5.
Japanese Buddhist Nuns
Innovators for the Sake of Tradition

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The question to be explored here is whether there are Buddhist nuns in Japan. Despite the various perspectives and experiences of Buddhist monastic women in the modern world, all share a concern for living according to the Dharma. Sometimes this means going against a tradition that is designed to make it difficult for women to lead lives as Buddhist renunciants. In ancient Japanese history, however, we can find examples of how women did not allow external forms and secular regulations to limit their commitment to the Dharma. First, allow me to offer some explanation as to how I, a laywoman of Japanese American heritage, became interested in the lives of monastic women.

I met Kito Shunko in the autumn of 1987, when I sojourned to India as a scholar of Buddhism. She is an elderly Soto * Zen monastic woman who was returning to India for a final pilgrimage to the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment. Although my Buddhist studies were focused on Japan, I was not aware of an extant order of Japanese Zen nuns. My first glimpse of her, with clean-shaven head and saffron robesthe traditional color of Indian monasticswas compelling. Moving toward her I realized that her robes were Japanese in design, though they were not in traditional Japanese black. Her aesthetic sensitivity and cultural awareness drew me to her side. In the softened light of evening, as we walked around the bodhi tree, her face glowed with the wisdom of enlightenment. Compassion emanated from her every motion as we moved through wispy clouds of incense, carrying the prayers of devotees. Among the spirited pilgrims and anxious beggars her laughter resounded with the peace of one who has soared the heights and fathomed the depths; she embodied harmony in its richest form. What teachings helped her gain such wisdom and compassion? Where was the spring of her ebullient laughter?

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I knew after our first conversation under the bodhi tree that I wanted to learn as much as possible about her way of life. As we walked along the Naranjana River, where Sakyamuni * Buddha once walked, a brilliantly pink sun rose into the sky. Kito Shunko wove stories of the years she spent in India, building the Japanese Temple in Bodhgaya, with poetry by Zen master Dogen* (thirteenth century), and she spoke about a training temple for monastic women in Nagoya, Japan. I had found a living treasure of Japanese Buddhism.

Now let us go back to a historic moment that has faded from memory. The time is 584 C.E. and Buddhism is a fledgling religion in the land of *kami,* 1having been officially introduced only about three decades previously. Cultural interaction with Korea is active, bringing in fresh energy. A young woman is moved by the new teachings of the Dharma. Because she lives in a cultural climate where she is surrounded by women engaged in religious affairs, it is natural that her family consider ordination for her. But there are no native Japanese Buddhist nuns for her to emulate, for no one in this island country has ever before been ordained into this new tradition. Nonetheless, compelled by the wisdom of these new teachings, she commits her life fully to them. She makes her historic vows and becomes the first ordained Buddhist in Japan. Over a millennium later, some people still remember her Buddhist name, Zenshin-ni.2

Shortly after Zenshin-ni's ordination, two other women joined her. Zenzo-ni and Ezen-ni also come to devote their lives to the Dharma.3 In March of 588 C.E., their zeal to gain a deeper understanding of the monastic regulations propelled them to make history again by becoming the first Japanese people to go abroad to study in Paekche, on the Korean peninsula.4 They returned to Japan after receiving full *bhiksuni**ordination in March of 590.5 Upon their return, with heightened resolve and determination to establish this new religion on Japanese soil, the first Buddhist temple, an *amadera*6 called Sakurai-ji, was built in the central location of Yamato,7 in the year 590. Shotoku Taishi (574-622), a prince widely recognized for his contributions to establishing Buddhism in Japan, had not yet made his entrance onto the stage of Japanese government and culture.

Although their vital contributions have been obscured in the mire of androcentric historiography, women were a significant force in the introduction of Buddhism to Japan.8 Indeed it is no quirk of historical circumstance that the first ordained Buddhists in Japan were women,9 because women were central figures in the religious sphere of ancient Japanese culture.10 The tradition of women playing a central role in Japanese religion is illustrated by the fact that the highest deity in the indigenous pantheon of *kami* is Amaterasu Omikami, the Sun God-

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dess, and is further demonstrated by the fact that a number of empresses ruled over periods of ancient Japanese history. The most famous female ruler was a shaman named Himiko. She ruled over the state of Yamatai in the first half of the third century. 11 A man succeeded her after she passed away, but the people rejected him. He was replaced by a thirteen-year-old female relative of Himiko's, named Iyo or Ichiyo.12

Such events make it compellingly clear that historiography, not history, is at fault in the omission of the contributions of women. Recently scholars have begun to correct the histories that have left out numerous female participants, but some of these only highlight the story of what women could *not* do. It is important to include the ways in which women have been oppressed, but it is perhaps more important to extend one's purview to include what women *have* accomplished, especially when they do so in spite of oppressive circumstances.

Documents dating back to the mid-Heian period (794-1185) record that women protested against unfair treatment. A prime example from the ninth century begins with the Tendai and Shingon sects establishing a practice that prohibited women from their mountain-top temples and their mode of Buddhist practice. Furthermore, since the government granted Tendai, and later Shingon, control over the ordination platform, they chose to prohibit women from receiving the precepts. The women of Heian Japan, however, did not let these obstacles deter their determination to seek the Dharma. In the face of political and religious institutions threatening to exclude them from monastic life, the women of Heian exercised their acumen and determination to continue practicing Buddhism by creating their own form of Buddhist monasticism. Their actions reveal their insight that no institution has the authority to dictate the Dharma.

