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Zen Buddhism in Brazil: Japanese or Brazilian?

By Cristina Moreira da Rocha



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**Zen Buddhism in Brazil:  
Japanese or Brazilian?**

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**THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISM IN BRAZIL**

**B**uddhism was introduced into Brazil by the Japanese immigrants who first arrived in 1908 at the port of Santos, in São Paulo State. Emigrating to work at the coffee, cotton, and banana plantations, they intended to return to Japan as soon as they had amassed the necessary means. At the end of the nineteenth century, Japan was leaving the feudal system behind and going through a period of economic difficulties; the rural population was especially hard hit. Consequently, the Meiji Government (1868–1912) wanted to relieve pressure on the land, while creating colonies that would grow food for export back to Japan.<sup>1</sup> The Brazilian Government, on the other hand, needed laborers for the plantations since slavery had been abolished. Brazil had become independent in 1822, but by the end of the century, the ideas of abolitionism and republicanism were everywhere. Both movements were successful: the abolition of slavery was ratified in 1888, and Brazil became a federative republic in 1889.

The Japanese male immigrants who migrated to Brazil were not firstborn sons. Due to the rule of primogeniture in Japan, the eldest son inherited all family property as well as the responsibility for taking care of the *ie* (household) and worshipping ancestors. Having so many duties, they could not emigrate. Consequently, the younger children were the ones who left the country to seek a better life elsewhere. As a result, because they were not in charge of promoting religious rituals for the

ancestors, religion was not central to their lives.<sup>2</sup> They only went back to religion at the time of family members' deaths in Brazil.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs prohibited Japanese monks from accompanying the immigrants to the new country because their presence could prove to be evidence of Japanese non-assimilation into the mainly Roman Catholic Brazilian culture.<sup>4</sup> In fact, at that time there was an ongoing debate in the Brazilian Congress about the ability of the Japanese to assimilate into Brazilian culture. Many senators wanted to stop Japanese immigration altogether. The discussion was public, and many newspapers carried articles picturing the Japanese immigrants as inassimilable.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, the relationship between the Japanese immigrants and religion changed completely when Japan was defeated in World War II. The immigrants had to give up their dream of returning to their homeland because Japan was destroyed both economically and morally. However, after years of laboring in rural areas in Brazil, Japanese immigrants began to ascend socially and become more urbanized. Due to the terrible work conditions at the plantations faced by Japanese immigrants upon arrival, most of them tried to save enough money to leave the farms and purchase their own land. In addition, Japanese privately-owned businesses and the Japanese government (under the *Kaigai Kogyo Kabuhiki Kaisha*) invested in Brazil, buying land for the immigrants to form Japanese-run colonies. After successfully working on their own land for a time, the Japanese immigrants then began moving to urban environments and establishing small businesses. The ones who remained in the rural areas became producers, landowners, and distributors of farm and other products.<sup>6</sup> Migration to São Paulo City became intense after the 1950s. "In 1939, only 3,467 Japanese immigrants and their descendants resided in São Paulo. About 20 years later, they totaled 62,327. In the 1970s, around one third of the Japanese population and their descendants were concentrated in the Greater São Paulo area."<sup>7</sup> Today there are 1.28 million Japanese and descendants in Brazil.<sup>8</sup>

The migration to the metropolis was also part of Brazil's economic

project. The so-called “national agrarian vocation” made no sense anymore. The country was facing the upheaval of post-war industrialization and urbanization, and political power was drifting from the rural aristocracy to the industrial magnates. São Paulo, with a population of 2,817,600 in 1954, emerged as the biggest Brazilian metropolis, surpassing the capital, Rio de Janeiro.<sup>9</sup>

Due to the decision by most Japanese immigrants to remain in Brazil (because of Japan’s defeat in World War II, as well as its socioeconomic ascension, urbanization, and the approaching old age of many of the immigrants), several Japanese religions—among them Buddhism, Shintoism, and the new religions of Shintoist and shamanistic inspiration—began preaching more intensely in Brazil.<sup>10</sup>

The Japanese defeat in World War II made the immigrants realize that they would have to assimilate culturally into their new homeland. In order to help their descendants to acculturate more easily, a pattern was established: the younger children went to college, and the oldest child stayed home and followed the father’s profession, thereby maintaining the family business. Two kinds of *nisei* (second generation) were created: the eldest brother, who spoke Japanese, was closely tied to Japanese values and the Japanese way of life. In addition, the eldest brother followed a Japanese religion. On the other hand, the younger children, who undertook the mission of socioeconomic ascension, went to university, were not fluent in Japanese, and converted to Roman Catholicism.<sup>11</sup> Cases were commonly found of parents baptizing their children as Roman Catholics so that they would not face discrimination. In many cases, conversion was not the result of religious conviction. According to research undertaken in 1987–1988, 60 percent of the Japanese immigrants in Brazil and their descendants were Roman Catholic, while only 25 percent followed Japanese religions.<sup>12</sup>

### **ZEN BUDDHISM IN BRAZIL**

From the mid-1920s onwards, there was religious activity in larger Japanese colonies (in western São Paulo State and in Paraná State).

Although there were *butsudan* (Buddhist altars) inside Japanese homes, the religion that proliferated was State Shintoism (the cult of the emperor). At the center stage of such a cult was the *nihon gakko* (Japanese school), which was not only a place designed for teaching the Japanese language and culture with material sent from Japan, but also a meeting place for the colony, the headquarters of the agriculture cooperative organization, a ballroom for weddings, and a makeshift shrine for the recitation of the Imperial Rescript on Education of 1890.<sup>13</sup> In 1992, a book commissioned to commemorate the eightieth anniversary of the immigration to Brazil described the relationship between the Japanese school, the cult of the emperor, and religion in the following terms:

The emperor's portrait was the divine body, the Imperial Rescript on Education the holy word, the Japanese national hymn the sacred chant, the school director the priest, and the Japanese school the deity [sic] of the village. Thus was created the "religious structure" of the Japanese immigrants.<sup>14</sup>

The lack of Buddhist rituals is possibly due to the Meiji period (1868–1912) ideology and its radical nationalism. This ideology shunned foreign religions and philosophy such as Buddhism and Confucianism, while it deified the emperor. In 1868, a decree instituted a distinction between the Shintō deities and the Buddhist pantheon, which previously had been syncretized. Buddhist monks who dwelled in Shintō shrines were expelled, and Buddhist altars in the compound were destroyed. Anti-Buddhist movements (Haibutsu Kishaku) escalated<sup>15</sup> This is the milieu in which the Japanese immigrants lived before departing for Brazil.

