Zen schools) have revealed that such ideas were rampant among Japanese intellectuals and coincided with the rise of Japan as a world power.⁴⁹ Like many of his clerical colleagues, Soen served as a military chaplain, and at times advocates Japanese expansion with unrelenting gusto. When the great Christian pacifist entreated Soen Roshi to join him in condemning the war between Russia and Japan, Soen declined, responding that at least in

some instances, war must be fought with the fullest vigor. In a short essay called “Buddhist view of War,” Soen writes:

And this example should be made the ideal of every faithful Buddhist. Whatever calling he may have chosen in this life, let him be freed from ego-centric thoughts and feelings. Even when going to war for his country’s sake, let him not bear any hatred towards his enemies. . . He may have to deprive his antagonist of the corporeal presence, but let him not think there are atmans, conquering each other. . . The hand that is raised to strike and the eye that is fixed to take aim do not belong to the individual, but are the instruments utilized by a higher principle than transient existence. Therefore, when fighting, fight with might and main, fight with your whole heart, forget your own self in the fight, and be free from all atman thought.⁵⁰

Such passages strongly echo the views expressed by Krishna to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad-Gita* but with perhaps even a more militant (dare we say “macho”?) tone. Even here, though, there seems to be a mystical tinge.

It is unclear to what extent such passages reflect Soen’s personal attitudes (he may have just been mouthing the party line), or how they may shape his notion of Zen. One of his most famous addresses at the 1893 Parliament, for instance, even speaks specifically *against* war.⁵¹ One explanation, of course, is that at the Parliament he was tailoring his message for his American and international audience. It is also quite probable that his views of war and the role of Japan on the world stage changed overtime with Japan’s continued rise, particularly in the wake of Japan’s victories over China (1895), Russia (1905) and invasions of Manchuria, Korea and Taiwan. In addition, Soen’s stint as a chaplain may have helped contribute to his nationalistic views, encouraging him to see Japan’s rise as a divinely (karmically?) ordained development that provided the ideal situation in which to spread Buddhism. Certainly Soen Roshi would not be the first (or last) religious leader to succumb to the seductive powers of “God and country” – something we in the contemporary U.S. know only too well.

In any case, such sentiments are deeply troubling and raise the long-standing issue of the relationship between mystical experience, practice and ethics. Passages in some of Soen’s work stress the unity of

mystical realization, spiritual practice, and moral living for the benefit of others. At one point, for instance, he writes, “Every religion, if it deserves the name, must be essentially practical and conducive to the promotion of the general welfare and to the realization of Reason.”⁵² This would seem to put him in line with other Zen thinkers (e.g. Dogen) who clearly state that moral conduct and realization go hand-in-hand.⁵³ Moreover, Soen’s conviction of the underlying unity of humanity and the cosmos that we *all* can experience (a decidedly mystical notion) comes through time and time again in his life and work.

Nonetheless, scholars such as Arthur Danto have argued that mysticism may foster an attitude of quietistic detachment and a corresponding *lack* of concern for the joys, sufferings, or just plain mundane experience of ordinary people, in effect cutting the mystic off from any sense of morality.⁵⁴ Furthermore, Robert Sharf rightly points out how sentiments such as those espoused by Soen and his Meiji Buddhist colleagues can lead to a melding of state and personal religious interests – a potentially dangerous attitude in aggressively militaristic social contexts such as we see in late Meiji Japan.⁵⁵ There is ample evidence of such attitudes in some of Soen’s writings:

Many material human bodies may be destroyed, many humane hearts be broken, but from a broader point of view these sacrifices are so many phoenixes consumed in the sacred fire of spirituality, which will rise from the smouldering ashes reanimated, ennobled, and glorified. The spirit which dwelt in them and brought them to the altar now assumes another material expression in the form of coming generations.⁵⁶

In reading such passages it is hard to avoid the conclusion that Soen is effectively minimizing the personal suffering and sacrifice of hundreds of his countrymen (to say nothing of the soldiers from the other side) while glorifying the nation’s cause. Still, despite such militant nationalist sentiments, Soen also expresses genuine horror at the slaughter even while eulogizing the soldiers slain on the battlefields. Again, we seem to see this contrast of a more abstract universal perspective with the particular scenes of pain and death. The ethical ramifications of such a collision should give us pause at the very least.

