

# SŌTŌ ZEN NUNS IN MODERN JAPAN: KEEPING AND CREATING TRADITION

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## Prologue

In the fall of 1987, as a travelling scholar of Buddhism, I sojourned to India. At this time I met Kitō Shunkō 鬼頭春光, an elderly Sōtō Zen nun returning to India for a final pilgrimage to the Mahābodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya. As we walked around the Bodhi Tree her face glowed with the wisdom of enlightenment. Compassion emanated forth from her every motion. Her laughter resounded with the peace found in understanding life and death. I knew after our first conversation under the bodhi tree that I wanted to learn as much as possible about her way of life. She was a living model of all that I had been studying. This nun embodied harmony in its richest form. What teachings have helped her gain such wisdom? How did she train to be so compassionate? Where is the spring of her ebullient laughter?

As we walked along the Nirange river where Śākyamuni once walked, a brilliantly pink sun rose into the sky. She wove stories of the years she spent in India building the Japanese Temple in Bodh Gaya with poetry by the Zen master Eihei Dōgen Zenji 永平道元禪師 (1200-1253) and information about a nunnery, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, in Nagoya, Japan. We laughed heartily as the image of meeting again in this nunnery worlds away flashed through our minds.

## Nuns in Perspective

Nuns have been a vital and important facet of Buddhism since the original *saṅgha* was formed during Śākyamuni Buddha's lifetime (c. 566-486 BCE). To date, however, nearly all scholarly research has focused primarily on the male monastic experience and history within

the tradition. Recently, however, there has been increasing attention to nuns within the Buddhist tradition.

The first ordained Buddhist in Japan was a nun named Zenshin-ni 善信尼. She took the tonsure in 584 CE. Shortly thereafter, two women, Zenzō-ni 禅藏尼 and Ezen-ni 惠善尼, became her disciples.<sup>1</sup> In 588, they again made history by being the first Japanese to go abroad to study. They undertook the strenuous voyage to China in pursuit of a deeper understanding of the *vinaya*.<sup>2</sup> Another landmark in Japanese Buddhism is that the first Buddhist temple in Japan was an *amadera* 尼寺,<sup>3</sup> Sakurai-ji 桜井寺, founded in 590.<sup>4</sup> Although these monumental moments in the development of Japanese Buddhist history illustrate the fact that nuns were a significant force in the introduction of Buddhism to Japan, their vital contribution to Japanese Buddhism has been relegated to rare footnotes and scarce publications.

My exploration into the world of Japanese Buddhist nuns concentrates upon the Sōtō sect of Zen, for it is the largest and most organized sect of nuns in Japan. Presently there are about 1000 Sōtō nuns, followed by approximately 400 Jōdo-shū nuns, and around 300 Rinzai Zen nuns.<sup>5</sup> The Sōtō-shū has the highest number of nunneries, three (Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, Niigata Senmon Nisōdō, and Toyama Senmon Nisōdō), compared to the Jōdo-shū which has one (Yoshimizu Gakuen

<sup>1</sup> Tajima Hakudō 田島栢堂 *Sōtōshū nisō-shi* 曹洞宗尼僧史 (Tokyo, 1955), 112-13. This work is the most comprehensive text written on Japanese Buddhist nuns. Other texts include Aichi Senmon Nisōdō's *Rokujūnen no ayumi* 六十年のあゆみ, written in celebration of their 60th anniversary. Various other texts help fill in the picture of the nuns, including the magazine published by the Sōtōshū Nisōdan, *Otayori* おたより. Aichi Senmon Nisōdō also publishes a magazine, *Jōrin* 叢林.

<sup>2</sup> Tajima, *Sōtōshū nisō-shi*, 14.

<sup>3</sup> This is a temple headed by a nun. *Ama* 尼 means nun and *tera* or *dera* 寺 means temple. There is no equivalent in English, since there is no situation calling for one. I therefore prefer to use the transliteration.

<sup>4</sup> Tajima, *Sōtōshū nisō-shi*, 14.

<sup>5</sup> *Shūkyōnenkan* 宗教年鑑 [*Annual Record of Religion*]. It is extremely difficult to get an accurate count of the number of nuns in each sect, for the definition of female teacher (*kyōshi*) has broadened considerably in recent years. Before World War II this term referred primarily to nuns, but now it also includes lay women teachers. I have tried to calculate the number of nuns in a traditional definition of nun: women who shave their heads, have taken the bodhisattva precepts, trained at a nunnery, live in a temple, and wear a *kesa* all the time. Tendai and Shingon nuns also exist, but I have been only able to determine that their numbers are less than the Rinzai sect.

of Chion-in). The other sects do not have a special school for the sole purpose of training nuns.