When Japanese religions arrived in Brazil—and hence infringed upon the Japanese Government's edict that no preacher should emigrate—however, they suffered restrictions and threats. This was the case of new religions such as *Tenrikyō*, which arrived in 1929, *Ōmotokyō*, and *Seicho-no-iae*.<sup>16</sup> During World War II, Japanese schools were closed, Japanese language newspapers were prohibited (there were four Japanese daily newspapers published in São Paulo with a total circulation of around fifty thousand<sup>17</sup>), and speaking Japanese in public and private (including

houses of worship) was banned. But when the fear of the “yellow peril” weakened because Japan lost the war, Japanese Buddhist schools began sending missionaries to Brazil to proselytize.

Nevertheless, although the idea that Buddhism was not disseminated in Brazil prior the World War II is supported by many authors (Lesser, 1999; Clarke, 1999; Nakamaki, 1994; Comissão de Elaboração dos 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil, 1992; Saito, 1973, 1980; Saito Maeyama, 1973), one author contradicts this idea. The historian Ricardo Gonçalves affirms that the first ship, *Kasato Maru*, which docked in Brazil in 1908, carried a priest from the *Honmō Butsuryo* (a branch of the *Nichiren* school) on board. This monk later established a temple in Bauru, in São Paulo State. Subsequently, a priest from the *Shingon* school arrived, and in 1925, the first priest from the *Jōdo Shinshū* school arrived. In 1932, *Jōdo Shinshū* established the first Brazilian Buddhist temple in Cafelândia in São Paulo State.<sup>18</sup> Although it is perfectly acceptable that there were Buddhist congregations in Brazil prior to World War II, the idea that immigrants’ lives were centered around the cult of the Emperor is also an acceptable supposition. Both theories can be seen to complement one another if scholars accept the fact that although there was Buddhist activity before World War II, it actually only became institutionalized after the 1950s. All of these authors agree that after World War II, the religious institutions in Japan sent official missionaries to establish temples and proselytize. Even so, this contention needs to be further studied.

*Zengenji* was the first *Sōtō Zenshū* Zen Buddhist temple in Brazil. Built in the early 1950s in Mogi das Cruzes, a town on the outskirts of São Paulo City, *Zengenji* was constructed with Japanese *Sōtō Zenshū* funds and the help of the Japanese community who lived in its vicinity. The *Busshinji* temple was built in 1955 in São Paulo City to be the headquarters of the *Sōtō Zenshū* school in Brazil. It was also built with Japanese community funds and *Sōtō Zenshū* funds. These two temples, together with the temple in Rolândia in the state of Paraná, catered to the Brazilian Japanese community for three decades. During this time, their missionary work gained 3,000 families as followers.

In 1955, the *Sōtō Zenshū* Buddhist Community of South America (*Comunidade Budista Sōtō Zenshū da América do Sul*) was established and officially recognized by the Brazilian Government. In the same year, the Buddhist Society of Brazil (*Sociedade Budista do Brasil*) was founded by a Brazilian of non-Japanese origin (Murillo Nunes de Azevedo) in Rio de Janeiro. Azevedo was the first Brazilian interested in studying Buddhism “as a philosophical and artistic system.” He was a professor of philosophy at the Pontifical Catholic University in Rio de Janeiro, where he taught philosophy of the Far East. The Buddhist Society of Brazil organized lectures and exhibited films on Buddhism supplied by the Indian and Sri Lankan embassies.<sup>19</sup> In 1961, Azevedo translated the *Introduction to Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki into Portuguese. However, mass interest in Buddhism and Zen by non-Japanese Brazilians did not occur until the 1990s.

The schools of *Nishi Hongwanji*, *Higashi Hongwanji* (*Jōdo Shinshū*), *Jōdo Shu*, *Nichiren*, and *Sōtō Zenshū* sent missionaries to Brazil in the early 1950s. The missionaries sought Japanese families who were associated with such Buddhist schools in Japan prior to their migration to Brazil. In 1958, all of these Buddhist schools were united in the Federation of the Buddhist Sects of Brazil (*Federação das Seitas Budistas do Brasil*).

Brazilians of non-Japanese descent began seeking Zen Buddhism starting in the late 1970s. In 1968, *Sōtō Zenshū* headquarters sent the Japanese monk, Ryotan Tokuda, to the *Busshinji* temple in São Paulo as a missionary. Upon arrival, he opened the temple to non-Japanese Brazilians. Working together with these new practitioners, Tokuda founded the first Zen monastery of Latin America, *Mosteiro Morro da Vargem*, in the state of Espírito Santo in 1976. In 1984, Tokuda established a second monastery, *Mosteiro Pico dos Raios*, in the state of Minas Gerais. Today their abbots are Brazilians of non-Japanese origin who were disciples of Tokuda and studied in monasteries in Japan. Daiju (Christiano Bitti) became the abbot of *Morro da Vargem* monastery in 1983 after spending five years in Japan. This Zen monastery is visited by four thousand people

annually and receives seven thousand children of the state each year who go there to learn environmental education.<sup>20</sup> Besides having maintained an ecological reserve and the Center of Environmental Education since 1985,<sup>21</sup> the monastery established a “House of Culture” to patronize fine artists who subsequently can devote themselves to creating their works away from the city. In addition, *Morro da Vargem* monastery holds eight five-day retreats each year with forty-five attendants at each session. The people who attend these retreats are not necessarily Buddhist, as Daiju suggested: “In general, the people who seek the monastery do not profess any religion. They are in search of spiritual peace.”<sup>22</sup> *Pico dos Raios* monastery is also linked with the external community. Tokuda teaches acupuncture to the monastery’s practitioners who offer this service to the local population. In 1984, Ryotan Tokuda established the Sōtō Zen Society of Brazil (*Sociedade Sōtō Zen do Brasil*), whose headquarters are at the *Pico dos Raios* monastery.