Confidence in their abilities enabled the women of ancient Japan to prevail over the complications perpetrated by male-dominated institutions. Without sharing the advantages of governmental sponsorship that monks enjoyed, and in the face of male Buddhists not offering ordination to women, Heian Buddhist women triumphed over this blatant inequity with innovative thinking. They created a new category that they named Bosatsukai-ni that was granted to those who took the *bodhisattva* vows. In so doing they took authority into their own hands and became "*bodhisattva* nuns." Their lives were similar to their predecessors in that they maintained the practices of nuns; they shaved their heads, wore Buddhist robes, and engaged in rigorous Buddhist practice. They were highly respected in society, partly because a number of the nuns were women from the imperial family. Their perseverance is a genuine testimony to the strength of their

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commitment and the depth of their understanding of the Dharma. It is easy to imagine that many nuns had sentiments similar to those expressed in the following poem by the Great Kamo Priestess (9641035):

> With the scent of just one flower as my guide,
> Won't I, too, see all the numberless Buddhas? 13

The innovations implemented by the nuns reveal the strength of Heian period Buddhist women. They did not allow official regulations made by male authorities, nor a technical definition of the category "nun," to dissuade them from their commitment to the Dharma. In a sense, they followed the precedent set by Mahaprajapati*, the very first Buddhist nun, who persisted in her efforts to establish the order of Buddhist monastic women even though Sakyamuni*, the enlightened founder of the tradition, initially resisted. Since the first Buddhist nuns did not have a quorum of ten monks and ten nuns present at their ordination ceremony to qualify them as official *bhiksuni**,* why should it be absolutely required of those who seek ordination later?

In the next historical epoch of Japanese history, I will highlight Dogen*, the founder of Soto* Zen in Japan. He lived during a period of inclusivism during the Kamakura period (1186-1333). It was a time when Buddhism was being introduced into the lives of common people, men and women alike. Like other reforms of his time, Dogen took a strong stand on his views of women. Borne out of frustration with the existing Buddhist institutions of his day, he wrote this impassioned text in order to extinguish the errors of those who harbored incorrect thoughts about women and the Dharma. This excerpt is from the *Raihaitokuzui.*

> There is a ridiculous custom in Japan: it is the practice that nuns and women are not allowed to enter the places called "restricted territories" or "training halls of the Mahayana*." Such a perverted custom has been practiced for ages, without anyone realizing its wrongness in the least. Those practicing the ancient way do not reform it, and those who are learned and astute do not care about it. While some say that it is the work of the incarnated [Buddhas and *bodhisattvas],* others claim that it is a legacy from ancient worthies. Yet all fail to reason about it. Their egregious absurdity is truly hard to believe ....If such obsolete practices do not have to be redressed, does it mean that the cycle of birth and death need not be forsaken either?14

Dogen wrote this in the spring of 1240, just three years prior to his departure from Kyoto to the mountainous and remote region of Echizen. The timing of his exodus from the capital city, occurring shortly after this unambiguous statement regarding women, suggests

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that the prevailing institutions may have made it difficult for him to freely practice his understanding of the Dharma.

In the *Raihaitokuzui,* however, Dogen * does not merely denounce the ways of others. He also offers positive instruction regarding his understanding of women and the Dharma. He clearly states that male and female practitioners are equal, and he clarifies the confusion surrounding female Dharma teachers. "It is irrelevant whether a guide has male or female characteristics, and the like; what counts is that the guide be a person of virtue, of thusness."15 He continues in the *Raihaitokuzui* with advice on what is the appropriate way to express respect and gratitude to a teacher of the Dharma regardless of their form.

> Valuing the Dharma means that, whether [your guide] is a pillar, a lantern, buddhas, a fox, a demon, a man, a woman, if it upholds the great Dharma and attains the marrow, then you should offer your body-mind as its seat and service for immeasurable *kalpas* [aeons].16 Nevertheless, the prevailing view of Dogen is that, while he held

egalitarian ideals in his early years, he did not take them with him when he established his "serious" monastery in Echizen. This view is based upon one sentence in a text that is recognized as one of a number that were compiled a few years after Dogen passed away. The text, *Shukke ku doku* has a single sentence that denies the possibility of attaining Buddhahood in a female body: "Female-body Buddhahood is not the true Buddahood." The fact that Dogen had a number of female disciples until his death contradicts the superficial meaning of these words. One nun, Egi-ni, even had the highly honored position of trust to care for Dogen, her teacher, during his illness prior to his passing away. Furthermore, texts that strongly assert positive views of women are more numerous than the one line indicating the contrary, and they are more in harmony with the Zen master's action. Moreover, his egalitarian views on women correspond to his nondualistic philosophy. Therefore, to conclude that Dogen had a fundamental change of heart in his understanding of women implies that he was an inconsistent philosopher, for Dogen writes with certainty that "All existences are Buddha nature."

