CHAPTER 8

Shundō Aoyama Rōshi

Nurturing the Seeds of Zen

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Shundō Aoyama Rōshi was born in 1933 in Aichi Province, Nagoya Prefecture, a few hundred kilometers south of Tokyo. Considered by her mother to be a gift from the Buddha, she arrived at Muryō Temple in the mountains of Nagano Prefecture at the age of five (Aoyama 2019, 91). She began her religious training under the careful and compassionate guidance of her aunt (Aoyama 2019, 110). As she was growing up, she not only studied scriptures, rituals, and meditation, but also the way of tea (*chadō*), the way of flower ornamentation (*kadō*), the way of calligraphy (*shodō*), and other traditional Japanese arts (Arai 1990, 43–7; 1999, 53, 144).

In 1948, at the age of fifteen, Aoyama Rōshi became a nun and continued her monastic training as a novice at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō in Nagoya. She was one of the very first nuns to receive higher academic education, graduating with a master's degree from the prestigious Komazawa University, flagship of the Sōtō School of Zen. In 1976, she became abbess of Aichi Senmon Nisodo, where she took up the task of training novices (Arai 1990, 40). In 1984, she became abbess of Tokubetsu Nisodo, responsible for training special monastics to become teachers of the tradition.

In 1984, she was appointed abbess of Tokubetsu Nisōdō at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, where she was authorized to train nuns, give Dharma transmission, and designate her own Dharma heir. Today, she also serves as the abbess of two other temples, oversees numerous Buddhist activities, lectures widely throughout Japan, and has authored many books. She is recognized internationally as a prominent Zen master; a recent article in a leading North American Buddhist magazine regards her as "the highest ranking nun in the history of Soto Zen" (Ruff and Yamada 2019, 70).

Aoyama Rōshi's legacy and her place in the Buddhist world are unique. Situated within a notably patriarchal tradition, she has been a leader in the struggle for gender parity in contemporary Japan. Due to her unflagging efforts, nuns in the Sōtō Zen tradition have now achieved unprecedented visibility and independence. According to religious studies scholar Paula Arai, the leading contemporary scholar of Sōtō Zen laywomen and nuns, "the nuns now control their own religious training, enjoy educational and ceremonial rights, and have … appropriate titles and religious robes" (Arai 1999, 74). Today, at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, Aoyama Rōshi not only directs the leading training program for Zen nuns in Japan, but also conducts regular classes and meditation programs for laypeople. Every Sunday, she opens the monastery to the public and delivers two talks, along with sessions of *zazen,* formal *oriyoki* meals, and, periodically, tea meditation (*chazen*) (Arai 1990, 38). By training a generation of highly qualified nuns and dedicated female teachers from Japan and around the world, she has ensured the continuity of a monastic lineage that was believed to be in precipitous decline. As a lineage holder, she epitomizes three generations of twentieth-century female Zen practitioners who have valiantly embodied, and thereby preserved, the tradition.

Image 1: Aoyama Rōshi (photo by Tomomi Ito).

Early Steps on the Path

Aoyama Rōshi's connection with Buddhism began when she was very young, in her mother's womb, when her mother resolved to dedicate her to the Buddha. At a tender age, the child reached Muryō-ji Temple, where she came under the care of her aunt, Shuzan, an old nun, and Shuzan's cousin Senshu, a compassionate and exacting teacher. The temple is located on the plains surrounding the Japan Alps, in the small town of Shiojiri in Nagano Prefecture. In the freezing Buddha hall of this country temple, she learned the *sūtra*s and the stories of great Zen masters, through strict discipline and their example. She saw her mother only occasionally and, from a young age, deeply committed to the path of Dharma, felt no attachment to her. Her mother cried the first year her young daughter was away at the temple, but soon realized that she truly had offered her to the Buddha. Rōshi remembers:

> For the child with whom she had spent so little time, my mother raised silkworms, spun the thread, wove the cloth, and made all the clothing I would need for the rest of my life, including the ceremonial robes, surplices, kimonos, and even obi sashes for kimonos. Clad in the embrace of the handwoven garments my mother made so devotedly with fervent prayer, I have earnestly followed the Buddhist Way for fifty-one years, since I entered the temple at the age of five. (Aoyama 2019, 111)

Two years after she arrived at the temple, after suffering from illness most of his life, her father passed away. He enjoined her to become a nun and "do my part of the practice as well," which deepened her commitment to the religious life. Her gratitude for entering the path with ease extends beyond her natal family:

> When I look at my own life, I feel happy that the hopes and prayers and help of my parents, grandparents, and the many ancestors before them came together in this one living body of mine. Thus, I feel strongly that I must never neglect my religious faith, which is a gift from the Buddha. While praying that I may be allowed to live single-mindedly according to the Buddha's teachings, these days I find myself asking "Is this enough, Father? Have I managed to do your part as well?" (Aoyama 2019, 111–12)

Aoyama Rōshi recalls a singular incident that decisively shaped her practice. At the age of 18, in her third year of training, she attended a rather stylized question-and-answer session led by a self-effacing professor and Zen master named Ryōun Ōbora as part of a precepts ceremony where she was serving. Throwing caution to the wind, she quoted a verse by Dōgen and posed the question: "What does it mean to say 'Life and death, as they are, is nirvana?'" Ōbora Rōshi responded, "Practice for thirty years and then come back; then ask me again." Although he would have been 108 years old by that time, while regretting her lack of understanding, she took his "severe words" as encouragement, as his "last will and testament" to her (Aoyama 2019, 117).

Aoyama Rōshi became quite critical of disingenuous Buddhist priests, whom she compares to "black clouds covering the sun" (Aoyama 2019, 99). Rejecting such an insincere life, she spent her youth in search of the true path. Finally, after many twists and turns, she found solace in the Buddha's words of counsel to the layman (*upāsaka*) Atula. These words are recounted in the *Dhammapāda:* "neither one who speaks too much, speaks too little, or remains silent can escape blame in this world" (99). Later, after completing her studies at Komazawa University and recovering from a bout of disillusionment over corruption in the clergy, she returned to her home temple with "a new sense of admiration for the profundity and splendor of the Way" (95). With the unfailing support of her two

nun teachers, she began leading annual Zen retreats at her home temple attended by up to two hundred participants. She narrates how, in order to express her gratitude to her teachers, she once insisted on cooking for an intensive retreat, toiling in the kitchen from early morning to late at night.

In 1966, when she was 33, Aoyama Rōshi stumbled over rocks along a mountain path on a rainy pitch-black night to attend a *sesshin* (intensive meditation retreat) at Antai-ji (Purple Bamboo Grove Monastery). After arriving, she called out and, getting no response, she narrowly escaped opening a door on a batch of trainee monks who were bathing. At last, she was kindly welcomed by Kōshō Uchiyama, the respected Zen master who was leading the silent five-day *sesshin*. Despite having a bad cold, she followed the tightly regulated meditation schedule, facing the wall in the freezing meditation hall. She persevered because she believes that Zen as practiced at Antai-ji is the ideal, kind method of sitting meditation (*zazen*), "the true way human beings should live" (Aoyama 2019, 123).

Negotiating Tradition and Modernity

Aoyama Rōshi came of age in an era of greater freedom, expanded opportunities, and improvements in the status of Sōtō Zen nuns. As documented in the work of Paula Arai, Zen nuns made great strides in the twentieth century. There are currently about 1,000 Sōtō Zen nuns in Japan–the largest number of any sect–who are celibate practitioners and observe the *bodhisattva* precepts of the *Brahmajala Sūtra*.[1] The nuns' strategy has been to follow strict standards of monastic discipline, and this practice has given them the confidence to deal with institutionalized inequalities. The fact that nuns were held to a stricter standard of discipline than the monks has had the unanticipated consequence of preparing nuns to be the keepers of tradition and models of the Zen lifestyle. "The weight of monastic tradition helped establish the legitimacy of institutionalized equality" (Arai 1999, 16). The nuns' struggle to transform discriminatory institutional structures was fostered by the egalitarian stance of Dōgen (1200–53), founder of the Sōtō Zen School, who affirmed that women and men were equally capable of practicing *zazen*. Through the efforts of these pioneers who struggled to establish equal regulations for male and female practitioners, nuns were eventually able to create and maintain their own institutions and "to achieve ranks commensurate with their competence within the Buddhist hierarchy" (16).

In the late nineteenth century, the status of nuns in Japanese society was low, apart from a few who belonged to the imperial family. However, perhaps because of Dōgen's unequivocal statement regarding the equal capabilities of women and men, monastic schools began to be established specifically to improve the quality

of education for nuns, first in Gifu Prefecture (1881), followed by schools in Aichi (1887), Kyoto (1888), Tokyo (1889), and Toyama (1892). At these schools, constructed and managed by nuns, novices studied Buddhist texts, chanting, classical Chinese, and calligraphy, in addition to regular secular subjects. In 1902, the Sōtō Zen School passed regulations that allowed monastic schools for nuns to officially grant degrees that were eventually recognized by the Ministry of Education (Arai 1999, 53).