In 1985, the Center of Buddhist Studies (CEB) was created in Porto Alegre, which is the state capital of Rio Grande do Sul. CEB comprised practitioners of several schools of Buddhism, including Zen. In 1989, Tokuda and CEB’s Zen practitioners inaugurated the temple *Sōtō Zen Sanguen Dojō*. Currently the temple follows the orientation of Daigyo Moriyama Rōshi and his French disciple, Zuymyo Joshin Sensei. Moriyama is a Japanese *rōshi* who has disciples in Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, USA, France, Germany, Sweden, Austria, Canada, Korea, and Sri Lanka.<sup>23</sup> Continuing his missionary work among non-Japanese Brazilians, in 1993 Tokuda founded the Zen Center of Planalto in Brasília, the federal capital. In the future, the center plans to establish a Brazilian Buddhist library and a Brazilian Buddhist university. In the following year, Tokuda and Brazilian practitioners founded the Zen Center of Rio de Janeiro. In 1998, Tokuda established the *Serra do Trovão* monastery in the state of Minas Gerais. This monastery was founded exclusively for the training of new monks and holds two seven-day retreats monthly. It is important here to note that Ryotan Tokuda has a connection with European Zen. He has Zen groups in Italy, France, and Germany. In



1995, Tokuda founded the *École Nonindo de Médecine Traditionnelle Chinoise* and the *Association Mahamuni*, both in Paris.

Currently, there are twenty-three Zen Buddhist centers and temples, three Zen Buddhist monasteries, thirty-four Tibetan centers, seven Theravāda centers, thirty-seven *Nishi Hongwanji (Jōdo Shinshū)* temples and twenty-two associations (where there is no resident monk), twenty-six *Higashi Hongwanji (Jōdo Shinshū)* temples and associations, two Jōdoshu temples, four *Nichireshū* temples (with 5,000 families of adherents), twelve *Honmon Butsuryushū* (a branch of *Nichiren*) temples, and four Shingon temples (with 850 families of adherents) in Brazil.<sup>24</sup> Tibetan Buddhism, which was the latest to arrive (1988), is undergoing a boom similar to that which is taking place in the West. In fact, Buddhism in general is becoming better known and is attracting media attention in Brazil. In June of 1998, important Brazilian magazines published three articles on the expansion of Buddhism and meditation in Brazil and its famous adherents (television stars, politicians, etc).<sup>25</sup> *Elle* magazine featured the American Lama Tsering Everest, as well as the Tibetan Chagdud Rimpoche, who moved from the US to Brazil in the mid-1990s. Lama Tsering noted that “[i]t is the right moment for Buddhism in Brazil . . . the involvement of Brazilians with Buddhism is karmic.” The Tibetan Lama Chagdud Tulku Rimpoche is building two monasteries: one in Três Coroas in the state of Rio Grande do Sul that is intended to house 400 people during retreats, and another one in Brumadinho, in the state of Minas Gerais. The *Elle* magazine article estimated the number of Buddhist practitioners at around 500,000, distributed among the Tibetan, *Nichiren*, *Sōka Gakkai* (150,000 adherents), *Jōdo Shinshū*, *Jōdo Shu*, *Shingon*, *Theravāda*, and Zen schools.<sup>26</sup>

The only reliable statistics available on religion in Brazil are from the 1991 census. According to this census, the Brazilian population (170 million people) comprises citizens of the following religious affiliations: 83 percent Roman Catholic (141.1 million), 6 percent pentecostal (10.2 million), 3 percent traditional evangelical (5.1 million), 5 percent with no religious affiliation (8.5 million), 1 percent Spiritists (1.7 million),

0.5 percent with miscellaneous African religions (850,000), 0.2 percent Buddhist (340,000), and 0.08 percent Jewish (136,000).<sup>27</sup> As the statistics show, the great majority of Brazilians come from Roman Catholic families. What these figures do not show is the symbolic migration from one religion to another, which frequently happens in Brazil. Many Brazilians either practice more than one religion at the same time or migrate from religion to religion.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, although the number of Buddhists is only 0.2 percent, one has to be aware that for most Brazilians, Buddhism is more a “philosophy,” a “way of life” than a religion. Zen Buddhism is often viewed as a meditation technique that helps to relieve stress. *Busshinji* abbess Koen supports this view on Zen Buddhism in an interview for the *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper: “It’s not necessary to be a Buddhist to practice this kind of meditation. The temple offers several lectures for those who wish to learn this activity, even if they have no intention of becoming Buddhist.”<sup>29</sup> In the same report, one practitioner notes that “Zen Buddhism was a way to awaken my sensibility without denying my Catholic religion.” As a result, being Buddhist does not exclude professing other religions. Many Brazilians continue being Roman Catholic while adopting Buddhism. If asked which religion they profess, it is most likely that they will state that they are Catholic (because they were baptized) or have no religious ties (if they do not profess any religion) even though they might have adopted Buddhism as a way of life.<sup>30</sup> The abbot of *Morro da Vargem* monastery, Daiju (Christiano Bitti), reinforces this point in an interview for *Isto É* magazine: “If a Roman Catholic considers his/her religion as a study of himself/herself, so he/she is also a Buddhist. Roman Catholic priests, who were initiated in Buddhism, told me that afterwards they understood the Bible better. Buddhism has neither the intention to dispute adherents nor to convert them. People loosen up because we are not disputing anything. We just want to strengthen the faith of the Brazilian people.”<sup>31</sup>

## CONFLICTS

Because the monasteries, temples, and Zen centers—all of which were established after 1976—cater mainly for non-Japanese Brazilians, there are no conflicts over which practices of Zen Buddhism are performed. Yet, when Japanese immigrants and non-Japanese Brazilians share the same place, dissension arises. This is the case for the temple *Busshinji* in São Paulo.

Inaugurated in 1955 and catering for the needs of the Japanese community for more than three decades,<sup>32</sup> *Busshinji* suffered considerably when a new abbot was appointed by the *Sōtō* Zen school in Japan. In 1993, Japanese monk Daigyo Moriyama Rōshi arrived in São Paulo with new ideas about how Zen practice should be.