Although there are numerous examples of women in Japanese Buddhist history overcoming obstacles to full engagement with Buddhist monastic life, one striking one dates from a few centuries later, during the feudalistic era known as the Tokugawa period (1603-1867), when the tides had shifted to a regimented society controlled by a military government. A number of *amadera* resisted society's increasingly oppressive regulation of women. A poignant example of the

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sincerity of these women is displayed in the story of Eshun-ni. She was the younger sister of the founder of Saiko-ji, a temple in present-day Odawara. Her brother forbade her ordination because of her peerless beauty. Unflinching in her resolve to fully commit her life to the Dharma, she responded with swift and irreversible action. The young beauty burned her face in the *hibachi* stove. Thereafter, her dedication to the Dharma was uncontested.

In the twentieth century, Japanese women are still engaged in a deliberate and active attempt to reassert their concerns. The shackles of the male-dominated and markedly regimented Tokugawa period were shed for a renewed sense of worth. Monastic women had a similar vision and acted with swift strength. Fortified with the triumphs of female religious leaders of the past, they approached their goals with confidence.

Soto * Zen nuns began the twentieth century with deep commitment to living a monastic Buddhist life, with the knowledge that their founder, Dogen*, had given teachings affirming women's practice. Although academics are divided over the significance of Dogen's* egalitarian teachings, practicing Zen nuns are not divided in the least. Nuns embrace the positive views of women that are found in Dogen's writings and, empowered by them, have affected the course of Soto Zen history in the twentieth century.

Japanese Buddhist nuns began the century encumbered by misogynous regulations that had developed like an insidious disease in a sect administration that did not acknowledge nuns' abilities, contributions, or commitments. Monastic women always wore black robes, the color of novices, because they were not able to receive higher monastic or secular education along with the men.17 Nuns did not have official training facilities, nor were they permitted to enter the Soto sect university, Komazawa. Even for the lower degrees, the coursework requirements for a nun were considerably lengthier than those of their male counterparts, sometimes necessitating one, two, even three years more training. With these unfair regulations in common practice, it was easy to prevent nuns from heading temples of any size or influence. This, in turn, meant that nuns were effectively shut out of a fiscal system that had become very lucrative by the close of the century. The regulations stated that only a monastic with a certain rank could be considered for middle and high positions, but nuns were not eligible to attain those ranks, no matter how long or hard they practiced.

This section traces the three generations of Soto monastic women who are responsible for releasing nuns from these systematically undue restrictions. They are: the four nuns who founded Nagoya's official training monastery for nuns in 1904; Kojima Kendo (b. 1898), the

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founder of the Nisodan *; and Aoyama Shundo (b. 1933), who exemplifies the contemporary life of monastic women in Japan. The first generation broke through the embankment of inequity by focusing upon the fundamental problemdenial of education to female monastics. The second generation continued to blaze the trail of the true Dharma by forcing the sect administration to unify all sect regulations and make no distinction between male and female monastics. By the third generation, the fruits of the previous generations' toil were beginning to ripen. Each new generation of women continues to manifest strength of character, depth of commitment to Buddhist life, and the spirit of egalitarianism.

Monastic women led the way for women to seek education outside the home, but it was a path filled with institutionalized obstacles. At least toward the end of the Tokugawa period, nuns lived in subtemples studying and practicing together. The sect did not acknowledge their efforts, for they did not authorize the subtemples to grant degrees. Moreover, nuns were not allowed to study or practice anything outside of the subtemples. In a move to increase the quality of their education, the first monastery school for resident nuns was established by a nun in Gifu Prefecture on April 1, 1881.18 Although nuns had yet to receive recognition from the sect administration for their efforts, shortly thereafter each region established its own school for nuns. In 1887, Aichi Prefecture became the second location, followed by Kyoto in 1888, Tokyo in 1889, and Toyama Prefecture in 1892.19 These monastery schools trained novices in Buddhist practice and provided a general education, but were not authorized to grant degrees. Nonetheless, they were a step above the subtemples because they offered a higher level of education.

During this period, monastic women also were active in society. They were involved in nursery schools and day care for children during the farmers' busy seasons. Although they personally had renounced the householder life, nuns had insight into the needs of householders and were eager to serve their needs. Many temples also ran schools called Terakoya,20 and though these schools were invariable at a monk's temple, the majority of those doing the actual teaching and care of the children were nuns.21 During the Meiji years of rapid modernization and reexamination of traditional customs and values, temple education was reformed. Soto* nuns forced the currents of change in their favor; they won the right to officially establish schools fully authorized to train women in the monastic life and offer a general education. The barriers removed, Soto nuns wasted no time in fulfilling their dreams of higher education. On August 10, 1902, regulations for an official degree-granting Soto-shu* Niso Gakurin were established.22

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It was originally determined that there would be three locations in the country that would give instruction on various Buddhist teachings and offer classes as found in a regular secular school. But by 1907, monastery schools for nuns had already been established in Toyama, Aichi, Nagano, and Niigata prefectures. Their curriculum was designed to prepare the nuns broadly in both Buddhist studies and general academic studies. The requirements during their tenure at the monastery school included Soto * sect teachings, teachings of other sects, ethics, practice, Japanese, classical Chinese *(kanbun),* history, geography, math, calligraphy, chanting scriptures *(shomyo),* and sewing. To receive the preparatory degree *(yoka),* one had to attend the monastery school for a year. The standard degree *(honka)* involved three years of study and practice.

