

# Discovering Sōtō Zen Nuns' Contributions to Japanese Buddhism and Culture

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Buddhist nuns have made generative and perennial contributions to Japanese history. Their contributions, however, have been hidden from the dominant representation of history. They were central agents in cultivating the foundation of Buddhism in Japan in the sixth century. They were active participants during the formative years of the Sōtō Zen sect in the thirteenth century. Monastic women also induced major advancements in the twentieth century. Inbetween these prominent moments of Japanese history, Buddhist women have been a vital and constant presence. They displayed creative vision that navigated them through sometimes foul waters—a testimony to their seriousness of intention, commitment, and ingenuity.

The lives of many Sōtō Zen nuns in the twentieth century embody classical Buddhist ideals. This study focuses on these women. It highlights the women who were not daunted by a male-dominated institutional hierarchy. It gives names to women who did not flinch as they demanded that sect regulations treat male and female monastics equally. It gives voices to the women who have chosen to lead strictly disciplined and refined monastic lives over against successful careers and the comparatively unconstrained and unregulated quality of secular lifestyles.

In the face of such resolute determination and historical efficacy, one is justified in wondering why nuns have been largely non-existent in the scholarship on Japanese Buddhism. Part of the reason is the now unsurprising, but nonetheless significant, androcentric bias that has dominated academic inquiry. Gender has only relatively recently become a salient category in the field of Buddhist studies. Furthermore, Zen Buddhist studies have primarily focused on textual documentation. The field lags behind in ethnographic research, contributing to the lack of examining how the tradition has been

lived by the diversity of its adherents. Since nuns' activities and contributions rarely appear in the texts that have attracted the attention of scholars, nuns' assiduous engagement in the tradition has been neglected.

This study expands the purview of Zen studies by presenting historical evidence and providing new ethnographic data that advances a critical interpretation of the meaning and significance of female monastic practice. Where the historical record did not reflect why or how nuns achieved what they did, I sought out answers. Where historical documentation and textual sources were insufficient, I gathered ethnographic data. Where prevailing interpretations of Buddhist nuns did not correspond with the historical, textual, and ethnographic evidence gathered, I revised them.

This is primarily a study of Japanese women who have chosen a Buddhist monastic lifestyle complete with vows of celibacy and the pursuit of wisdom and compassion. The structure of their lives is regulated by Sōtō Zen monastic practices, which means their daily lives include waking up at pre-dawn, doing zazen, chanting, cleaning, and cooking. Aside from exploring their lives as an example of human religiosity, concerns found in historiography, Japanese studies, women's studies, and ethnographic studies are also addressed. I am trying to find out what Sōtō Zen nuns consider important as Buddhists. Close examination of a large group of nuns within Sōtō Zen, especially those affiliated with Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, a women's monastery in Nagoya, Japan, is the main focus of this work. It is only an explication of that part of history that helps bring to light the efforts of this group of Sōtō Zen nuns in their struggle to live meaningfully in situations that they wanted to modify.

In order to do this, I had to do a critical examination of the available materials and gather original data. This entailed making value, epistemology, and legitimacy judgments along the way. To clarify what this means, let me explicate a scheme devised by the insightful semiotic scholar, Daniel Patte.<sup>1)</sup> He outlines the types of interpretations that are basic to scholarly work by contrasting two main varieties.

	Customary* Scholarly Interpretations	Exemplary Critical Interpretations
Value Judgment	Implicit	Explicit
Epistemological Judgment	+/- Explicit	Explicit
Legitimacy Judgment	Explicit	Explicit

\*“Customary” is used here as shorthand for “Androcentric and Eurocentric”

Patte’s scheme, originally designed for literary interpretations, can also apply to field researchers or people interpreting the practice of religion. In general, one’s background in language, culture, and education, as well as age, sex, and experiences influence one’s value, epistemology, and legitimacy judgments. Value judgments are judgments made about the significance of the material. For example, I made a value judgment when I decided to explore the religious aims and experiences of nuns. Another type of value judgment would be to choose, instead, to focus on the socio-economic dimensions of being a monastic in modern Japan. My decision to focus my investigation on the activities of women is also a value judgment, which I make explicit. In “customary” scholarship it was common to limit the focus to men, but frequently cast it as if it represented all people. Another value judgment found in “customary” historical scholarship was to limit one’s purview to western music, for example, and call it the history of music. In these examples the value judgments remain implicit.