The primary impetus for these advances was a group of four nuns who worked diligently to alter the status quo. Their sincerity and hard work resulted in incremental institutional changes. In 1901, Mizuno Jōrin received the title *ni-oshō* (nun preceptor) from the leading Zen master of Eihei-ji Temple, even though "sect regulations did not permit nuns to be granted this title" (Arai 1999, 54). Three other nuns subsequently received this prestigious title: Hori Mitsujō in 1910, and Andō Dōkai and Yamagushi Kokan in 1911. These four nuns were especially concerned with improving educational facilities for nuns and worked together to establish a monastic training school for nuns (*nigakurin*). This training school, currently known as Aichi Senmon Nisōdō (Novitiate Monastery for the Sōtō Zen Nuns of Aichi Prefecture), was founded in 1903 (55). There, the nuns followed the rules of daily life of Dōgen Zenji and Keizan Zenji, the founders of Sōtō Zen in Japan, and seriously dedicated themselves to learning and meditation practice.

At the time of its founding, the living conditions at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō were minimal. Twenty-two novice nuns and eight teachers lived together in two six-mat rooms with no electricity, eating barley and salty soup. Despite the lack of amenities, the novices applied themselves conscientiously to both traditional subjects–such as classical Chinese, Sōtō Zen texts, tea ceremony, flower arrangement, and calligraphy–and modern subjects, such as science and math. In the following years, the number of student nuns steadily grew, and the monastery moved to a more suitable location on a hill in an especially pleasant part of Nagoya, where it continues today. By 1941, despite many obstacles, the monastery had expanded to provide education to 140 nuns. Tragically, it burned to the ground during a World War II air raid in May 1945 (Arai 1999, 59). Again, the nuns persevered and worked diligently to reconstruct the monastery under difficult post-war economic conditions. After 1948, many of the nuns embarked on university studies at Aichi Gakuin, a local, private, Sōtō-affiliated university. As a community, the nuns raised funds to construct a meditation hall, which was completed in 1950.

Aoyama Rōshi quickly rose to prominence as a recognized Zen master. As mentioned, in 1976, she was appointed the abbess of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, responsible for training novices, and, in 1984, became the abbess of Tokubetsu Nisodo, responsible for training future teachers. Since 1984, she has also been

responsible for overseeing two other temples, Shōbō-ji and Muryō-ji. Shōbō-ji is a fully functioning temple on the grounds of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō in Nagoya. The main hall (*hondō*) for the monastery also serves the function of caring for parishioners (*danka*) and houses the memorial tablets (*ihai*) of those who have passed away. The nuns who train at the monastery also gain experience by visiting parishioners and counseling them in their homes. Home visits are a mainstay of a nun's practice. The formal activity is for a nun to chant the requisite *sūtra*s at a family's home altar on the monthly death anniversary (*meinichi*) of a deceased family member. After the rituals are performed, being in the privacy a parishioners' home provides an opportunity for a parishioner, usually a woman, to seek spiritual guidance. Often over tea, the confidential exchanges are regularly welcome and intimate. Aoyama Rōshi stresses the importance of these interpersonal exchanges, indicating they are a vital dimension of training to be a nun.

> The foundation of nuns' responsibility, conscience, and honor is to have been granted the role to support the spiritual dimensions of the efforts of women who bear the responsibility–granted by the gods and the Buddhas–to give birth to and raise the people of tomorrow who will saddle the world on their shoulders. We must exert ourselves unremittingly. This is the only path on which we must continuously advance. (Arai 1999, viii)

Nuns who reside at Muryō-ji, the temple where Aoyama Rōshi was raised, also engage with the parishioners of that temple, in addition to tending an extensive garden. Aoyama Rōshi frequently travels back and forth between the large city of Nagoya and the small town of Shiojiri to personally oversee the training and education of the nuns there. Some develop a master-disciple relationship with her and receive Dharma transmission from her, thereby becoming teachers themselves. Despite Aoyama Rōshi's very traditional Zen training, her attitude toward monastic life is quite progressive: "If one is a Buddhist monk or priest, one must throw aside one's robes and become involved in the world in order to weep, suffer, and laugh with other people. Gradually people will become aware of the true Way and be drawn toward it" (Aoyama 2019, 130).