The Japanese *rōshi* came from a context where Zen Buddhism was highly institutionalized and structured due to nine centuries of history in Japan. Moreover, due to the patrilineality and primogeniture that are part of the rule of succession of the Japanese society, boys who enter the monasteries to become monks are those first-born sons of families that possess monasteries. As a result, to be a monk becomes a profession as any other, a way of making a living inside a rigid structure.<sup>33</sup>

Facing this situation, the *rōshi* decided to leave Japan in search of a more “active” Zen Buddhism. Having worked with Shunryu Suzuki Rōshi in San Francisco in the 1960s, Moriyama Rōshi shared Suzuki’s ideas that foreigners have “a beginner’s mind (*shoshin*), one which is empty and ready for new things.”<sup>34</sup> When interviewed in 1997, he said that in Japan, monks were more interested in social practices and money to be received by services rendered to the community (funerals and worship of ancestors) than in spiritual work. Meditation (*zazen*), debates with the abbot (*dokusan*), studies of the *Dharma*, retreats (*sesshin*), and manual work (*samu*)—all meant to aid in the way to enlightenment—were not properly practiced. As Moriyama Rōshi declared:

That is why I put my energy in a foreign country; here Zen Buddhism can be created again in a purer way. Japanese Buddhism is changing Buddha’s and Dōgen’s teachings (Personal interview, 1997).

However, upon his arrival in Brazil, the *rōshi* encountered a Japanese

community that demanded him to perform the same things that he was not willing to do in Japan, that is, “masses” (as the members of the sect denominate the rituals in Brazil), weddings, funerals, and worship of ancestors, instead of a practice based on meditation.

The conflict became even more serious when the Japanese *rōshi* met a group of Brazilians of non-Japanese origin who were quite interested in meditation and in Buddha and Dōgen’s teachings. From the moment that these Brazilians entered the temple and began to interact with the Japanese-Brazilian community, conflicts arose. As a result, in 1995 the headquarters of the *Sōtō Zenshū* school in Japan released Moriyama Rōshi from his services due to the Japanese community’s strong pressure. In Japan, the abbot, as a first-born son, inherits his temple from his father. In Brazil, the Japanese community owns the temples. As a result, Japanese missionaries (who are appointed by the Japanese headquarters) have to prove that they are good proselytizers. Because the Japanese community was dissatisfied with Moriyama’s work, he was called back to Japan by the *Sōtō Zenshū* school. A number of his Brazilian followers also left the temple and founded a new Zen center (*Cezen*) in São Paulo where the *rōshi* is a spiritual mentor. Moriyama continues to travel to Brazil independently twice a year to visit his disciples, promote retreats, and give *Dharma* talks at his two Zen centers located in São Paulo and Porto Alegre.

Ironically, the successor of Moriyama Rōshi—and newly appointed abbess—was a Brazilian nun of non-Japanese origin. Claudia Dias de Souza Batista was ordained in Los Angeles under Maezumi Rōshi in 1980 (when she received the Buddhist name of Koen) and lived in a monastery in Nagoya for six years thereafter. Koen took the abbess position at Busshinji and soon started enforcing all of the activities more strictly than they had been before. One Brazilian of non-Japanese origin practitioner observed:

When Moriyama was in charge of the temple, he tried to adapt Japanese Zen to Brazilian culture. It was more flexible. With Koen, as she recently arrived from Japan, she tries to maintain the patterns

and rules by which she lived in Japan. She tries to impose everything, the rhythm, behavior and discipline of the Japanese practice. She is very inflexible (Cida, 40 years old, astrologer).

What makes this case more interesting is that traditionally, the Japanese-Brazilian community maintained some diacritical cultural traits preserved and away from Brazilian society (among them were the language and the religion) for the maintenance of its ethnic identity.<sup>35</sup> Although second and third generations have started assimilating into Brazilian culture<sup>36</sup> and are quite integrated into the country today, the abbess position in the only Zen Buddhist temple in São Paulo is not one that the community can leave in the hands of a “foreigner.” How, then, did a Brazilian nun get the highest position in a Buddhist sect, and furthermore, how could she have been accepted by the Japanese-Brazilian community?

Although Koen is a Brazilian nun, she slowly gained acceptance because she worked hard at preserving the rituals that the Japanese community expected to be performed. At the same time, by speaking Japanese and Portuguese fluently, she served as a successful intermediary between the Japanese and Brazilian communities. This conflict of motivations, practice, and aspirations is one that has occurred in similar Western contexts, be it in Buddhist centers in the United States or Europe.

In spite of the fact that the Japanese community and Brazilians of non-Japanese descent have separate practices in *Busshinji*, one must take care not to think of cultures as “organically binding and sharply bounded.”<sup>37</sup> Between the Japanese community and Brazilian society at large, there are Japanese descendants who were educated according to both Japanese and Brazilian custom, and as a result, display mixed cultural patterns. They dwell in the interstices of society and comprise a small group of practitioners who began going to the temple because of family pressure and have ended up attending the activities offered for Brazilians of non-Japanese origin. Many Japanese descendants told me in interviews that one of the deciding factors for choosing to be affiliated with “Brazilian Zen (or ‘convert-Zen’)” over the “Japanese community Zen” was the language spoken because most Japanese descendants do not understand

the Japanese language, which is spoken at the rituals for the Japanese community.

In fact, Portuguese is beginning to be recognized as the official language of *Busshinji* Temple. In 1998, for the first time, there were two parties vying to run *Busshinji*'s administration: one composed of the old traditional Japanese board and a new party comprising Brazilians of Japanese ancestry. The latter won and began enforcing an adaptation of Zen Buddhism to Brazilian culture; for example, they required that *sūtras* be translated into Portuguese, sponsored lectures on Zen Buddhism given in Portuguese, and started study groups of *sūtras*. In addition, they set up retreats for children and began giving assistance and computer courses to prisoners, as well as providing help to AIDS patients. Traditional activities like rituals, funerals, and ancestor worship that cater for the Japanese community are still performed, but they are separate from the activities of the Brazilians of non-Japanese origin.