My study of Sōtō Zen Buddhist nuns focuses on the foremost Sōtō nunnery in Japan, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō 愛知専門尼僧堂 . This nunnery, the first autonomous school established for nuns, was founded in 1903 by four nuns (Hori Mitsujō 堀密成 , Mizuno Jōrin 水野常倫 , Yamaguchi Kokan 山口巨鑑 , and Andō Dōkai 安藤道契 ) during the Meiji years of rapid modernization. Since then Japan has spiraled to the peak of technological accomplishment. The quality of life at the nunnery, however, remains a living kernel of the traditional arts and values of Japanese culture.

The current abbess of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, Aoyama Shundō 青山俊董 , is a woman widely respected within the tradition by virtue of her spiritual excellence and her being among the first women to be granted an education at the Sōtō sect's Komazawa University. Her reputation extends into the broader Japanese society through her numerous books and articles written for the laity on topics including *chazen* 茶禪 and spiritual development. The international scholarly community is familiar with her work in religious dialogue. Therefore, under the leadership of Aoyama Sensei, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō is a vital resource for exploring the various facets of the dynamic life of nuns in Japan.

### Life in a Zen Nunnery

Through Kitō Sensei's introduction, I spent four months in training at the nunnery, from September 1 to December 23, 1989. My academic background in Japanese Buddhism, personal religious orientation, and Japanese cultural heritage (my mother is a native Japanese) enabled me to segue into the rhythm of life within the cloistered walls of the nunnery with a minimum of discordance. This phase of participant observation was a rare opportunity to examine at first hand the nuns' daily pattern of study and meditative discipline.

The daily schedule of the nunnery is similar to that of any standard Zen monastery, for they all use as their base Dōgen's *Eiheishingi* 永平清規 . Dōgen wrote these regulations in a thorough and meticulous fashion. It is designed to teach the disciples to act in accordance with the Dharma in each and every activity—to treat all life with respect, to purify the mind of illusions of self and other, good and bad, desire and dislike. The ideal behind this method is to make the regulations and

ideals of the *saṅgha* an internalized mode of living, rather than an external set of regulations to be obeyed. No actual system, of course, is as perfect as the ideal that can be articulated on paper. Nonetheless, the training at the nunnery seeks to free one from the delusions, desire, and ignorance which plague most sentient beings. Although modifications of some of the regulations have been permitted due to the changes in technology since Dōgen's time, the rhythm of life at the nunnery retains the spirit of Dōgen's ideal.

4:00 AM	<i>Shinrei</i> 振鈴 wake-up
4:15	<i>Zazen</i> 坐禪
5:00	<i>Chōka-fūgin</i> 朝課諷經 , Morning sūtra chanting
6:15	<i>Seisō</i> , Daily morning cleaning of nunnery
7:30	Breakfast
8:00–12:00	Time for classes, <i>samu</i> 作務 (working together – gardening, cleaning, preparation for events), or private study.
12:00	Lunch
12:30–3:00	Classes, <i>samu</i> , or private study
3:00	Tea
4:00	<i>Banka</i> 晚課 , Evening sūtra chanting
4:30	<i>Hattō sōji</i> Clean Worship Hall
5:30	<i>Yakuseki</i> 薬石 , Dinner, which consists of the day's leftovers
6:00–8:00	Private study in one's own room
8:15	<i>Yaza</i> 夜坐 , Nightly <i>zazen</i>
9:00	<i>kaichin</i> , Lights out

The key to finding peace in the midst of the strenuous schedule at the nunnery is to accept the fact that the present moment is important. What must be done, must be done. One just does what is necessary at the time. To rebel against this reality only causes one to suffer. To contemplate “maybe” or “later” only means that one must fight against these wishes *and* keep pace with the others. Yet, to accept the task before you and to do it with your whole heart leads to joy and freedom. These

are words that many acquainted with Zen practice are familiar with. I was, too. But in the midst of it, I found out just how true they are. When it is cold, it is cold. When your right knee hurts, it hurts. When the morning wake-up bell rings, you wake up. When the bell in the *zendō* is struck, you stand up. When the gong is struck, you go to eat. When the *samu* drum is beaten you go to work. It is as simple as that.