Conclusion

I have by no means exhausted the material on Soen and mysticism in this preliminary study, yet it is undeniable that when we consider such material in conjunction with biographical details of Soen's life, he emerges as a more complex man than has commonly been reckoned. His life and work is an unusually rich source of material for wrestling with some of the perennially vexing matters in the study of mysticism. While not necessarily an original thinker, Soen is unarguably an intriguing figure—a man disciplined in a very traditional Japanese style but with a strong modern scholarly background, whose outlook was staunchly Japanese yet very cosmopolitan at the same time. In many respects, Soen Roshi embodies the paradoxes emerging in the clash between tradition and modernity that we see in several of his contemporaries such as Vivekananda and Dharmapala as well as more philosophically inclined writers such as Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) and Feng Youlan (1895-1990). All of these men were “Easterners” who immersed themselves in “Western” studies and styles of discourse in order to reassert the cultural and spiritual power of the East in the face of Western military and colonial dominance – a move scholars speak of as “reverse Orientalism” and even “Occidentalism.” In so doing, Soen et al made themselves living bridges between East and West, dwelling “betwixt and between” by simultaneously embodying aspects of both cultural spheres. There can be little doubt that these figures continue to shape our understanding of Asian traditions, both in the West and in their Asian homelands.⁵⁷

From what I have been able to determine, however, scholars have yet to explore how seeking to bridge such cultural and religious divides, or to investigate this tension as a source of intellectual and spiritual creativity. I maintain that this creative tension combined with his personal charisma and zeal to found a new Zen order on American soil, make Soen such a compelling person. Moreover, Soen's personal influence lives on in true Zen fashion. His book *Zen for Americans* is regarded as a “classic” and still has a significant readership even after a century or more in publication (note reviews on Amazon). The influence of Soen and his disciples (especially Suzuki) on the development of American Buddhism, particularly American versions of Zen, is without peer. While we can argue over whether he should be called a “mystic,” he does seem to have been a dedicated practitioner and teacher. Furthermore, his writings bespeak a deeply held belief in the fundamental kinship of all beings. In one of his more poetic passages, Soen notes:

There towers a huge mountain, here lies a boundless ocean, birds are singing, trees are growing, and I sit here looking over the verdant meadow; yet in spite of all these, nay indeed by reason of these, I believe in the nothingness of existence, in the non-reality of realities, and in the absolute oneness of all things; and it is thereby that I gain my peace of mind and realize the sense of perfect freedom in my everyday life.⁵⁸

Soen's reveals a real mystical sense here, providing a glimpse of the Buddhist truth of *sunyata* (emptiness) that resonates with the works of other spiritual seekers throughout the ages. While we might criticize Soen for being overly romantic, even sentimental in his expression, we scholars of mysticism cannot afford to ignore him.

In the end, whatever we think of Soen Roshi's views, he had an undeniable attraction to mystical and spiritual ideas and experiences, finding them central to all religions (not just Buddhism). Soen Shaku thus deserves serious scholarly attention. In one of his essays cogently entitled "Ignorance and Enlightenment," Soen Roshi writes:

Religion, when devoid of this mystical element, loses its irresistible fascination. Of course, we must not make it abide always in the camera obscura of imagination and mysticism. We must take it out in the broad daylight of science and subject it to an intellectual scrutiny. But we cannot for all that ignore the fact that there is something in religion which defies or escapes the most penetrating searchlight of intellectual analysis. And in this something there lies its charm, its *raison d'être*, and its power to remove vexation of spirit.⁵⁹

No doubt many contemporary scholars of mysticism would agree.

¹ The "New Buddhism" movement arose in response to the Meiji government's anti-Buddhist policies. Rather than capitulate, Buddhist leaders began a large-scale institutional reform to strip away the "corrupt" and "superstitious" accretions on the Dharma and return it to its "original purity." This "New Buddhism" (which was allegedly the old "true Buddhism") was modern, cosmopolitan, and eminently rational

– hence perfectly suited to take the stage as a “world religion.” For details see Robert H. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism Under Colonialism*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1995), 109-112.

² Carus, a prolific writer of numerous books as well as editor of *The Monist* and *The Open Court*, was a great supporter of Buddhism, finding within it numerous parallels to what he termed the “Religion of Science.” For an overview of his contributions to Buddhism in America and his relationship with Soen and Suzuki see Martin J. Verhoeven, “Americanizing the Buddha: Paul Carus and the Transformation of Asian Thought,” in *The Faces of Buddhism in America*, ed. Charles S. Prebish and Kenneth K. Tanaka (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 207-227.