### **TRANSPLANTING ZEN BUDDHISM TO BRAZIL**

So far we have seen how Zen Buddhism evolved in Brazil, its practitioners, their motivations, and the conflicts that have occurred. However, it is important to place the study of Zen Buddhism in Brazil within an analysis of the transplantation of Buddhism to the West. Although Zen in Brazil has its own history and developments, it is deeply related to the history and developments of Western Buddhism. In order to establish this relationship and further analyze Zen in Brazil, I shall use the analytical categories coined by Martin Baumann, a German scholar who works with the transplantation of Buddhism to Europe. Baumann identifies five processive modes for transplanting a religion to a new sociocultural context. They include contact, confrontation and conflict, ambiguity and alignment, recoupment (re-orientation), and innovative self-development. Baumann explains that the process of transplanting a particular religion does not need to cover all these modes and must not necessarily occur in this sequence.<sup>38</sup>

The first processive mode, that of contact, comprises strategies of adaptation such as the translation of scriptures. Translation is one of the main concerns of monks, nuns, and practitioners in all Zen centers, temples, and monasteries where Brazilians of non-Japanese descent are involved. Not only are *sūtras* translated, but also recitations that are used in retreats before meals and manual labor (*samu*). Though translated, these recitations are chanted using a Japanese rhythm, that is, stressing each syllable as those speaking the Japanese language do. In addition, Brazilian Zen centers produce written materials in Portuguese that discuss the meaning of ordination, provide explanations and drawings on how to sit *zazen* and do *kinhin* (walking meditation), and transcribe lectures by the *rōshi* or monk in charge of the group. Furthermore, new means of communication such as websites are used to spread the word.<sup>39</sup> Produced by most Zen temples, centers, and monasteries, these websites include schedules of activities; articles about the history of affiliated temples, monasteries, and Zen Centers; translated *sūtras*; and pictures of temples and monasteries.

The contact mode can lead to the second processive mode of transplantation: confrontation and conflict. Confrontation happens when “protagonists of the imported religious tradition are concerned with presenting the peculiarities which contrast with existing traditions.”<sup>40</sup> The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs avoided this when it prohibited Japanese monks from going to Brazil to proselytize before World War II. As shown earlier in this paper, there were already enough cultural conflicts between Brazilians and Japanese; the Japanese Government could not afford a religious one. Conflict actually arose when the Japanese community and Brazilians of non-Japanese descent started sharing the same religious space in *Busshinji*. As we mentioned above, the Japanese community and Brazilians of non-Japanese descent do not accept the other group’s practices as “true” Buddhism.

“Ambiguity and adaptation” is the third processive mode of transplantation. Baumann explains that there are unavoidable misunderstandings and misinterpretations that happen when transplanting a religion into a new sociocultural context. “For members of the host

culture it is only possible to interpret and understand symbols, rituals or ideas of the imported religious tradition on the basis of their own conceptions. The bearers of the foreign religion share similar problems of understanding with regard to the new culture and society. As a consequence of contact unavoidable ambiguities arise.”<sup>41</sup> Because of the prevailing Roman Catholic environment, much of the terminology used in speaking of Buddhism in Brazil is Roman Catholic in origin. For instance, rituals such as funerals are called “missas” (masses); the abbot is called “bispo” (bishop); and there are mentions of “paraíso” (heaven), “inferno” (hell), and “rezar” (to pray).

Furthermore, there are also intentional ambiguities that are part of a strategy to make the foreign religion less exotic to the host culture, and by doing so, reduce conflicts. This involves emphasizing similarities and links with concepts of the host culture. Such ambiguous delineation can be observed at *Busshinji*, where Brazilian holidays are commemorated with the Japanese counterpart. For instance, Children’s Day (October 12) in Brazil is commemorated on this date, but with a festival for Jizo, the *bodhisattva* who looks after children in Japan. In addition, the Brazilian “Day of the Dead” (November 2) is commemorated on this date, but with references to *Obon*, the Japanese festival for the deceased ancestors.

In the same context, *Sōtō* Zen in Japan began to emphasize the ecological connotation of Buddhism as a strategy for displaying a modern Buddhism that is in tune with current world issues. This is done through “Caminho Zen” (*Zen Way*), a Japanese magazine written in Portuguese especially for Brazilian followers. Indeed, one of the reasons given by many Brazilians of non-Japanese origin practitioners to justify their migration to Buddhism is the religion’s connection with ecology.<sup>42</sup>

In a lecture given in a *sesshin* (retreat) in Porto Alegre, Moriyama Rōshi connected Buddhism with Greek philosophy. Through this approach, the *rōshi* compared the term “Apathia” (lack of feeling), created by the Greek philosopher Zenon, to the idea of “Atarakushi” (to quiet the *kokoro*/spirit). By doing this, Moriyama brought Zen meditation closer to the Brazilian/Western context. He finished his lecture by saying that he is



studying other “Buddhisms,” because “in a globalized world people have access to an increasing number of religions, and the true religion is the one it is closer to the follower (February 14, 1998).” Tokuda also makes use of intentional ambiguities in his frequent quotations from the Bible and comparisons of Jesus to Buddha.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, he compares the ecstatic state mentioned by the Christian mystics, Saint John of the Cross and Meister Eckhart, to the experience of enlightenment in Zen. Tokuda says there is no difference between West and East concerning this state of ecstasy. He even refers to the image of God, affirming the Christian experience of union with God as similar to *satori*:

As Saint John of the Cross said: the night of senses, the night of spirit, the night of soul. Through this internal voyage, we start to leave the exterior world and begin to work with our inner world, diving into our subconscious, into our unconscious. When we get to the bottom of this darkness, there is a union with God, with Love. To this experience, Zen gives the name enlightenment, *satori*.<sup>44</sup>

Baumann adds that a foreign religion may borrow features of the host culture, for example, organizational structures. All of the temples and monasteries in Brazil comply with Brazilian law and are registered legally as non-profit organizations. In addition, they are managed as a Brazilian organization would be: the temple in São Paulo and the Zen centers all over Brazil have a democratically elected president and a board of directors.