Preserving the traditional schedule, this nunnery allows the nuns to bathe, shave their heads, and do laundry on days which contain either a 4 or a 9. At times when the heat and humidity of Nagoya persisted, I dreamt of pouring the water for the flowers over my own wilting head. At these moments I felt the tenacity of tradition. Yet, it is precisely because the nuns do not waver on these details that they are genuine living bearers of the Zen tradition.<sup>6</sup>

The structure of the nunnery is organized around the various tasks which must be performed to make the nunnery function. They are divided according to the system that originated in Chinese Buddhist monasteries.<sup>7</sup> Since the nunnery is small, they presently function with a minimum number of divisions or *ryō*: *Ino-ryō* 維那領, *Chiden-ryō* 知殿領, *Tenzo-ryō* 典座領, and *Anja-ryō* 行者領. The *Ino-ryō* is responsible for making decisions, informing everyone of events, and making sure everyone abides by the rules. The next in rank of importance is the *Chiden-ryō*. The primary function of those in this division is to take care of the worship hall, the ceremonies, and rituals. They also go out to *zaike* 在家 homes (laity) and chant sūtras upon request. This is one of the most common activities of nuns once they graduate from the nunnery, so their time in the *Chiden-ryō* is an invaluable opportunity for new nuns to learn the various rituals a nun is expected to perform. The *Tenzo-ryō* is one of the vital organs of the nunnery. The *tenzo* must prepare all the food for the nuns in a nutritious, economic, and aesthetic fashion. Here one learns how to prepare vegetarian dishes with creativity, for the *tenzo* must wisely use all the food donated to the temple without any waste. The *tenzo* has the power and responsibility of keeping the nuns healthy and happy. The final division has the

<sup>6</sup> Nuns generally retain this rhythm of life after leaving the nunnery. They continue to rise early, clean their own temple daily, chant sūtras, arrange the flowers, and cook. I have yet to meet a lazy Zen nun.

<sup>7</sup> See Holmes Welch's *The Practice of Chinese Buddhism 1900-1950*, chapter 1, for a more complete description of the traditional division of labor in a monastery.

sensitive responsibility of taking care of the guests of the nunnery. The *Anja-ryō* members learn how to be gracious to lay visitors, high *rōshi-sama* (Zen masters), and guests off the street. This interface with various sorts of people is a time for refining the art of understanding people's varying needs and feelings.

Responsibilities are rotated each semester, so that all the nuns can learn the various things that go into running a temple. Since their numbers are small, nuns tend to get a more thorough training than their male counterparts in large monasteries. Each nun usually has the chance to be in each division at least twice during the minimum two-year program. The small numbers also allow each nun to be responsible for more within each division. This makes them strong and competent members of the Buddhist clergy when they graduate.

Another dimension of the *ryō* system of organization is that the nuns' rooms, the seating order in the *zendō*, the seating order at meals, and bathing order is determined by their *ryō*. The result is that the nuns in any given *ryō* must do everything together during their tenure in that *ryō*. It is an efficient and effective method for learning to cooperate with any kind of person that crosses your path. The situation is perhaps exacerbated now that the composition of communities of nuns has become more diverse. In earlier times the nuns were all about the same age and had similar backgrounds. The range of ages (presently 21-71) is the most striking source of tension and misunderstanding. Furthermore, the nuns come from previous experiences as diverse as having been the associate director of a company to being the daughter of a *yakuza* (Japanese mafia). All the nuns agree that human relations is the most difficult aspect of training.

### The Educating of Zen Nuns

The nunnery offers elementary through advanced levels of training. The first rank, *yoka* 予科, requires two years of training at the nunnery while completing a high-school education. Most women, however, enter with a high-school diploma, so they enter straight into the *honka* 本科 training. During these two-year programs the nuns learn to chant the *sūtras*, perform the various necessary ceremonies and rituals, cook *shōjin ryōri* 精進料理 (Japanese vegetarian food), clean, sew religious garments, take tea and flower lessons, do *zazen*, and take a number of academically oriented courses on Buddhist texts. The third level of

advancement is a two to three year program for *kenkyūsei* 研究生 . This is considered the level where the nuns refine what they have learned in the previous years. Since many ceremonies and rituals only occur once a year, it requires many years to perfect and deeply understand the complicated ritual motions and profound meaning embodied in the various ceremonies. The highest level of training is called *tokusō* 特僧 . Most nuns do not complete this training, for it is a long and challenging program. Although they are still in training themselves, they become responsible for the younger nuns' training. Completing this training qualifies them for becoming a high level teacher.