These monastery schools were distinct from a pure monastery, for their aims were to train the women to be effective both in the Buddhist community and the community at large. For the women to succeed and be respected by society, the secular component of education was indispensable. Since most schools were traditionally affiliated with a temple and there were few public schools, it was not unusual to combine the two. Nuns won the authority to grant official monastic degrees recognized by the sect administration and to grant official academic degrees recognized by the Ministry of Education.

This historical achievement was fostered in large part by the efforts of the women who established the first autonomous school officially authorized to train monastic women. Four monastic womenMizuno Jorin, Hori Mitsujo, Yamaguchi Kokan, and Ando Kokaiestablished the Aichi-ken Soto-shu* Niso* Gakurin on May 8, 1903, only nine months after the regulations enabled them to do so.

These nuns were empowered by their understanding of the teachings of Dogen* and Ejo, by faith in their "original destiny," and by what they called their "natural rights," a concept that had come into currency along with a host of Western ideas in the Meiji period. Thus they did not merely claim, but reclaimed rights that were theirs before the sect administration instituted inequality:

> We monastic women have largely been neglected by members of the sect, to say nothing of general society. The result has been that the institution of the sect has not granted us our natural rights. Due to this negligence, a great number of monastic women have endured miserable conditions, and the situation has not changed much over time. However, we will not permit the flow of history to stop and leave us in our current situation. Indeed, we have arrived at a time when the actual day is not far away when women in society will clamor with a loud voice and claim the right to participate in govern-

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ment. At the next special meeting of the legislature, the government and the people from both political parties will introduce a bill for the civil rights of women. Is there a more lucid tale to see than this? Even if only one day sooner, we monastic women, too, must awaken from our deep slumber; we must free ourselves from the bonds of iron chains. Having been granted on this occasion the opportunity to participate in a National Monastic Women's meeting at the head temple, Eihei-ji, the historic seat of the great Dharma, we monastic women must become self-aware of the important destiny to which we have been assigned. Along with this, we must claim our natural rights. This will happen soon, for we have the capacity to truly believe and not doubt the spirit of the Second Patriarch Koun Ejo and the original founder, Dogen * Zenji. The majority of us are of congenial spirit; namely, we the monastic women of Japan are ever more solidifying our joint forces. We must succeed in attaining our original destiny, and in so doing let us claim the natural rights that we deserve but have not yet gained!"23

Resolutions

I. We monastic women are resolved to work to achieve the important mission of educating the people along with exerting ourselves to increasingly improve and advance, and cultivate belief in ourselves by looking in the mirror to see our duty and the current of the times.

II. Beyond accomplishing our duty as monastic women, we are resolved, in the name of this large association, to petition to the sect authorities and the institution of the sect to claim our rights as follows:

A. We want authorization to designate Dharma heirs.

B. We reclaim the right to participate in the governing of each aspect of the sect and to opportunities for education and the like.

C. We reclaim the capacity to have appointments in each category of teachers of the faith.

D. We resolve to hold annual seminars that focus upon the various concerns of monastic women.

E. We reclaim the right to be granted positions as heads of temples at least as high as those with the status of full-ranking temple *(hochi)*.24

In 1937, the Third Soto* Sect National Assembly of Monastic Women was held at Soji-ji in honor of the 600th anniversary of Emperor Godaigo (1318-39). At this assembly the nuns wrote another resolution including petitions for authorization to designate a Dharma heir, to wear different robes (nuns were only allowed to wear the color of novices,

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black), to have the right to participate in all aspects of the sect governing organization, and to have increased educational opportunities. Thereafter, they decided to present their resolutions annually. 25

The nuns formally established the Soto* Sect Nuns Organization for the Protection of the Country (Soto-shu* Niso* Gokukudan) in 1944.26 Their motto is: "Do not discriminate against [a person's] sex, this is the True law of the exquisite and supreme Buddhist path." The three aims they established when they formed this organization are as follows:

1. To be authorized to grant Dharma transmission.

2. To build a school for teaching nuns and to publish a history of nuns before Koun Ejo's 700th memorial [1980].

3. Social work: For example, we started the orphanage Lumbini-en when we found children who had lost their parents in the war struggling for survival in Ueno Park and the subway station in Asakusa. Taniguchi Setsudo took sole responsibility for the long-term daily care of the children.27

Soto nuns saw their aims clearly and proceeded with confidence. They developed their role as protectors of the unfortunate, institutionally cultivating and advocating a socially engaged monastic life. After the war they renamed their organization Soto-shu Nisodan*, the Soto Sect Nuns' Organization, and were given an office in the sect headquarters building in Tokyo.

Sallie King suggests that due to these historically poor conditions, "It is scarcely possible that any outstanding nuns could appear" until recent reforms.28 It is more to the point to say that the recent reforms were won because there *were* outstanding nuns who wrought them.