The fourth mode, “recouplement or re-orientation,” is a critique of the ambiguities that have arisen. The foreign religion tries to reduce the ambiguities in order to regain the identity of the religious tradition. One of the examples that Baumann uses is the ordination of Tibetan lay people. When Tibetan Buddhism arrived in Germany, the Buddhist refuge ceremony was given immediately to people attending ceremonies. However, a decade later, initiations are only offered after a thorough preparation. Such is the case of Brazilian Zen Buddhism. Until the 1980s, traditional Japanese monks gave ordination to Japanese descendants without any process or preparation. Likewise, in the 1990s, Moriyama

Rōshi gave lay ordination to Brazilians of non-Japanese origin when requested. However, after arriving from Japan, abbess Koen started to carry out rituals more formally and strictly, establishing a two-year preparation course prior to lay ordination.

The last of the strategies of transplantation, “innovative self-development,” deals with the creation of new forms and innovative interpretations of the religion in the host culture. This generates a tension with the tradition from which the religion developed. Many innovations took place in the United States and Germany. Feminism determined a new status for women in Buddhism. Another example is the democratic organization of Zen centers instead of strict hierarchy. In Brazil, the tension between Japanese Buddhism and Brazilian Buddhism marks the innovations that are occurring. Such innovations are mainly being imported from the Western discourse on Zen.

The appropriation and construction of Zen that took place in many Western countries had a similar departing point. D. T. Suzuki—one of the first Japanese scholars to write on Zen in English—and the Kyoto school scholars were fundamental to the creation of a discourse on Zen in the West. As Robert Sharf observed, for Suzuki Zen was “pure experience—ahistorical, transcultural experience of ‘pure subjectivity’ which utterly transcends discursive thought.”<sup>45</sup> Sharf argued that Suzuki was writing during the period of Nationalistic Buddhism (Meiji New Buddhism—*Shin Bukkyō*) “as a response to the Western universalizing discourse.” Under this pressure, Suzuki and many other writers such as Okakura Kakuzō, Watsuji Tetsurō, Tanabe Hajime, and Nishida Kitarō— Influenced by the ideas of *nihonjinron* (the discourse on and of Japanese uniqueness)—struggled to recreate Japanese national identity as something special that was identified with the Way of the Samurai and Zen Buddhism. For these authors, Zen, as the very essence of the Japanese Spirit, would denote the cultural superiority of Japan. Moreover, because it is experiential and not a religion, Zen was able to survive the enlightenment trends of the West and was viewed as rational and empirical.<sup>46</sup> The global expansion of Zen Buddhism carried *Shin Bukkyō* ideas with it. However, they were

appropriated, indigenized, and hybridized locally. Similarly, Brazilian Zen took part of this process of Zen Buddhism “glocalization” (a process that Roland Robertson terminologically specified as the blending of the local and the global).<sup>47</sup> The interviews that I conducted with Brazilian practitioners of non-Japanese origin showed that their interest in Zen Buddhism is a result of the United States’ influence, through the media,<sup>48</sup> books on Zen,<sup>49</sup> movies,<sup>50</sup> and travels. In fact, all of the people interviewed noted that their first contact with Zen was through books.<sup>51</sup> The United States is a strong source of ideas and material on Zen for various reasons. For example, English is more accessible to Brazilians than Japanese. In fact, most of the books on Zen now available in Portuguese were originally written in English. Moreover, due to the fact that these practitioners come from the intellectual upper-middle class and the vast majority are degreed liberal professionals, many of them can read the books in English before they are translated. Some buy books about Zen via the Internet from Amazon ([www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)) and/or subscribe to American Buddhist magazines such as *Tricycle*. Some practitioners even choose to travel to Zen centers abroad.

The urban Brazilian upper-middle class seeks Zen Buddhism because it appeals intellectually to them as a philosophy of life. Their main concerns are, among others, relieving stress and acquiring inner peace, turning this symbolic field into a miscellany of religion and leisure. In order to have inner peace, practitioners feel that they have to search for their “inner self.” Very frequently, the people that I interviewed said that they sought Zen meditation as a way to learn about themselves. Zen meditation worked either in place of psychotherapy or in conjunction with it.<sup>52</sup>

The French anthropologist, Louis Dumont, argues that in the contemporary world, religious practice is a private choice.<sup>53</sup> In a process of *bricolage*, the practitioner chooses characteristics from different practices to condense them into a spiritual quest. Thus, each practitioner constructs his or her religion as a unique praxis that is different from all the others, mixing various traditions in order to build a new contemporary spirituality. There are several groups of practices associated with Zen

Buddhism in Brazil that are recurrent in the interviews: practices of healing (yoga, *Shiatsu*, *Do In*, *Tai Chi Chuan*, acupuncture); practices of self-understanding (many kinds of psychotherapy, astrology); martial arts (*Ai Ki Do*, karate); eating habits (vegetarianism, macrobiotics); and other religions (Spiritism,<sup>54</sup> African religions, Mahikari<sup>55</sup>, Rajneesh/Osho<sup>56</sup>).

The Western construct of Zen, which was appropriated, hybridized and indigenized in Brazil, is still a new phenomenon that needs to be further studied. This article is intended to be a first outline of the main trends of this phenomenon.

### CONCLUSION

Though the Japanese community in Brazil has been leaving Buddhism behind and adopting Roman Catholicism as a means to be accepted in the new country, many Brazilians of non-Japanese descent have recently been adhering to Buddhism, as we saw in this paper. For these Brazilians of non-Japanese origin, the main practice of Zen Buddhism involves meditation (*zazen*) and retreats (*sesshin*). Zen Buddhism is seen more as a philosophy than a religion. As such, Zen as practiced in Brazil is directly related to the Western construct of Zen.

Among the new features of Brazilian Zen is a retreat for children and teenagers that takes place twice a year (during school holidays) in *Busshinji*, the temple in São Paulo City. In general, the children's parents are adherents of the temple. Interestingly, in these retreats, children of both Japanese origin and of non-Japanese origin learn *zazen* and Buddhist concepts through drama sketches, drawing, and games. Although their parents have separate practices, the children are already sharing the same body of ideas about what Zen Buddhism is.

Since 1999, *Busshinji* has also been innovating through its work with prisoners (teaching them *zazen* and also giving computer classes) and AIDS patients. This is the first manifestation of so-called "engaged Buddhism," which is more frequently seen in the West. Furthermore, Koen, the *Busshinji* temple's abbess, is also establishing inter-religious debates with Roman Catholic orders and is regularly invited to give lectures

at universities across Brazil.