Over the years, Aoyama Rōshi has become a leading scholar of Sōtō Zen and a distinguished author, having written more than 50 books on a range of topics. The titles in themselves give a strong sense of her approach to life. Some are very poetic, such as *Quiet Conversations on Zen Tea: Listening to the Wind in the Pines* (2007) and *Flowers of Compassion* (1997). Others are straightforward accounts of Chinese and Japanese Zen masters. Some of her books are based on early Buddhist texts, such as *Flower Garlands of the Dharma: A Taste of the Dhammapāda* (1984) and *Stories of the Heart of Wisdom Sūtra* (2002), while others are based on later Zen

texts, such as *Zen Wisdom: Lessons Learned from the Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki* (1994) and *Instructions from the Cook* (1995). Some are teachings on living a life of harmony, purity, and tranquility, such as *Becoming a Beautiful Person: The Words of a Nun Living Zen* (2004) and *Polishing Life as an Offering: Illuminated by Zen* (2015). Other books, such as *A Journey to Another Me* (1997) and *How to Cook My Life* (2001) offer Zen-inspired guidelines for personal nourishment. Her humility and her concern for the many challenges women face on the path are evident in *The Path is a Little Far* (1998) and *Because There is Mud, Flowers Bloom* (2016). Her written work, reflecting on life from different angles, conveys how deeply her path has been informed by Buddhist teachings and demonstrates how creatively she applies those teachings.

International Engagement

Aoyama Rōshi is one of the very few Japanese women who have actively engaged in religious dialogue in the international community. In 1987, she participated in the Third East-West Spiritual Exchange, in which a group of 28 monks and nuns of all three schools of Zen monasticism–Obaku, Rinzai, and Zen–lived in Benedictine and Cistercian monasteries in Europe (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain) for almost a month. The exchange included a visit to the tomb of St. Benedict, a private audience with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican on September 9, and an interreligious prayer gathering for peace in Assisi. The monastics not only engaged in deep dialogue but, as the Pope noted, shared liturgies, meditation, and a "silent encounter within the interior of their monasteries" (Augustine 1989, 249). Although she was one of only a few Zen nuns involved in the encounter, she played an active role in moving Zen beyond the confines of Japanese culture and bringing it to the forefront of constructive, heartfelt interreligious dialogue.

Aoyama Rōshi has been an influential figure both nationally in Japan and internationally. She has traveled widely and taught abroad, visiting the Buddhist sacred sites of India and numerous Zen centers in the United States and Europe. Aoyama Rōshi was featured on the long-running French series *Sagesses bouddhistes* on France 2 (*Sagesses bouddhistes* 2010). Even at an advanced age, she made an effort to participate in international conferences–a rarity among Japanese nuns. In 2004, she attended the 8th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Seoul, South Korea on the theme, "Discipline and Practice of Buddhist Women Past and Present." In 2008, she delivered the keynote address at the 10th Sakyadhita, held in Ulaanbataar, Mongolia, where she spoke on the theme, "Buddhism in Transition: Tradition, Changes, and Challenges." The conference was disrupted by political events following a disputed election in which

six people were killed the very day after her keynote. However, she remained serene and attentive throughout the conference proceedings. Her calm presence helped to reassure the other conference participants in a time of great uncertainty with few lines of communication open beyond the conference venue. In 2011, Rōshi attended the 12th Sakyadhita International Conference on Buddhist Women, held in Bangkok, Thailand on the theme, "Leading to Liberation." The organizers and participants were honored by the presence of a nun of her stature and deeply impressed by her warmth, humility, and elegance. Her presence was especially appreciated given the Fukushima nuclear disaster that had racked Japan just a few months earlier. Japanese women are often missing in international gatherings, whether due to language barriers, cultural isolation, social and religious responsibilities in Japan, personal reticence, or other factors. By standing in for Japanese Buddhist women at these historical international gatherings, she helped fill a critical gap by representing Japan among the Buddhists of the world (Arai 1990, 40; Arai 1999, 74–5, 78).

Aoyama Rōshi has played a major part in expanding the influence of Sōtō Zen internationally by training teachers who take their experience of Zen practice back to their home countries and thereby expand awareness of Japanese culture and meditation around the world. Aoyama Rōshi has overseen the training of nuns from around the world who come to Nagoya to practice *zazen* and experience an authentic Zen monastic lifestyle. In this way, she has nurtured students who return to their home countries to establish Zen centers and become teachers in their own right, training students of their own. One example is Monja Coen Rōshi (Cláudia Coên), who trained at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō and returned to Brazil in 1995. After teaching at Busshinji Temple in São Paulo for some time, she established Zendo Brasil, trained her own students, wrote numerous popular books on Zen, and became a well-known public figure (Tsomo 2017, 252).