The first three generations of the twentieth-century Soto Zen nuns went from a position of little opportunity and recognition to a position of official equality. They won parity in sect regulations regarding instructional and religious ranks, created a national organization to officially present their specific concerns to sect headquarters, and began publishing various journals written by and for nuns. One of their journals from the early 1960s features a poem written by the twentieth-century nun Toko-ni, perhaps because it reflects an awareness that nuns are acting in accordance with the Dharma as they overturn centuries of inequity.

On Becoming a Beautiful Nun

Nuns are forever praying for beautiful things.
The Buddha probably does not like a nun who does not have spirit.
A nun whose heart and body are beautiful is an incarnation of the
Buddha.29

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Continuing their march toward institutionalizing equality in the Zen sect, monastic women made unprecedented strides in terms of educational possibilities. They established three autonomous monasteries for women in different regions in Japan. This century also saw the first monastic women educated and graduated from the Soto-shu's * prestigious Komazawa University. In short, Soto* Zen monastic women established the first official Zen monasteries to train women exclusively to gain equal rank with male monastics. Yet in the midst of these significant advances, they maintained the genuine quality of traditional Zen Buddhist monasticism. Finally, in the twentieth century, they succeeded in institutionalizing the equality that Dogen* taught in the thirteenth century.

These women illuminate a vital stream in modern Japanese society and culture, and can serve as a model for all women who seek liberation. Triumphant over various forms of male domination, modern Japanese Zen nuns maintain a traditional monastic lifestyle, not allowing the currents of modernity to dilute their religious commitment. They have become creative innovators in order to enforce the egalitarian teachings of their founder and to reclaim the illustrious heritage of women in Japanese religion. That is to say, the Zen nuns who lead the movement for the independence and equality of women do so precisely in order to transmit ancient religious and cultural traditions. Like their predecessors, Zen monastic women in modern Japan are innovators *for the sake of tradition.*

My field research reveals that monastic Buddhist women persist in their quest to lead the monastic Buddhist life, and that the monastic institution envisioned by Dogen can still be found today at Eihei-ji, the monastery he founded, and at other Soto monasteries, both large and small. The place of the monastic lifestyle in the prevailing trends of Soto Zen, however, has undergone notable, and in many instances radical, change. Many ordained male Buddhists do not believe that monastic Buddhism is still a strong and viable institution. It has changed so much that monks are perhaps more accurately called priests, since their activities primarily center upon liturgical, rather than mediational, practices. The majority of male monastics marry and lead household lives where they are involved with raising children, cultivating an heir to the temple, and supporting the family economically. They are commonly found indulging in the consumption of alcohol and other luxury items.30

Monastic women, on the other hand, typically enter a monastery and undergo rigorous training for an average of five years, in contrast to the men, who train for an average of two. The women consider five years to be the minimal amount of training necessary for the rhythm

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and quality of the strict monastic life to become a natural part of one's being and body, for one must cultivate habits of mind and body that are increasingly divergent from the habits of the common householder in modern Japan. The physical demands of rising before dawn, sitting in zazen posture, eating with ritual exactness and grace, cleaning with meticulous determination, and using no assistance from convenient gadgets or solutions, requires a keen mind and strong body. Furthermore, with no chairs, all activitieschanting scriptures, drinking tea, sewing, confiding with a fellow adeptare done in the formal sitting posture called *seiza* (sitting on one's legs with back perfectly straight). Since they are monastics, these women do not even allow themselves the comfort of sitting on a cushion. The nun's hands, however, hold precious tea bowls with a familiarity and ease uncommon in the highly aristocratic tea ceremony. They frequently take time to enjoy traditional tea and cakes, a time when the comings and goings of the flowers in the garden are noted with a sense of wonder. Though conversation in the women's monastery is minimal, it is musical and sublime. Words that interrupt the silence are embellished with graceful and humble turns of phrase, and subtle feelings are expressed through refined sensitivities that are ever aware of the seasons, while their vocabulary and grammar betray patterns of centuries past. Upon graduating from the monastery, the women enter a temple in which they continue the practices they learned in training. The training of Zen monastic women enables them to be self-sufficient in a temple as they become imbued with a traditional way of life. In the world of monastic women, therefore, one may still experience traditional Soto * Zen values interwoven with traditional Japanese culture.

The value nuns place on monastic tradition is evident in the choices they make in their lives. Soto Sect regulations do not restrict nuns from marrying or growing their hair, yet nearly all choose to maintain strict vows and practice. Most explained that they considered these basics to be the definition of being a monastic. Interviews, survey responses, and their actions suggest that many find the practices laid down by Buddhist tradition, especially by Dogen*, meaningful. The nun's commitment to Buddhist practice is not experienced as a burden, nor as merely clinging to old-fashioned ways. Most see that living a life according to these ancient teachings is important, because they help one understand the nature of human society. There is an underlying belief that an aspirant must strive to deepen her practice in order to help others usher in the new age.

Monastic women realize their important role in society and have confidence that they can make a positive difference. Although the range of their activities and interests is broad, they are all life-affirming.