In addition, different Buddhist schools in Brazil are getting together in Cyberspace. Many Buddhist centers are linked together by means of websites. There are three ecumenical discussion forums and two mailing lists on the Internet produced in Brazil for Brazilian practitioners. In the printed medium, most of the Buddhist centers have a newsletter in which they communicate their schedule of activities, publish book reviews, and advertise books and products on practice. There are also four Buddhist magazines published quarterly in Brazil. Two of them are exclusively Zen Buddhist: *Flor do Vazio* is published in Rio de Janeiro, and *Caminho Zen* is published in Japan by the *Sōtō* school in the Portuguese language, and is intended specifically for the Brazilian market. *Bodigaya* and *Bodisatva* comprise articles that mostly center on Zen, Tibetan and Theravāda Buddhism.

The phenomenon of Buddhism is still very recent in Brazil. It has evolved much faster in the last decade than in the previous ones. Although much of what has been done was mirrored in the experiences of Buddhism in the United States and Europe, some of its Brazilian characteristics are already clear. Although incipient at this stage of formation, we are able to observe the merging of Buddhist teachings and rituals with non-Buddhist practices and concepts. Many practitioners had and still have a Roman Catholic background and migrated to African cults and Spiritism before finding Buddhism. A *bricolage* is evolving that, in due course, might create a Brazilian Zen and Brazilian Buddhism, innovatively combining the local and the global in a regionalized form of Buddhism.

## NOTES

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2. Peter Clarke, "Japanese New Religious Movements in Brazil" in *New Religious Movements: Challenge and Response*, edited by Bryan Wilson and Jamie Cresswel (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 205; P. Clarke, "The Cultural Impact of New Religions in Latin and Central America and the Caribbean

- with special Reference to Japanese New Religions,” *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies*, 4, 1 (1995), pp. 117–132.
3. Takashi Maeyama, *O Imigrante e a Religião: Estudo de uma Seita Religiosa Japonesa em São Paulo*, Doctoral dissertation, São Paulo: FFCHL/USP, 1967, p. 89.
  4. J. Lesser, 1999, p. 109; T. Maeyama, 1967, p. 84.
  5. J. Lesser, 1999, pp. 115–146.
  6. P. Clarke, 1999, p. 205. For more references on Japanese immigration to Brazil, see Jeffrey Lesser, *Negotiating National Identity: Immigrants, Minorities and the Struggle for Ethnicity in Brazil* (Durham: Duke University Press), 1999; organized by Hirōshi Saito and Takashi Maeyama, *Assimilação e Integração dos Japoneses no Brasil* (São Paulo: Edusp, 1973), Hirōshi Saito org., *A Presença Japonesa no Brasil* (São Paulo: T. A. Queiroz and Edusp, 1980).
  7. Comissão de Elaboração dos 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil, “Vida Religiosa dos Japoneses e seus Descendentes Residentes no Brasil e Religiões de Origem Japonesa,” in *Uma Epopéia Moderna: 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil* (São Paulo: Hucitec and Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Japonesa, 1992), p. 575.
  8. IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics), 1991 Census.
  9. Regina Meyer, *Metrópole e Urbanismo: São Paulo Anos 50*, Ph.D. dissertation, São Paulo: FAU/USP, 1991, pp. 4–53.
  10. Clarke, 1999, p. 205; Maeyama, 1967, pp. 84–112.
  11. Comissão de Elaboração dos 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil, 1992, p. 577.
  12. Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros, *Pesquisa da População de Descendentes de Japoneses Residentes no Brasil—1987–1988*, São Paulo: unpublished research, 1990, p. 97.
  13. Clarke, 1999, p. 205.
  14. Comissão de Elaboração dos 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil, 1992, p. 566.
  15. Ricardo Mário Gonçalves, “A Religião no Japão na Época da Emigração Para o Brasil e Suas Repercussões em nosso país” in *O Japonês em São Paulo e no Brasil*, report of the Symposium held in June 1968 for the 60th anniversary of Japanese immigration to Brazil (São Paulo: Centro de Estudos Nipo-Brasileiros, 1971), pp. 58–73.

16. Comissão de Elaboração dos 80 anos da Imigração Japonesa no Brasil, 1992, pp. 573–574.
17. J. Lesser, 1999, p. 133.
18. Ricardo Mário Gonçalves, “O Budismo no Japão na Época da Emigração Para o Brasil e Suas Repercussões em nosso país” in *O Japonês em São Paulo e no Brasil*, organized by Eurípedes Simões de Paula (São Paulo: Centro de Estudos Nipo Brasileiros, 1990), pp. 58–73.
19. Regina Yoshie Matsue, *O Paraíso de Amida: Três Escolas Budistas em Brasília*, Master’s thesis, Brasília: Universidade de Brasília, unpublished, 1998, p. 104.
20. *Isto É* magazine, March 12, 1997, p. 62.
21. Wilson Paranhos, *Nuvens Cristalinas em Luar de Prata* (Rio de Janeiro: Fundação Educacional Editorial Universalista, 1994), p. 151.
22. *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, March 31, 1998.
23. “Zen Oferece a Paz,” in *Bodigaya* magazine, No. 5, 1998, p. 5.
24. For a complete list of temples, monasteries and centers see: <http://sites.uol.com.br/cmrocha>.
25. *Veja* magazine, “Em Busca do Zen,” June 17, 1998; “Salvação para Tudo,” June 24, 1998; *Elle* magazine, “Onda Zen,” June, 1998.
26. “Onda Zen,” in *Elle* magazine, June, 1998.
27. IBGE, in *Revista da Folha*, April 12, 1998.
28. Cristina Rocha, “Zen Buddhist Brazilians? Why Catholics are Turning to Buddhism” (paper presented to the AASR [Australian Association for the Study of Religion] Conference: *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalization*, University of Sydney, 1999).
29. *O Estado de São Paulo* newspaper, October 27, 1998.
30. Cristina Rocha, “Catholicism and Zen Buddhism—a Vision of the Religious Field in Brazil” (paper presented to the 25th Annual Conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999).
31. *Isto É* magazine, March 12, 1997.
32. Since 1968 Tokuda has opened the temple in São Paulo to Brazilians of non-Japanese origin, but the number of participants was not significant. Return to text
33. “During the past century Sōtō Zen, like all Buddhist institutions in Japan, has

witnessed tumultuous changes. Its population of clerics has changed from (at least officially) 100% celibate monks to more than 90% married priests who manage Zen temples as family business. [Sōtō Zen] operates only thirty-one monasteries compared to nearly 15,000 temples, the vast majority of which function as the private homes of married priests and their wives and children.” See William Bodiford, “Zen and the Art of Religious Prejudice: efforts to reform a tradition of social discrimination,” *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*, 23,1–2 (1996), pp. 4–5.