³ A good source for details on Soen’s life is Rick Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake: A Narrative History of Buddhism in America*, 3rd ed. (Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1992), 109-113, 126-128, 135-140, 168-175.

⁴ For details on Hakuin see Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, vol. 2, *Japan*, trans. James W. Heisig and Paul Knitter, Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1990), 367-94. An important figure in Japanese history who did much to make Rinzai popular among the common people, Hakuin left such an imprint on his followers that many now speak of Rinzai as “Hakuin Zen.” Like his predecessors, Kosen Roshi continued in reforming Zen and expanding its popular base. In many respects, we should see Soen as merely following in and extending the reformist activities of his Dharma ancestors.

⁵ Suzuki later claimed that Soen attended Keio *against* the wishes of Kosen Roshi. See Abe Masao, ed., *A Zen Life: D. T. Suzuki Remembered* (New York and Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1986), 8. However, this view is not in keeping with the reform spirit of Kosen.

⁶ It is interesting to note that Soen, like many of his contemporaries, consistently refers to the Buddhism of Southeast Asia as “Hinayana,” in contrast to the more expansive (and presumably superior) Mahayana exemplified in Japan, especially in Zen.

⁷ Soen spent a week with Carus in La Salle following the Parliament, during which time he arranged they shared plans for a worldwide religious reformation that would unite people of all faiths under the one light of truth. It was also during this time that Soen made arrangements for Suzuki to stay with Carus and serve as translator and assistant at Open Court, Carus' influential and eclectic publishing house.

⁸ Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 169-170.

⁹ A direct result of the encounter of the various "Buddhisms" found across Asia with the West, "Modern Buddhism" is a self-consciously universalist doctrine that downplays folk practices (e.g. relic veneration) and rituals while emphasizing meditation and spirituality, as well as science, social justice, ordination of women, and individualism. For a good overview see Donald S. Lopez, Jr., *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), especially "Introduction," vii-xli.

¹⁰ Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism: A History*, 416.

¹¹ Soen Shaku, *Zen for Americans*, trans. Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki (LaSalle, Ill: Open Court, 1974). This work is actually a reissue of an earlier edition entitled *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot: Addresses on Religious Subjects*. All citations in this paper are to the 1974 reprint, which, for the sake of simplicity, I treat as a single coherent whole, even though it comprises, what were originally separate pieces.

¹² To cite just one example, Soen often uses the concepts of "self-will" and "divine will" when explaining the attaining of *nirvana* – hardly a traditional Buddhist approach.

¹³ See, for instance, Soen *Zen for Americans*, 42 and 149 respectively.

¹⁴ Approaching religion in terms of "experience" is a relatively recent development, arising in the modern West largely due to the influence of Friedrich Schleiermacher. For a good overview of the concept of "religious experience" see Wayne Proudfoot, *Religious Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985). Works critical of the experiential approach include Mark A. McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA: Blackwell

Publishers Inc., 1998) and Grace M. Jantzen, *Power, Gender and Christian Mysticism*, Cambridge Studies in Ideology and Religion 8 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

¹⁵ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 132.

¹⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

¹⁷ Ibid., 98.

¹⁸ Ibid., 65.

¹⁹ Ibid., 163.

²⁰ Ibid., 77.

²¹ Ibid., 63.

²² See, for example, Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 258-283. In this chapter (and throughout the book) Faure clearly demonstrates that Chan/Zen tradition, despite its rhetoric, includes all the “superstitious” beliefs and practices (magic, healing, relic veneration, devotion to various deities) found in other East Asian religions.

²³ William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience: a Study in Human Nature* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1902), 380-381 and 423-424.

²⁴ W.T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan Publishers Ltd., 1961), 63-133 and 207-250.

²⁵ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 127.

²⁶ Stace goes out of his way to differentiate his view from pantheism as normally understood (i.e. “all is God.”) Rather, as he states, “I conclude that the philosophical theory of pantheism properly means *the identity in difference of God and the world, and not their bare identity.*” Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy*, 218 (emphasis added).

²⁷ R.C. Zaehner, *Mysticism Sacred and Profane: An Inquiry into some Varieties of Praeternatural Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), 204-207.

²⁸ Steven T. Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism," in Steven T. Katz, ed., *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 26,

²⁹ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 132.