Epistemological judgments are judgments made when one chooses the types of sources upon which one will base one’s conclusions, such as oral interviews, participant-observation, and written documents—published research, institutional records, individual surveys. Although true for both “customary” and “critical” scholarship, “critical” scholarship is acutely conscious that one’s method shapes the knowledge one will gain. Furthermore, one’s relationship to the material and the material-gathering process are integral to the epistemology judgment. For example, one’s ability in the languages used in the sources affects one’s epistemology judgments, compounded if an interpreter or translations were used. Besides methodological and reflexivity concerns, specific epistemology judgments I had to make in studying nuns involved discerning what categories nuns use to

interpret and express their lives. I made an epistemological judgment to use Buddhist categories to guide my interpretation. Moreover, I based my judgment upon what nuns think, not upon what monks think. When epistemology judgments remain implicit, there is little to no reflexive analysis. For example, when one does not take into account the differences that are introduced when a translation is used, the epistemology judgments are not explicit.

Legitimacy judgments are judgments made about the accuracy and reliability of the material. In other words, the researcher must determine what counts as significant evidence. In most scholarship, written documents constitute the preponderance of legitimate sources. Other types of sources, however, can be as valid, or in some cases more valid, than written sources. Validity is related to and in part assessed by the value judgments one brings to the research. For example, since I value what the nuns think of their own lives, I made the legitimacy judgment that interviews with nuns yield valid data. Oral, observed, and written sources directly from nuns are essential to my research, because I am trying to ascertain how nuns interpret their own lives.

According to this schema, “Customary Scholarship” and “Critical Scholarship” differ mainly in whether the perspective or epistemology and value judgments of the scholar are made explicit or remain implicit. “Critical Scholarship” recognizes that each person has a perspective. A scholar, of course, tries to have as informed a perspective as possible. The quality, quantity, and type of information available to the scholar will surely affect the perspective of the scholar, but it will not dissolve the epistemological and value judgments made. Each perspective sheds a distinct light on the issue at hand, and therefore makes a contribution. This is all good for advancing scholarly understanding. Thus, for example, androcentric and Eurocentric perspectives are not problematic when these orientations or value and epistemology judgments are an explicit dimension of the scholarship. Problems can arise, however, when the perspective is not explicated in the presentation of one’s material.

The raw data I gathered did not always corroborate the types of interpretations I found in the scholarship on women, Buddhism, and Zen monasticism. Therefore, I began to analyze how the perspective of the author

shaped the conclusions drawn by the author. In the process, I had to learn to see from the nuns's perspective. From that vantage point, nuns, Buddhist history, Japanese religion, and Zen monasticism looked very different.

In analyzing the field data, the relationship between the actual daily life in the monastery and the ideals of the community became clear. As might be anticipated, participant-observation yielded more information about their daily life, and interviews and surveys yielded more information about their ideals. I used the information gathered from one method to inform me about the other. This gave me a clearer sense of the way in which the ideals of the community are negotiated in daily life. The participant-observation data showed us the difficulties and tensions that accompany their monastery life. It was the key to understanding that the core of their practice is in dealing with human relations. It explained how they could take negative situations and express them in positive terms. Thus, the information gained through interviews and surveys made more sense. When these nuns reflected on their personal histories, despite having lived through difficult and unfair circumstances, they invariably described their experience as a nun in affirming terms. Indeed they lavishly articulated the ideals of their community, especially in the surveys. This confirms that participant-observation, as well as interview and survey methods, need to be employed to get a balanced picture of their lives. Without the participant-observation data informing us about their real-life complexities, we would only get a picture of the end result, which at times sounds too positive to be true. On the other hand, if we only saw how nuns dealt with interpersonal relationships, we would not have learned that upon leaving the training monastery many nuns were able to apply their practice of taking things as a resource for growth and actually experience difficult circumstances like misogynist regulations and oppressive structures, yet remember their lives as something for which to be grateful. Most did not even acknowledge that they had been discriminated against.

Oppression can elicit a diversity of responses. I have been concerned with both the perception of detached observers and the perception of those who are the target of oppression, in this case Sōtō Zen nuns. People often assume that those who are the target of oppression experience it negatively. One result in people who are the targets of oppression is that they come to see themselves

as deserving victims and act as if they were inferior. My field research disproves this in the case of Sōtō Zen nuns. Instead, Sōtō nuns changed their situation to make it closer to their vision of monastic life. They accomplished this by living according to their understanding of Buddhist practice. Their religious values instruct them not to blame external conditions, but rather to seek opportunities for expressing gratitude. Although this is the key to their lives, it would not have come to light without ethnographic research.