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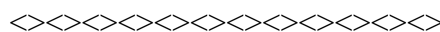
Leading lives of aesthetic refinement, nuns keep Japanese aesthetic traditions and Buddhist values alive. They express few complaints or regrets about their lives. On the contrary, in the survey, the most frequently used word in response to an inquiry reflecting on life as a nun is *gratitude.*

The gender of nuns in modern Japan does not encumber them from full devotion to Buddhist truth, for they have defined their gender as having the qualities of a plum blossomstrong enough to be gentle in the harshest conditions. They can be warm and understanding, because they have the strength to transcend ego desires. They were able to change the sect regulations in just a few short decades, because they knew their demands were in accord with Buddhist truth. They did not let the attempts of the male-dominated sect administration undermine their effectiveness nor inhibit them from acting in a constructive manner to institutionalize the principles of Dogen's * teachings in the twentieth-century practice of Zen.

Historical and anthropological data reveals that Soto* Zen nuns have a high respect for monastic life. Women in other traditions, contexts, and time periods who have been dismissed as oppressed and unfortunate have found their lives important and meaningful as well. The Personal Narratives Group Survey found that "while. . women might be defined as 'marginal' from the perspective of a society's dominant norms and established power relations, the women so defined did not necessarily experience themselves as marginal."31

Women's lives as seen through the poetry of the *Therigatha**suggests that women even in ancient India had the resolve to take control of their lives and not let themselves be pushed by the tides of suffering. They persisted, and found liberation and joy. Many monastic women in modern Japan are similarly strong, dedicated, and determined to lead meaningful lives. As is poignantly demonstrated in the following story, most Soto Zen nuns lead exemplary, yet ordinary, lives devoted to Buddhist truth.



In a small, inconspicuous nun's temple in Nagoya, a hardy Zen nun with pristine sincerity, Nogami Senryo, lived Dogen's teachings with her entire being. Though hardly known beyond the temple compound walls, her daily life was plain testimony to her supreme realization of Buddhist truth. She dedicated herself to caring for this nuns' temple, Seikan-ji, meanwhile training a quiet but alert nun named Kuriki Kakujo. Kuriki, who is currently the head nun of Seikan-ji, arrived under Nogami's tutelage at the age of eight. With a sense of awe, respect, and a hint of trepidation, Kuriki remembers how Nogami

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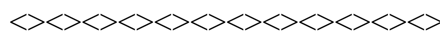
raised her on the classical Zen dictum, *Zadatsu ryubo* ("Die sitting, die standing"). This is the way of a monastic. 32

Dogen* used this classical Zen dictum in a widely chanted and studied text, *Fukan zazengi,* to stress that practice means to do all activities with steady attention to reality here and now. According to Dogen, practice is not for the purpose of creating sages out of ordinary people, because the distinction between an ordinary person and a sage is false. All are Buddha nature. Therefore, he admonished his student, *"Zadatsu ryubo* (Die sitting, die standing)." Since ancient times, various cultures have had a fascination with the posture of a person at the moment of death, which is interpreted as an indication of the deceased's level of spiritual attainment. In Zen, although no one can verify how many people have actually succeeded in this, sitting and standing death postures are considered absolute proof of enlightenment.

Nogami Senryo repeated this like a *mantra* as she strove to live each moment with pure and relentless concentration. On a crisp afternoon, the 17th of November, 1980, Nogami's adamantine voice pierced the silence: "It's time for *zadatsu ryubo!"* Not knowing what to expect, Kuriki rushed to the dim hallway where she saw Nogami slowly walking toward the bronze sculpture of Sakyamuni Buddha sitting full-lotus posture on the altar in the Worship Hall. Arriving in time to witness the stout ninety-seven-year old nun in simple black robes take a final step to perfect her stance, Kuriki pealed, "Congratulations!" as Nogami died standing.33



Like the story of the first ordained Buddhists in Japan, the story of Soto* nuns in this century illuminates a vital stream in Japanese society and culture. As exemplars of traditional monastic Zen Buddhism, they serve as moral and spiritual leaders of society. Indeed, interviews, surveys, and living with the nuns enabled me to verify that they do not see themselves as powerless victims of oppression. This raises the historiographical issue that leads us to consider the self-perceptions of women historicallynot just how they have been viewed by others, primarily men. The story of Soto nuns helps bring to the surface the lasting role of women in Japanese religion. Women have made, and continue to make, important contributions to Japanese religious life as they participate in it and create it according to their own understanding. With the nuns in focus, it is evident that Dogen Zen is not a matter of the past, but is alive today, in the lives of nuns as they make traditional daily activities their religious discipline. The Dharma is conducive to modifying a form in order to more genuinely maintain the living truth. Indeed, Japanese women com-

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mitted to Buddhist monastic life today thrive in the Dharma, in part due to the women of ninth-century Japan who ordained themselves as bodhisattva nuns. From the perspective of Zen nuns today, living according to the True Dharma takes precedence over forms that serve as obstacles. In this way, they can say that they are daughters of the Dharma, for the Dharma is constant through time and space. All forms are impermanent, subject to change over the years as they are experienced by people of diverse cultural and historical backgrounds.