Among the required activities for all levels of nuns are taking courses in a number of Buddhist texts. *Rōshi* from other temples come to the nunnery to teach these courses. Among the texts studied is the *Gakudōyōjinshū* ( 学道用心集 , *Points to Watch in Practicing the Way*) by Eihei Dōgen Zenji. It is vital for the nuns in training for it covers fundamental issues such as the necessity of arousing Bodhi-mind, the importance of finding a true teacher, and the basics of harmonizing body and mind. Keizan Jōkin Zenji's (1268-1325) text, *Zazen-yōjinkī* ( 坐禅用心記 , *Things to be Careful about Regarding Zazen*), is read with keen interest for, among numerous essential things, it instructs the new nuns on more mundane aspects of zazen, such as how to keep from getting sleepy (focus your mind on your hairline). It describes the kind of clothing suitable for zazen – not luxurious, not rags, comfortable – and cautions one to eat moderately lest one get sick. Breathing techniques are also described to help enable one to find harmony of body and mind. Dōgen's *Shōbōgenzō zuimonki* 正法眼藏隨聞記 , recorded by Koun Ejō Zenji (1198-1280), is also scrutinized for it is a text which records original talks Dōgen gave to his disciples in training at Kōshō-ji. The main teaching of this text instructs the disciples how to see impermanence and egolessness. Although the majority of the nuns do not have the time, training, nor inclination to analyze these texts philosophically, they understand the core of these texts with their bodies.

The educating of nuns also includes the study of Chinese poetry or *kanshi* 漢詩 . Providing a foundation in reading Chinese poetry enables nuns to gain a broader perspective and interpretation of Buddhism as it interplays with culture. Buddhist sermons or *hōwa* 法話 are also practiced, for the nuns will be expected to give sermons on various occasions throughout their career once they leave the cloistered

walls of the nunnery. One of the favorite classes, *dōwa* 童話 , or children's stories, challenges the nuns to express their understanding of Buddhist teachings in a simple and creative way. The nuns take turns telling stories to each others. The ones listening enjoy reverting to childhood innocence and happy-go-luckiness.

*Saihō* 裁縫 — sewing Buddhist garments — is also an integral activity within the nunnery. All the nuns learn to sew all the garments necessary for a nun. This includes a *kesa* 袈裟 , *rakusu* 絡子 , *zagu* 坐具 , *koromo* 衣 , and *kimono* 着物 . Most nuns begin with sewing a *rakusu*. A *rakusu* is a miniature, symbolic version of a *kesa*. *Kesa* are the only robes worn by the ordained in Theravādin countries, as it was in the days of early Buddhism. But as the Dharma moved to cooler climates and sundry cultures, the robes of monks and nuns also underwent appropriate transformations. The Chinese added the *koromo*, a long-sleeved robe, and the Japanese added another layer underneath, the *kimono*. Nuns and monks also began to include working, whether it be tilling fields, cooking meals, or cleaning floors, as an essential dimension of Buddhist practice. Since it was cumbersome to work with so many layers, the modified *kesa*, the *rakusu*, was developed. Zen nuns frequently sew *rakusu* for their beloved teachers and friends. The tiny stitches required for making a *rakusu* are seen as an expression of the commitment one has to the Dharma, thus, to offer a *rakusu* as a gift is a highly symbolic gesture. Once one masters the intricate pattern of a *rakusu*, one can advance to the complicated, but meaningful, project of sewing one's own *kesa*. This is usually preceded, however, by the sewing of the *zagu*, or kneeling mat, since it is a much less involved piece. Many of the nuns then go on to sew their own *koromo* or *kimono*, but this requires great amounts of time. During their tenure at the nunnery this is usually not reasonable. But all the nuns learn how to sew tiny stitches in straight lines. The Abbess, Aoyama Sensei, frequently reminds them that this is the same way one follows the path of Buddhism — taking tiny steps in a straight line (a line of pure concentration on the Dharma) — not an easy task.

At Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, along with the traditional Zen training which includes *zazen*, chanting sūtras, studying Buddhist texts, sewing, cooking, and cleaning, they include *kadō* 華道 , *shodō* 書道 , and *chadō* 茶道 , as integral elements of their training. Mastery of these contemplative arts is not an ornamental supplement to their training, but it is required for receiving the certificates of graduation the nunnery offers.

The nuns take tea and flower lessons throughout their tenure in the nunnery. The teachers of these arts, of course, are also nuns. They teach not only the basic skills of the arts, but they also teach the philosophy, more commonly called *kokoro* (heart-mind 心) in these circles, which accompanies these arts. They are arts which simultaneously train the body, mind, and heart. This philosophy is based upon the orientation that the body, mind, and heart are one. One soon learns that to perform these arts with beauty requires a clean spirit that draws on the deepest resources of one's *kokoro*. To teach the hand to pour water into the tea bowl is to teach the heart the way of compassion and wisdom.

*Goeika* ご詠歌, or its *Sōtō-shū* version, *baika* 梅花, is becoming an increasingly necessary art for the nuns to acquire. *Baika* is a recently developed form of singing songs based upon the scriptures. The singing is accompanied by a bell and chime which the singer strikes in rhythm with the melody. As in all Japanese arts, there is an elaborate and meticulous pattern of ritual-like motions which helps the singer enter into a contemplative and focused state appropriate for putting Buddhist scriptures to song. It has become an extremely popular activity for lay women particularly, so a nun graduating from the nunnery must be able to lead such groups. Some of the nuns choose to concentrate on this art, while others choose tea or flower arranging.

These arts serve as vehicles for practice, but they are also necessary skills for performing the various activities in a temple. It is, however, perhaps no coincidence that the arts that the nuns practice are also the arts expected of a proper Japanese woman. The monks do not practice these traditional arts as the nuns do. Although at all temples flowers must be arranged and tea served to guests, monks usually defer these tasks to their wives, whereas nuns must do these activities on their own. Another aspect of the nuns' involvement in these traditional arts gives insight into the nuns' contribution to general Japanese society. Many of the nuns teach tea or flower lessons in their temples. The students are not necessarily Buddhists, but they are women interested in refining their skills and hearts. Teaching these traditional arts not only allows the nuns to make an impact upon the cultivation of Japanese women, it also serves as a means by which nuns may make an acceptable form of income. Most temples run by nuns do not have parishioners, or *danka* 檀家, so they must find other means of support. An investigation into the role of the traditional arts in the lives of the nuns is a multifaceted issue. Through the traditional arts the nuns reveal the

beauty of their spirit, their independence in running a temple, the sociological ramifications that impinge upon their lives, their contribution to preserving traditional culture in contemporary Japanese society, and their economic ingenuity.

### **Buddhist Activities and Ceremonies at the Nunnery**

There are various monthly activities held at the nunnery that help train the nuns in basic temple responsibilities. *Shakyō* 写経, sūtra copying, is an activity, like all activities, primarily attended by lay women. The most commonly chanted sūtra in the nunnery is the *Heart Sūtra* 般若心経, and so it is no surprise that this is the sūtra everyone copies. Another activity that is open to the public is the *Nichiyō-sanzenkai* 日曜参禅会. One Sunday each month is designated for allowing anyone to experience a day of Zen lifestyle. Women come from all over, near and far, to participate in this. Aoyama Sensei, the abbess, gives two talks during this day of zazen and zen-style eating. Most people find the day a little painful, but worth every bit. They keep coming back for more. This is another opportunity for the nuns to learn how to interact and help the laity. It is also a chance for the nuns to be reminded of their own progress, for they were once in the position of those whose legs ache and could not enjoy eating because there were too many details to remember during the meal.

*Sesshin* 接心 are also open to the public, but they are mainly for the deepening of the nuns' training. These are held once a month, usually for three days. They also have a long *rōhatsu sesshin* 臘八接心 in December and a five-day-long *sesshin* in February. These periods of concentrated practice become part of the rhythm of the lifestyle. Many nuns look forward to this time, because it means diminished interaction with others. Most of the life in the nunnery involves intense human relations, so it is a chance where nuns may rest from this more stressful aspect of life in the nunnery. Another activity at the nunnery is the holding of the *hōmyakue* 法脈會 ceremony. This is a ceremony where laity can receive the precepts and a *kaimyō* 戒名 or precept name, usually reserved for the deceased or the ordained. Most temples do not perform this elaborate ceremony, for it is demanding in terms of time, money, energy, complexity of ritual, and in seriousness. The nuns at this nunnery, therefore, are extremely fortunate to have the rare opportunity to learn the intricacies of this solemn ceremony. It places

them in the important position of being able to assist with this ceremony when they graduate.