My research revealed several impressions about nuns to be unfounded. Over the years I have heard several impressions about nuns in various academic and casual conversations. I have also found them implied in various texts. Sometimes the text suggests these impressions by the line of analysis used when addressing nuns and sometimes by lack of mention. The impressions outlined below are a synthesis of these sources.

The first impression, “because nuns are oppressed, they are weak,” is rejected by citing their achievements. Despite unfair regulations that officially kept nuns out of sect-authorized training institutions at the beginning of the century, these nuns trained themselves, eventually establishing their own official monasteries. Then, even though the nuns started the twentieth century with their highest rank being lower than the lowest monks' rank, they were effective in changing the sect ranking regulations. After a few decades of concerted effort, they now enjoy complete parity in all monastic and teaching ranks. To establish their equal position within the sect, they had to become leaders in educational and institutional reform. To facilitate this process they organized an official group to express their concerns in sect politics and began publishing various journals for and by nuns. They did not act like nor did they perceive themselves to be oppressed victims of discriminatory practices. They turned their unfair situation into an opportunity to freely practice their interpretation of Buddhist teachings. Oppression by the structure did not make them act as if they really were less deserving than the monks. Instead, the women changed the structure.

The same evidence that refutes the first impression negates the reciprocal second—“because nuns are weak, they are oppressed”—as well. The cause of the nuns being oppressed was not their weakness. They showed great strength, first in their successful efforts to train, practice, and teach themselves with

little sect support, and second in their triumph over misogynist sect regulations.

The third impression about nuns “the numbers of nuns are small, so they do not play a significant role in Zen Buddhism or Japanese society is rejected on the basis of an examination of nuns’ activities and an analysis of their contributions. The establishment of five training monasteries for women (three currently open) is a significant development for Zen Buddhism, as is the major reform of its sect regulations. Functioning as counselors for laity is a significant role nuns play in both Zen Buddhism and in Japanese society. People often feel reluctant to seek assistance with personal problems. Yet, my survey of laity showed that many are not as reluctant to discuss their personal problems with a nun. By responding to the needs of the laity, nuns fill a vital niche. Furthermore, nuns’ traditional dress, language, and eating habits, as well as their engagement in tea ceremony, flower arranging, calligraphy, and poetry writing, helps to maintain these aspects of Japanese culture that are waning in the society’s drive to modernize. The numbers of nuns involved in these activities may be relatively small, but that does not diminish the importance of their contributions. Cultural contributions are not a matter of quantity. They are a matter of quality.

Fourth, the impression that “nuns have not made any real gains in the twentieth century, because they are only able to do what the monks used to do from the thirteenth through nineteenth centuries” is not supported by research in the field. Characterization of monastic Buddhist practice in modern Japan depends upon the perspective from which the past century’s developments are viewed. Analysis proceeds from two major vantage points. One is concerned with secular values that are deeply imbedded in the society. The other is based upon values integral to the Buddhist monastic tradition. When comparing the activities of females and males, if the standard is set by secular society, entirely different results ensue than if the standard is based upon traditional monastic Buddhist values. The secular view finds that nuns are victims of a male-dominated system, because it assumes that what monks do is better and that nuns accept that.

The fact that most nuns do not marry but most monks do is one of the points that a secular line of analysis could claim as proof that nuns are not fairing as

well as monks. Monks marrying enables the practice of passing their temples by inheritance. By remaining celibate, nuns increasingly have trouble finding successors. Feminists see this as discrimination against women. Many casual observers draw a quick conclusion that nuns do not marry because only unmarried women enter a nunnery in the first place. Even those who know that the 1872–73 revision of regulations governing the lives of monks and nuns allows both male and female monastics to marry sometimes interpret the nuns' decisions as an indication that society will not accept married nuns even if the sect administration will. This is the secular view of what equality, marriage, and human worth mean.

My interviews and survey results show clearly that nuns do not use modern monks as models. It also became obvious that nuns have deliberately pursued a path different from most monks in the twentieth century. Nuns are following a traditional paradigm of monastic living. That means most nuns choose to adhere to monastic regulations that include celibacy, diet, cleaning and cooking in their daily practice. When examined from a Buddhist perspective, twentieth-century developments illuminate the power and loyalty of Zen nuns and their substantive contributions.