The history of women in Japanese Buddhism is filled with courageous acts and personal victoriesfrom the first ordained Buddhist in the sixth century, to the Heian period innovators, to the inclusive spirit of the Kamakura period, to the perspicacity and determination of nuns in the Tokugawa period, to the leaders in educational and institutional reforms in the twentieth century. The events highlighted here only suggest a dim outline of the contours of a landscape that is rich with the suffering and triumphs of centuries of women devoted to the Dharma. This is only a clue to the treasures buried in Japanese Buddhist history, waiting to be discovered.

Notes

1. *Kami* are the deities of the indigenous Japanese religious tradition primarily connected with Shinto *. They are commonly referred to as animistic or nature deities, for there are mountain *kami,* wind *kami,* and tree *kami* among myriad others.

2. Tajima Hakudo, *Soto-shu* Niso-shi**(Tokyo, 1955), pp. 112-13. This is the most comprehensive text written on Japanese Buddhist monastic women.

3. Ibid. The *Nihonshoki* and *Gankoji Garan Engi* are the historical documents that record this event. For further information, see Ienaga Saburo and Akamatsu Shunsho, eds., *Nihon Bukkyoshi*,* vol. 1 (Kyoto: Hozokan, 1967), pp. 56-57; Takagi Yutaka, *Bukkyoshi no naka no Nyonin* (Tokyo: Heibonsha, 1988), pp. 28-38; Ueda Yoshie, *Chomon Niso* Monogatari* (Tokyo: Kokusho Kankokai, 1979), pp. 34-36; and Shufunotomo, *Amadera: Kazari o Otoshita Nyonintachi* (Tokyo: Dainihon Insatsu, 1989), p. 38.

4. There are a few sources in Japanese that cite this fact. See Tajima, *Niso-shi,* p. 114. Takagi mentions the circumstances of the first three Japanese Buddhists who went to China to study the precepts on p. 28. On p. 35, he references historical documents that recorded this event: *Nihon Shoki* and *Jogu Shotoku Hoo Teisetsu.* The *Nihongi* also records this event. The Great Imperial Chieftain told envoys from Paekche to take nuns, including Zenshin, to study the precepts in 587. This passage is cited in Wm. deBary, ed., *Sources of Japanese*

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Tradition, vol. 1 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), p. 38. Ueda also mentions this event on p. 35.

5. Akira Hirakawa, "History of Nuns in Japan," *Buddhist Christian Studies* 12 (1992): 150. It is unclear which school of Vinaya these nuns followed, but Hirakawa speculates that it might have been the Dasabhanavara Vinaya or the Caturvarga Vinaya.

6. An *amadera* is a temple headed by a woman. *Ama* means "nun" and *tera* (or *dera)* means "temple." There is no exact equivalent in English, since there is no comparable situation.

7. Tajima, *Niso-shi *,* p. 115.

8. In Dale Spender's introduction to *Men's Studies Modified: Impact of Feminism on the Academic Disciplines* (Oxford: Pergamon Press, 1981), p. 2, she reasons that women are kept out of academic treatments of issues because of a structural problem. Since men have determined the traditional parameters, "the process itself can reinforce the 'authority' of men and the deficiency of women."

9. Although the first ordained Buddhists in China and Korea were not women, according to the *Bikuniden,* the first ordained woman in China dates to the early fourth century in Ch'ang-an. At that time she took only ten precepts and shaved her head. In 357 she and three others received full ordination. The year 544 marks the date of the first nun in Korea. She lived in Eiko-ji, the first *amadera* in Korea.

10. Nakamura Kyoto, a pioneer scholar of the role of women in Japanese religion, stresses, "It is clear that women had a good deal of authority [in ancient Japan], especially in religious matters." Nakamura Kyoko, "Revelatory Experience in the Female Life Cycle: A Biographical Study of Women Religionists in Modern Japan," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 8. 3-4 (Sept-Dec. 1981): 189. Takagi concurs with this analysis of history, stating that the reason women were the first to become ordained Buddhists was due to the predominance of women in "Shinto*" as shamans. *Bukkyoshi*,* p. 40.

11. Her reign is recorded in the *History of the Kingdom of Wei,* a section of the Chinese historical texts entitled the *San-kuo-chih.* The account notes that the region of Yamatai was beset by warfare, but peace reigned once Himoko embarked upon the throne. She never married. See Tsunoda Ryusaku, trans., *Japan in Chinese Dynastic Histories,* ed. L. Carrington Goodrich (South Pasadena, Calif.: P. D. & I. Perkins, 1951), pp. 8-16.

12. The Chinese monarch proclaimed Ichiyo ruler of Yamatai. Scholars still dispute the location of this ancient state. Some say it was in Kyushu; others claim it was the precursor of Yamato, placing it in present-day Nara Prefecture.

13. Translated by E. Kamens in *The Buddhist Poetry of the Great Kamo Priestess: Daisaiin Senshi and Hosshin Wakashu**(Ann Arbor: Center for Japanese Studies, University of Michigan, 1990), p. 101.

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14. From the *Himitsu Shobogenzo* *version of the "Raihaitokuzui." Dogen*, *Dogen Zenji Zenshu**, vol. 1, ed. Okubo* Doshu* (Tokyo: Chikumashobo*, 1969), p. 254. English translation from Hee-Jin Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness: Selections from Dogen's* Shobogenzo* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p. 293n18.