34. Shunryu Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginners' Mind* (Tokyo: Weatherhill, 1970), p. 21.
35. Hirōshi Saito and Takeshi Maeyama, *Assimilação e Integração dos Japoneses no Brasil* (São Paulo: Edusp/Vozes, 1973).
36. Ruth Cardoso, “O Papel das Associações Juvenis na Aculturação dos Japoneses” in *Assimilação e Integração dos Japoneses no Brasil*, org. by H. Saito and T. Maeyama (São Paulo: Edusp, 1973).
37. Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity” in *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash, and R. Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), p. 39.
38. Martin Baumann, “The Transplantation of Buddhism to Germany: Processive Modes and Strategies of Adaptation,” *Method Theory in the Study of Religion* 6,1 (1994), pp. 35–61, p. 38.
39. For a bibliography on Buddhism in Brazil and a Web directory of Brazilian Buddhist temples, monasteries and centers, and Buddhist texts translated to Portuguese, see <http://sites.uol.com.br/cmrocha>.
40. Baumann, 1994, p. 40.
41. *Ibid*, p. 41.
42. Cristina Rocha, “Catholicism and Zen Buddhism: A Vision of the Religious Field in Brazil” (paper presented to the 25th Annual Conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, University of New South Wales, Sydney, 1999).
43. Ryotan Tokuda, *Psicologia Zen Budista*, Rio de Janeiro: Instituto Vitória Régia, 1997, p. 55.
44. *Ibid*, p. 60.
45. Robert Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism,” *History of Religions* 33, 1 (1993), p. 5.
46. *Ibid*, 1993.



47. Glocalization is a blend of local and global, an idea “modeled on a Japanese word (*dochaku*, ‘living on one’s land’) and adopted in Japanese business for global localization, a global outlook adapted to local conditions. The terms ‘glocal’ and ‘glocalization’ became one of the main marketing buzzwords of the beginning of the 1990s.” Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity” in *Global Modernities*, edited by M. Featherstone, S. Lash and R. Robertson (London: Sage, 1995), pp. 27–44.
48. The word “Zen” is fashionable in the West: one sees Zen perfume, shops, beauty parlors, restaurants, magazine articles, and architecture. In Brazil, it is a common expression to say someone is “Zen,” meaning very peaceful. Zen has a positive image in Brazil; it is associated with refinement, minimalism, a lack of tension and anxiety, exquisite beauty, and exoticism. One illustration of this is the fact that the word “Zen” appears almost daily in the trendy social column of *Folha de São Paulo*, one of the leading newspapers in Brazil.
49. Many books have been translated. Some of the titles are as follows: *The Zen Doctrine of No Mind and Introduction to Zen Buddhism* by D. T. Suzuki; *Zen Mind, Beginners’ Mind* by Shunryu Suzuki; *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Phillip Kapleau; *Nothing Special, Living Zen* by Charlotte Joko Beck; and most of the books by Thich Nhat Hanh. When I accessed the Internet site of a Brazilian bookstore in December 1999, the word “Zen” was used in 39 book titles in Portuguese (<http://livrariasaraiva.com/br>).
50. The recent Hollywood movies “The Little Buddha,” “Seven Years in Tibet,” and “Kundun” were very successful in Brazil. Even though they dealt with Tibetan Buddhism, they are directly associated with Buddhism itself and not specifically Tibet. As we will see in this paper, practitioners may belong to various sects of Buddhist temples and monasteries at once.
51. Cristina Rocha, “Zen Buddhist Brazilians? Why Catholics are Turning to Buddhism” (paper presented to the AASR [Australian Association for the Study of Religion] Conference: *The End of Religions? Religion in an Age of Globalization*, Sydney, University of Sydney, 1999).
52. Cristina Rocha, “Zen Buddhism in Brazil” (paper presented to the 4th International Conference of AILASA [Association of Iberian and Latin American Studies of Australia]: *Latin American, Spain and Portugal—Old and New Visions*, La Trobe University, Melbourne, 1999). Return to text
53. Louis Dumont, *O Individualismo: uma perspectiva antropológica da ideologia moderna* (São Paulo: Ed.Rocco, 1985), p. 240.

54. Spiritism, or Kardecism as it is known in Brazil, was founded by Allan Kardec (1804–1869) in France. It arrived in Brazil at the end of the 1800s. At the core of its doctrine is the idea of spiritual evolution. According to Kardec, the spirit, created by God, goes through several reincarnations until it achieves perfection. In order to evolve, the incarnated spirits (human beings) should practice charity and proselytize. What is more, the evolution of the spirit depends on its own effort. In Brazil, it suffered influences of Catholicism. As a result, it emphasizes the ideas of healing and miracles. (Koichhi Mori, “Processo de ‘Amarelamento’ das Tradicionais Religiões Brasileiras de Possessão—Mundo Religioso de uma Okinawana,” *Estudos Japoneses* 18 (1998), pp. 55–76, p. 59.
55. The *Sekai Mahikari Bummei Kyodan* (World Religious Society of Civilization—True Light) is a new religious movement that was founded in Japan in 1959. It focuses on healing, and similar to Spiritism, it sees sickness as having its origin in possessing spirits.
56. Bhagwan (God) Shree Rajneesh, also known as Osho, is the founder of the Rajneesh movement. This new religious movement began in India in the early 1970s and drew on both Western and Oriental sources to form a synthesis of New Age spirituality. Osho has a series of books in which he analyzes and interprets Zen doctrine.