³⁰ Robert K. C. Forman, "Introduction: Mysticism, Constructivism, and Forgetting," in Robert K. C. Forman, ed., *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 30-43.

³¹ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 158.

³² *Ibid.*, 27.

³³ *Ibid.*, 80.

³⁴ Fields, *How the Swans came to the Lake*, 168.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

³⁶ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 141-142.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

³⁹ Jorn Borup, "Zen and the Art of inverting Orientalism: Religious Studies and Genealogical Networks," Terebess Asia Online (TAO), <http://terebess.hu/english/borup.html>. As Borup shows, there was something of a "theosophy boom" in some circles in late 19th century Japan and Soen did have direct connections to theosophists and theosophical organizations.

⁴⁰ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 157.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Ibid., 124-125.

⁴³ James Ketelaar suggests that when translating the paper Soen delivered in Chicago, Suzuki used theosophical terminology (more or less justifiable as a form of *upaya*, “skillful means”) to get Buddhist points across in readily accessible fashion. See James E. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan: Buddhism and its Persecution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 151.

⁴⁴ It was Soen who gave Suzuki his Dharma-name *Daisetz*, meaning “Great Simplicity.” In later years Suzuki would joke that it in fact meant “Great Stupidity.”

⁴⁵ In his preface to Soen’s collected works, Suzuki mentions how he condensed various articles into one and even patched together passages from Soen’s different addresses to make a “special essay” in certain cases. In addition, when he found Soen’s expression too technical, he “put the thoughts in a more conventional and comprehensible form for the benefit of the American public.” See D.T. Suzuki, “Translator’s Preface,” in Soen Shaku, *Zen for Americans*, trans. D. T. Suzuki (La Salle, IN: Open Court Publishing, 1974), iv-v.

⁴⁶ Borup, “Zen and the Art of inverting Orientalism.” Borup notes that *The Gospel* was later used in Buddhist schools in both Japan and Ceylon, and still is sold as a basic introduction to Buddhism today.

⁴⁷ Verhoeven, “Americanizing the Buddha,” 325, n. 20.

⁴⁸ A highly controversial form of discourse, *nihonjinron* (“Discourse on the Japanese People”) mixes quasi-scientific theory and intensely nationalistic propaganda in proclaiming the uniqueness (and even superiority) of the Japanese people and culture. Typical *nihonjinron* themes include purported differences between “Oriental” and “Western” ways of thinking (“Westerners are noisy, boisterous and materialistic while Orientals are calm, refined and naturally spiritual”) and *bushido* (the samurai code of chivalry) as the epitome of the Japanese character. *Nihonjinron* positively flourished during the heyday of the Japanese empire.

⁴⁹ In addition to Sharf's work (already cited) see also Brian Victoria, *Zen at War* (New York: Weatherhill, 1998), and James W. Heisig and John C. Maraldo, eds, *Rude Awakenings: Zen, the Kyoto School & the Question of Nationalism* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1995).

⁵⁰ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 195-196.

⁵¹ Soen Shaku, "Arbitration instead of War," *The World's Parliament of Religions*, Chicago, 1893.
<http://www.china1900.info/gedanken/wpr05.htm>.

⁵² Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 88. Earlier in the same essay Soen says that the aim of Buddhism is "to promote goodness" and "to cease from wrong-doing."

⁵³ Daniel Zelinski, "Dogen's 'Ceaseless Practice'," in *Action Dharma: New Studies in Engaged Buddhism*, ed. Christopher Queen, Charles Prebish and Daniel Keown (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 50-62.

⁵⁴ Arthur Danto, *Mysticism and Morality* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).

⁵⁵ Sharf, "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism," 137.

⁵⁶ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 211-212.

⁵⁷ Scholars sometimes refer to this phenomenon by means of an analogy to what Indian anthropologist Aghananda Bharati has dubbed the "pizza effect." By this Bharati is referring to the curious transformation of pizza (originally a small in Italy) into a main dish produced in a seemingly endless variety of styles and shapes in America. Ironically, the Americanized version has been re-imported by the Italians where it is now a popular meal. See Aghananda Bharati, "The Hindu Renaissance and its Apologetic Patterns," *Journal of Asian Studies* 29 (1970): 273. Similarly, we find Buddhism being brought to America by missionaries such as Soen where it was taken over, transformed, and re-imported back to Japan and other traditionally Buddhist countries.

⁵⁸ Soen, *Zen for Americans*, 99.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 130-131.