Ceremonies punctuate the life of a nun. The first ceremony that all experience is the *tokudoshiki* 得度式 . This is the ceremony at which a woman shaves her head and dons the robes which will be a part of her life from that moment on. It becomes her new birthday. Many nuns enter directly into the nunnery after they have taken the Bodhisattva Vows. The *nyūgakushiki* 入学式 is the ceremony for entering the nunnery. It brims with commitment, excitement, and hope for the future. Yet, it is also a time of uncertainty and readjustment. Everyone is learning how to put on a *kesa*, how to chant sūtras, how to eat properly, and where to place their slippers. They must even learn to respond to their new Buddhist names. This year, 1990, was an especially joyous time, because for the first time in ten years the nunnery received ten new women at one time. The numbers of entering nuns has been steadily diminishing for the last few decades, but this year there was a turn in events. This brought joy, relief, and hope to all.

During their tenure in the nunnery they will participate in and perform many ceremonies, but one of the most powerful and intimate is the ceremony to Ānanda. Ānanda is special to the nuns for he interceded to Śākyamuni on behalf of the first women who wanted to enter the Dharma. Through Ānanda's persuasion, Śākyamuni allowed the order of Buddhist nuns. Nuns have not forgotten Ānanda's act of compassion and wisdom. The *sotsugyōshiki* 卒業式 , or Graduation Ceremony, is another moving moment in the life of the nuns. For some it means leaving the nunnery after five to seven years of training. Most, however, graduate after two years. In all cases, these years of training have inevitably been filled with a myriad of experiences, feelings, and insights into their own hearts. It is a noble life through which they persevered. They do not leave the same as they entered. Their hearts have been polished like stones in a tumbler, becoming rounder, smoother, and brighter with each motion of interaction with the other nuns, teachers, and laity affiliated with the nunnery.

### **Liberation and Transformation Recent Changes in Regulations and Novices**

Secular and sacred realms have undergone unprecedented changes during this century. Nuns are fewer in number due to increased

opportunities for women in the secular sphere, but advancements in official recognition of nuns have enabled them to take on new roles and responsibilities. Regulations authorized by the Sōtō-shū Shūmuchō 曹洞宗宗務庁<sup>8</sup> have moved in the direction of greater equality between monks and nuns. For most of Sōtō Zen history nuns were subordinated and not given opportunities for proper training or education. Therefore, they were also not allowed into positions of power or responsibility. They were expected to clean, cook, and sew for the monks. They watched the ceremonies from the sidelines, in between chores. Now the nuns have come into their own. The quirks of history have put them into the position of being the living holders of the traditional Zen lifestyle, precisely because they were expected to follow a stricter set of regulations in the past. The monks were given freedom after freedom, while the nuns were kept under close rein. Now the world of the nuns is a harbor for the traditional values and lifestyle of Zen. They generally continue the rhythm of life they learned in training at the nunnery, they remain celibate, and they do not have access to opportunities for making any sizeable amount of money.

In 1941 the Sōtō sect headquarters officially pronounced that nuns were only allowed to care for the lowest rank of temple, called *heisōchi* 平僧地. These were small temples with no parishioners. At this time the highest rank a nun could attain was lower than the lowest rank for monks. In 1953, however, all Buddhist sects in Japan underwent drastic modification. At this time the nuns were given more opportunities. They were officially permitted to become head priests (*jūshoku* 住職) of *hōchi* 法地 temples, the middle rank of temple in the system. In 1978 nuns were also allowed to attain the rank of *nidaishō* 尼大和尚, which is the last level before *zenji* 禪師, a title reserved for the likes of Dōgen or the head of Eihei-ji or Sōji-ji—the head temples (*Daihonzan* 大本山) of the Sōtō sect. But in 1989 the Shūmuchō took off the prefix *ni* 尼 (which means nun), for they were concerned that this prefix was a remnant of discrimination.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the nuns have blossomed during

<sup>8</sup> The Sōtō-shū Shūmuchō is the official administrative office of the Sōtō sect. It determines the regulations, keeps the records, and is the guiding force behind Sōtō affairs. The major Buddhist sects in Japan have their own *shūmuchō*. The Sōtō Shūmuchō is located in the Tokyo Grand Hotel near the Tokyo Tower.