15. *Taisho* Shinshu* Daizokyo*,* 85 volumes, ed. Takakusu Junjiro*, Watanabe Kaigyoku, and Ono Gemmyo* (Tokyo: Taisho Issaikyo* Kankokai*, 1924-34), vol. 82, pp. 33-4. English translation from Hee Jin Kim, *Flowers of Emptiness: Selections from Dogen's Shobogenzo* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985), p. 287.

16. Ibid., p. 288.

17. Dogen is famous for having refused a purple robe, the color that symbolized highest respect, because it did not coincide with his commitment to simplicity. Nonetheless, the sect institutionalized a hierarchical system with each rank symbolized by an appropriate robe color. In keeping with their founder, many monastics prefer to wear black, regardless of their rank. For male monastics, this preference was a matter of choice. Not until the middle of the twentieth century was it a choice for women.

18. In 1872 the government officially designated Soji-ji* and Eihei-ji as the head temples of the Soto* sect. During this time of change, the male-dominated Soto Zen institution did not intitiate reforms to bring equality to monastic women.

19. Ueda, *Chomon Niso* Monogatari,* pp. 79-80.

20. *Terakoya* were common in the Tokugawa period and made a positive contribution to the community by offering education to young people.

21. This information was passed on to me through oral history. Many elderly nuns today recall how their teachers and teacher's teachers taught young children in their temples.

22. I have gained access to this period of their history through sources found primarily in the monastery archives. The major documents include *Soto-shu* Niso-shi* (The History of Soto Sect Nuns),* the authoritative book on the history of the Soto sect of monastic women; Tanaka Dorin, Kato Shinjo, Yamaguchi Kokan, and Tajima Hakudo, eds., *Rokujunen no Ayumi (A Path of Sixty Years)* (Nagoya: Aichi Senmon Nisodo*, 1963), a book that explicates the history of the Aichi Senmon Nisodo; and *Jorin* and *Otayori,* journals written by and for monastic women. These texts, written by a number of female monastics about their own history, are supplemented by secondary texts on modern Japanese history and women in modern Japan to gain a perspective of female monastics in the context of general social and cultural changes and progress. My exploration into the world of Japanese Buddhist nuns concentrates upon the Soto sect of Zen, for it is currently the largest and most organized sect of nuns in Japan. The Soto-shu has the highest number of convents; three (Aichi Senmon Nisodo, Niigata Senmon Nisodo, and Toyama Senmon Nisodo), compared to Jodo-shu*, which has one (Yoshimizu Gakuen of Chion-in). The other sects do not have a special school for the sole purpose of training nuns.

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23. Cited in *Soto-shu * Niso-shi*,* p. 439.

24. Cited in *Soto-shu Niso-shi,* p. 440. *Hochi* is the standard level of temple. The vast majority of temples in Japan are this rank. Monastic women could only be head of subtemples (originally *heisochi,* but renamed *junhochi),* the rank below *hochi.*

25. The total list of resolutions can be found in *Soto-shu Niso-shi,* pp. 440-43.

26. The nuns' actions are typical, for Japanese Buddhist history is filled with examples of Buddhists who organized their concern for the well-being of the country, especially during times of strife.

27. Kojima, *Bikuni* no Josei,* p. 155.

28. Sallie B. King, "Egalitarian Philosophies in Sexist Institutions: The Life of Satomi-san, Shinto Miko and Zen Buddhist Nun," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion,* 4.1 (Spring 1988): 20.

29. Zen Nihon Bukkyo* Niso* Hodan*, *Hanahachisu 1* (Spring 1961): 11.

30. In defense of male monastics who have chosen to become householder priests, it should be pointed out that it was initially a tactical decision encouraged by the government to ensure the continuation of, ironically, the monastic institution and the extensive temple system in Japan. Although there are historical precedents for monastics to marry within the Japanese Buddhist tradition, most notably the example of Shinran (1173-1262), the governmental leaders in the early years of the Meiji Restoration (late nineteenth century) were the first to officially establish the marriage of male monastics for the purpose of formally instituting a hereditary system. In the Japanese cultural context, the notion of hereditary transmission is not hard to grasp. Shinran's reason for marrying, however, was based upon his understanding of soteriology. For more information on this topic, see Alfred Bloom, *Shinran's Gospel of Pure Grace* (Tuscon: University of Arizona Press, 1965).

31. Personal Narratives Group, eds. *Interpreting Women's Lives: Feminist Theory and Personal Narratives* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), p. 12.

32. In the Buddhist tradition, there have been a number of adepts who have proven their state of enlightenment by passing away in the full-lotus position of meditation. In Zen, the classical dictum *zadatsu ryubo* ("Die sitting, die standing") indicates what is considered the ultimate way to die. Dogen* used the phrase in his text *The Way of Zazen Recommended to Everyone (Fukanzazengi),* which he wrote shortly after returning from China (1227) with the intention of making the true Buddhist teachings available to all people.

33. From an interview with Kuriki Kakujo at Seikan-ji Temple in Nagoya, Japan, July 17, 1990.

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