Having viewed Sōtō Zen nuns from historical, anthropological, cultural, and Buddhist perspectives, I am convinced that the significance of Sōtō Zen nuns is evident in at least three realms: traditional monasticism, traditional Japanese culture, and advancing women's opportunities. The Sōtō sect regulations permit monastics of both sexes to interpret the monastic tradition with considerable flexibility. The community of nuns shows strong commitment to their interpretation of a traditional paradigm of Zen monastic Buddhism. Moreover, their choice to maintain a traditional monastic lifestyle has significant ramifications for Japanese culture. The nuns' community represents a sector of modern society that honors traditional patterns of behavior. They deliberately retain firm roots in the customs and values that have been cultivated for hundreds of years. Traditions are central in their everyday lives. Their nunnery is one of the few places in modern Japan where one can experience or observe traditional Japanese culture in daily life. Furthermore, as a group Sōtō Zen nuns are a leading example of educational, occupational, and social advancements that Japanese women have made



during this century. Their most distinguished roles are as preservers of traditional Buddhist monastic life and bearers and transmitters of traditional Japanese culture.

### **Preservers and Creators of Buddhist Tradition**

Nuns as preservers and creators of Buddhist tradition is supported by the results of my research. In this section, four of the six hypotheses examined in this study are affirmed by the data. The arguments and analysis of the data overlap, because the issues are interrelated.

Hypothesis one: "Women in Japanese Buddhist history did not act as though they were defeated by oppressive conditions." The nuns' Buddhist practice is the reason for this. As seen in the data gathered through participant-observation, the nuns' ideal—to be like a plum blossom, strong enough to be gentle in harsh conditions—is cultivated through their discipline of human relationships. This practice entails trying to use each situation as an opportunity to polish one's heart. It does so by focusing the problem on the self. One does not begin by blaming. When the focus is on how one responds to the situation and not why the situation is the way it is, it leads to positive action rather than negative complaints. In this way, nuns work at paring down their delusions, desires, and aversions. It is no wonder, then, that the participant-observation data established that the discipline of human relationships is at the core of their practice. This is how they are trained to take even negative situations and transform them into opportunities for Buddhist practice. It does not mean that the nuns were treated fairly at all times. There were oppressive regulations and unfair treatment of nuns in Japanese history. The survey and interview data confirmed, however, that these nuns represent their own history and experience in terms of meaningful Buddhist practice. The nuns were able to overcome the obstacles, because they are dedicated preservers of Buddhist practice.

Furthermore, Sōtō Zen nuns 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 full and official acceptance by the male-dominated sect institution, complete with independent institutions for nuns. As

innovative pioneers in their struggle to lead traditional monastic lives, nuns serve as a model for all women who seek to make choices about their lives. They turned the unfair practices that circumscribed their lives into an opportunity to become stronger and clearer about the lives they wanted to lead. Their success is proof that oppressive circumstances are not an indication of weakness. On the contrary, those who have triumphed over oppression commonly acquire a keen ability to see what is significant and important. One might even say that Sōtō nuns are strong because acting in the face of discrimination honed their strength and vision to be creative preservers of Buddhist tradition.<sup>2)</sup>

Hypothesis two: “In their fight for institutionalizing egalitarian regulations, twentieth century Sōtō nuns acted as though they were only asking for what history had told them was their due.” They saw their history as one filled with valiant nuns, not one that was against women. Their interpretation of history is based upon the facts that the first ordained Buddhists in Japan were women and that many important women in Japanese history expressed themselves as nuns. Nuns had been treated with respect in Japanese history in part because many had come from the imperial family. There was not a sense that nuns were the outcasts and poor of society. Twentieth century nuns began their fight with dignity, drawing upon the dignity of the women who preceded them. They were part of a long tradition of dedicated Buddhist women.