<sup>9</sup> I am concerned, however, that without the distinction of monk or nun *Daiishō*, it is easier to hide the fact that few nuns are granted this status. I would rather see them keep the prefix *ni* 尼 and add the prefix *nan* 男 to monks who gain this title.

this century. They established the first Zen nunneries to train nuns exclusively, they gained equal rank with monks, and they continue to live in accordance with traditional Zen values.

Through surveys and interviews I am gaining a fuller picture of the present conditions of the nuns in contemporary Japan. I sent surveys to 150 Sōtō nuns all over the country. I also conducted extensive interviews of all the nuns I was in training with last fall. They are helping me understand the motivations of women who chose to commit their lives to Zen training in the modern age. Through them I am gaining some insight into their self-perception and the way in which they are perceived by Buddhist laity. Many seem to perceive their monastic experience to be fundamentally different from that of their male counterparts in terms of motivation, incentive, obstacles, and attitude towards the *vinaya* in daily life. A profile of the nuns is emerging through this data, thus elucidating the practical and cultural functions of Sōtō nuns in Japanese society. These nuns both continue the traditions of Zen culture that began to blossom in the Muromachi period (1338-1573) and cultivate methods and expressions that are unique to women committed to the tonsure in modern Japan.

The profile of the nuns first entering the nunnery has undergone a radical change. Just 40 years ago the average entering age of a nun was 16, but the present average entering age has risen to 43. This fact alone suggests the various other differences in the composition of the novice nuns now, versus that in the 1950s. Nuns now frequently enter the nunnery from a lay family, rather than having been raised in a temple environment. The majority of women entering now have had their own families or careers before taking their robes, whereas in the past the tender age at which most women shaved their heads precluded other life experiences. Thus, the women now make a conscious and mature decision to commit their lives to the Dharma, a difficult decision for a young girl to make who has donned a *kesa* upon the request of her parents.

Nonetheless, the survey results show that the vast majority of nuns make a serious attempt to abide by the precepts in their daily lives. It therefore seems natural that the nuns express a high level of consciousness towards social responsibility. Almost all the nuns suggested that one of their primary social responsibilities is to listen attentively to the needs of others, and to help them find peace in their daily lives. A significant number of nuns are also active in volunteer work, primarily

focussing on the needs of orphans and the elderly. Nuns attempt to fill a vital niche in modern Japanese society. Their presence is critical. Although the number of nuns has diminished,<sup>10</sup> the quality of each nun seems to be increasing. In part this is due to the increase in quality of life and education in Japanese society as a whole, but it is precisely this increase in the quality of life in general that has bred women who seriously consider their options and deliberately choose to commit their lives to the Dharma. Herein lies the hope for the future of Buddhist nuns.

### Conclusion

The history of Zen nuns in this century illuminates a vital stream in Japanese society and culture. Nuns can serve as a model for all women who seek liberation. In two generations they went from a position of little opportunity and recognition to a position of official equality, complete with independent institutions for nuns. They made unprecedented strides in educational possibilities by founding independent schools and nunneries for training nuns. This century saw the first nuns educated and graduated from the Sōtō-shū's prestigious Komazawa University. Sōtō nuns also formed their own organization in 1944, *Sōtō-shū Nisōdan* 曹洞宗尼僧団, which has since published its own journal entitled *Otayori* おたより. They went from only being permitted ranks lower than the lowest monk's to being granted the title *Daioshō*. Yet in the midst of these significant advancements, they maintain the genuine quality of the Buddhist tradition.

The story of Zen nuns gives a more accurate account of Japanese Buddhism. Their motivations differ from most monks who take the tonsure as a result of a hereditary system. Nuns make an independent and personal commitment to the Dharma. Nuns, therefore, maintain a relatively traditional lifestyle in the midst of a technologically superior society. They also help preserve the traditional arts of Japan by teaching them in their original spirit: training for the body, mind, and heart. Contemporary Japanese society leaves little room for traditional arts and Buddhist values, yet the small number of quality nuns keep these alive. Nuns are Japanese Buddhism's living treasures.

<sup>10</sup> The present numbers are also on the brink of a drastic reduction, for 52% of present Sōtō nuns were born before 1928.