Sōtō Zen nuns in modern Japan preserve the tradition of female Buddhist renunciants begun in India in the sixth century B.C.E. Like these women, Sōtō Zen nuns in modern Japan had to create new traditions in order to participate more fully in the community of Buddhist renunciants. Moreover, they claim that treating women as equals is part of traditional Zen monasticism. In order to preserve this tradition, they first had to systematically revise sect regulations to be in accord with the teachings of egalitarianism that the nuns asserted Dōgen taught. They made unprecedented strides in educational possibilities as this century saw the first nuns educated and graduated from the Sōtō sect's prestigious Komazawa University.<sup>3)</sup> Sōtō nuns also formed their own organization in 1944, *Sōtō-shū Nisodan*, which has since published its own journal entitled *Otayori*. They went from only being permitted ranks lower than the lowest monk's to being granted the highest title, *Daioshō*. These

achievements of Sōtō nuns were always ahead or synchronous with women in the secular sphere in winning reforms in education, economic opportunities, and self-determination. In the midst of these significant advancements, they maintain the traditional quality of monastic Buddhism. More accurately, they had to disencumber themselves from the unfair practices that had encroached into the sect's regulations over the centuries. Only after they were treated equally could the tradition be lived as they claim Dogen intended it.

Hypothesis three: "Sōtō nuns use distinctive strategies to establish legitimacy, relevance, and power in the twentieth century." In the twentieth century, the relationship between the monastic order and the social order is complex. Nuns choices of how to respond to the demands of the twentieth century and their choices of aims is another example of how they are preservers and creators of Buddhist tradition. Their choices to keep heads shorn, to wear monastic clothing at all times (not just at ceremonies as many monks do), to be celibate, and to train themselves in traditional arts are evidence that they want to maintain the patterns of the past. In so far as Sōtō nuns maintain a clear distinction between monastic and lay patterns of life, they represent Dōgen's vision of traditional monastic life. These women do not deem it desirable to lead a lifestyle closer to that of the laity. Indeed, nuns were able to get parity in sect regulations and establish their own training monasteries by following their understanding of the teachings of the founder of the sect, Dōgen. Basing their vision of Zen monastic life upon traditional monastic values, their dominant mode of monastic life is traditional. This enables them to be legitimate bearers of their tradition. Their relevance in the modern age is especially clear in their role as counselors to laity. Their power to be effective in helping people derives from the authority and respect granted to them because they are recognized as genuine teachers of Buddhist values.

The results of this field research confirms Bernard Faure's insight that "It is time for Chan scholarship ... to stress 'anthropological' multiplicity, since earlier scholarship has tended to stress the 'a/theological' unicity of Chan 'classical' orthodoxy."<sup>4</sup>) The activities and practices that actually are included under the Zen umbrella are diverse. Monastic women in the sect were not consulted, so the sect did not discover that most Sōtō nuns surveyed and

interviewed offer religious or spiritual reasons for wanting to uphold traditional monastic practices. The practices of most monastic women, as revealed in observations of their training and their attitudes about monastic practice expressed in interviews and surveys, leads one to the impression that traditional values are central to their lives. As the interviews indicated, many nuns recognize traditional monastic life as their “real home.” It is not experienced as an escape or reversal. The result is that today there are two patterns of ordained Sōtō Zen Buddhists: traditional and modern. Women are primarily traditional.

Hypothesis four: “Most twentieth-century women became Sōtō nuns because they *wanted* to lead traditional monastic lives.” The survey and interview responses revealed that the common motivation to become a Sōtō Zen nun was due to their desire to live a monastic lifestyle. The fact that most nuns actually do live a traditional monastic lifestyle is confirmation of the depth of their motivation and commitment. Many openly articulated the rationale that if they had wanted to lead a life like the laity, there was no reason to be ordained as a monastic. Having had to fight so hard to win, it is clear that Sōtō nuns were deliberately choosing reforms that enabled them to uphold the tradition over reforms that entailed modifying the tradition. They were not and are not, however, engaged in an equalitarian<sup>5)</sup> battle to act like monks. Most nuns do not want to live like “monks.” They merely want to practice as they interpret Dōgen had intended all monastics to. For them, celibacy is not only a monastic vow to be adhered to, but it is a preferred virtue.

Sōtō Zen nuns preserve the role women have played in the development of Japanese Buddhist tradition. It began with women being the first ordained Japanese Buddhists and it continues through women innovatively maintaining their position as monastic Buddhists, overcoming the challenges of this time period.

### **Bearers and Transmitters of Traditional Japanese Culture**

Viewing the nuns' activities in socio-historical context reveals that the traditional life Sōtō Zen nuns maintain embodies aspects of aesthetic qualities that hark back to the aristocratic culture of the Heian period where the

appreciation of beauty was cultivated through refining the senses to subtle differences in shades and hues of colors, scents, and delicately rich turns of phrase that evoked more than described. Renewed appreciation of these qualities in Japanese culture arose in the face of rapid westernization in the middle Meiji years (1880–90s). In the search for a new identity in the sea of changes, many developed a heightened awareness of the value of traditional Japanese ways. The 1890s saw a revival of interest in flower arranging, tea ceremony, and Noh drama. In this context, then, Sōtō nuns' 1903 decision to integrate the traditional arts into their curriculum for training nuns was not merely a matter of appealing to traditional expectations for women. They were tapped into the pulse of a nation that was zealously trying to preserve its own refined traditions. They helped transmit this revival of traditional Japanese arts by teaching them in their nunneries. Many nuns also actively taught them in their temples, like a nun named Tetsugan-ni who was admired by the people in her neighborhood, because she had many students who studied flower arranging, tea ceremony, and sewing with her.<sup>6)</sup> Sōtō Zen nuns actively participated in the Meiji construction of “traditional Japanese Buddhism and culture.”<sup>7)</sup> Nuns' involvement in the arts did not, however, begin in the Meiji period. Zen, especially the Rinzai sect, and Japanese art have had an intimate relationship that can be traced back to the Kamakura period, although the Muromachi period is better known as a period in which “Zen Art” flourished. Tea ceremony began as a practical method to help a monastic remain alert while engaged in Zen practice. An aesthetic of Zen Art evolved out of an emphasis upon the person engaged in the execution of an act. Flower arranging as a spiritual discipline evolved in conjunction with tea as a subtle yet beautiful reminder of the impermanent nature of life. The artistic spirit of Zen in action, attention to minute detail in daily living, was captured in Noh drama and developed into a distinct performing art.

Today, the arts as a living tradition can be found as central qualities in these Sōtō Zen nuns' lives which combine usefulness and beauty. Other Japanese are engaged in the traditional arts, but very few make them central to their daily pattern of life. Most of the traditional arts in contemporary Japan are experienced in the context of a classroom or reserved for special occasions. Nuns' temples and monasteries are some of the few places in contemporary

Japan where one can find beauty and discipline cultivated and refined in ordinary activities like taking off slippers, peeling apples, and cooking radishes. Sōtō nuns maintain a relatively traditional lifestyle in the midst of a technologically progressive society, with tea ceremony and flower arranging as integral aspects of many nuns' daily lives. The nuns 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 a small number of quality Sōtō Zen nuns keep these alive. Those who want to study the roots of traditional Japanese arts will find a Sōtō Zen nunnery an important resource.

Maintaining a tradition requires careful attention to detail. Being a transmitter of it demands a comprehensive understanding of and experience with the intricate mechanisms that comprise the tradition. Evident in obvious and subtle ways, nuns' choice of clothing, patterns of speech, and preferred behavior suggest that they are qualified bearers of the cultural and artistic traditions of Japan. Their physical appearance and use of language are obvious indications of their concern for tradition. With one glance across a crowded train station platform, one can pick out a nun immediately, for her traditional monastic robes, *zōri* sandals, and shorn head stand in distinct contrast to the western style clothing that is worn by the vast majority of the population. With one quick conversation, her ease in correctly conjugating the most complicated and polite forms of Japanese sounds practically musical against the drone of truncated and fumbled attempts pervasive in Japan today.

In a way, Zen nuns are quintessential models of traditional Japanese women. They affirm the value of virtues, such as patience, strength, and beauty. Many nuns have perfected the art of serving with grace and bowing humbly in the face of various demands. Although this skill has been denigrated by Western feminists as an indication of women succumbing to male dominance, monastic women do not interpret it this way. Instead, such behavior is understood as deriving from insight into Buddhist wisdom and the ways of compassion. Nuns know that to effectively cultivate such skills requires tremendous discipline. That is why most nuns exceed the minimum requirements for training at a monastery. The average time nuns spend in monastery training is five years. They explain that this is important, so that even after leaving the

high-pressured communal life they will maintain their discipline. As the participant-observation data revealed, the discipline of human relationships is at the core of their practice. It is in learning how to respond to other people without first thinking how you are hurt or helped by the interaction that enables nuns to take any situation as an opportunity for Buddhist practice. These nuns think that to treat another person with kindness is the mark of a polished heart. On numerous occasions I heard nuns explain that kindness from a well disciplined person is not dependent upon how the other person treats you. They recognize that the “gentler” virtues are a sign of discipline, strength, and clarity.

In *Recreating Japanese Women*, Jennifer Robertson intimates that many women in Japanese history became nuns as a way of rejecting the conventional female gender roles.<sup>8)</sup> This is not the case with Sōtō Zen nuns. When they established their own training facilities, they chose to institutionalize as an integral part of their practice the main traditional arts that defined a woman as refined, particularly the tea ceremony and flower arranging. Their choices reveal that they relish the discipline of the monastic life and the traditional arts. They perceive themselves as being part of a long history of women who have surmounted the obstacles that challenge one's ability to be gracious, patient, strong, and beautiful. They know it is not easy. To continue their commitment to these traditions is a statement that they think traditional Japanese culture has value in modern times.

Therefore, hypothesis five is established: “The aesthetic dimension to Sōtō nuns' practice helps maintain and transmit traditional Japanese culture in modern Japan.” Their presence is critical, for their actions bear and their monasteries and temples transmit some of the most refined and highly revered traditions that Japanese culture has to offer. They provide depth to the society through their religious commitment, and they also serve as reminders of what it means to be a “traditional Japanese.” A number of Japanese lay Buddhists commented to me that Sōtō Zen nuns should be recognized as “Living Treasures” (*Ningen Kokuhō*) of traditional Japanese Buddhism and culture.

Like the story of the first ordained Buddhists in Japan, the story of Sōtō nuns in this century illuminates a vital stream in Japanese society and culture. Including their activities and accomplishments gives a more accurate account

of each of the scholarly contexts: monasticism, women and religion, Buddhist historiography, Japanese religion, Zen Buddhism, and religious discipline. As adherents to 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 historically, and not just how they have been viewed by others, primarily men.

The story of Sōtō Zen nuns helps bring to the surface the lasting role of women in Japanese religion. Women 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 a traditional paradigm of Zen monastic life is not a matter of the past, but is alive today as nuns engage in their daily activities, their religious discipline. Indeed, over the millennia, the monastic way of life has compelled people to leave their homes for austere practices. Like the women in Sakyamuni Buddha's time, women in modern Japan still find the renunciant's lifestyle worth the effort. In order to live as a traditional monastic in modern Japan, however, they had to fight for fair treatment which included instituting new practices, publishing journals, modifying sect regulations, and establishing new institutions. From this vantage point hypothesis six is clear: "In order to accomplish their goals, Sōtō Zen nuns in twentieth century Japan became innovators for the sake of tradition."

#### Notes

- 1 ) Daniel Patte, *Discipleship According to the Sermon on the Mount*. (Valley Forge, PA : Trinity Press, 1996), p. 24. Patte labels his two categories "Traditional Scholarly Interpretations" and "Exemplary Critical Interpretations." After discussion with him, I renamed the first category "Customary Scholarly Interpretations" so as not to confuse readers of my text where "traditional" is used in a very different way.
- 2 ) This perspective is more poignant when expressed in Japanese, because it is imbued with humility, elegance, and penetrating insight into the interrelated nature of reality: *Nisōwa sabetsu no okagede rippadesu*.
- 3 ) Along with Tsuda Ume, Fukuzawa Yukichi, and a few others, Sōtō nuns were in



the forefront of the fight for education for women. For detailed information about women's higher education in purely secular institutions, see the following texts. Eiichi Kiyooka, ed. and trans. *Fukuzawa Yukichi on Japanese Women* (Tokyo University of Tokyo Press, 1988); Yoshiko Furuki, *The White Plum A Biography of Ume Tsuda Pioneer in the Higher Education of Japanese Women* (Tokyo : Weatherhill, 1991); Sharon Sievers, *Flowers in Salt: The Beginnings of Feminist Consciousness in Modern Japan* (Stanford University Press, 1983).

4 ) Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton. Princeton University Press, 1991), p. 320.

5 ) In this case I mean "equalitarian" and not "egalitarian." Nuns wanted to be treated fairly, but they did not strive to be equal or the same as monks.

6 ) *Hibiki*, p. 33.

7 ) See James Ketelaar's analysis and discussion of many Meiji institutions' concern to construct a convincing portrayal of a strong and coherent Japanese tradition. Ketelaar, *Of Heretics and Martyrs in Meiji Japan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990)

8 ) Jennifer Robertson, "The Shingaku Women : Straight From the Heart," in *Recreating Japanese Women 1600–1945*, edited by Gail Lee Bernstein (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991).