Image 2: Monja Coen with Aoyama Rōshi (courtesy of Monja Coen).

Another example is Paula Kane Robinson Arai, an eminent Japanese American scholar of Sōtō Zen, who credits Aoyama Rōshi with providing the "indispensable gift" of her trust. This enabled Arai "to live in the monastery and interview the novices in training," freely gather information, and benefit from the "necessary challenges" (Arai 1999, x). Aoyama Rōshi wrote a preface to the book that resulted from this extended participant-observer research experience, titled *Reflections on Women Encountering Buddhism across Cultures and Time* (vii–viii).

Yet another example is Gesshin Claire Greenwood, an American woman who completed three years of intensive training at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō. During her training, she was installed as a head trainee (*hossenshiki*) in a ceremony that involves ritual bowing and a question-and-answer exchange sometimes characterized as "Dharma combat." She recalls Aoyama Rōshi's patience and insight:

> Aoyama Rōshi once said in a Dharma talk that true selflessness is unaware of itself. True selflessness, she said, is like a person in a house up in the mountains lighting a lamp in their room; a traveler wandering through the valley below, lost and frightened in the dark, who then looks up and sees

> that light and feels comforted. The person lighting the lamp doesn't know someone else can see the light, doesn't know anyone feels comforted by it. That, she said, is true selflessness. (Greenwood, 29)

True selflessness, then, is awareness that is not self-reflexive but naturally, spontaneously illuminating. The image of a person who un-self-consciously lights a lamp in the darkness and unknowingly comforts others is an apt metaphor for Aoyama Rōshi's unassuming yet illuminating presence in the lives of her students. In this way, she has nurtured many women as future leaders.

Living Awareness

Aoyama Rōshi grew up in an era of intense and dramatic social and political changes. As a Buddhist nun, she was trained in a uniquely Japanese cultural context and speaks from a realm of experience that contrasts sharply with many contemporary interpretations of Dharma. Nevertheless, in contrast to most nuns of her day, who carefully avoided public attention, she has appeared on national television, in popular magazines, and has quietly pursued an illustrious teaching career. Her erudition, congeniality, cultural refinement, and many accomplishments are widely acknowledged. Her weekly lectures on Zen and *sesshin* sessions attract consistently large groups of sincere seekers. Her message is at once prosaic and sublime, encouraging listeners to embrace the difficulties of the human condition as a welcome, strengthening practice.

As evidence of Aoyama Rōshi's scholarly prominence, Einin Kumamoto, an associate professor of Buddhist studies at Komazawa University and an ordained Sōtō Zen priest, selects her as one of three contemporary scholars of Zen whose work he subjects to critical analysis in his article, "Shut up, Zen Priest." Yet in comparison to the scathing critiques he levels against the other two authors, his evaluation of Aoyama Rōshi and her 1987 book, *Ima ni Inochi Moyashite* (Burning with Life, Now) is quite laudatory: "There is no particular need for me to introduce Aoyama, beyond noting that today she is a nun who is able to speak not only for the Soto sect, but also for the whole of Japanese Buddhism. I have no intention whatsoever to criticize Aoyama's activities here. The half-a-lifetime described in her book is the true life of a Zen priest, pious and lacking in any point to criticize" (Kumamoto, 476–7). Kumamoto's first observation about Aoyama Rōshi's work concerns her conviction that karmic connections from the past enabled her to pursue the Buddhist path with relative ease from a young age. Unfortunately, Kumamoto confuses the Buddha's teachings on actions–the law of cause and effect –with the "will of Heaven," an unmistakably Confucian concept. His second

observation concerns gender structures and renunciation; in agreement with Aoyama, he concludes by endorsing her critical stance on clerical marriage. Kumamoto's acknowledgment of Aoyama's stature in the sphere of Zen scholarship is unusual in Zen's male-dominated hierarchy.

Aoyama Rōshi and her students have won accolades in Japan and abroad for their learning and leadership. Writing in 2018, the American Zen teacher Tenku Ruff said, "Not long ago, Shundō Aoyama Rōshi, the abbess of the women's monastery in Nagoya, received the highest rank a woman has ever held in the Soto Zen monastic system. At around the same time, two of her disciples also crossed gender barriers: Yusho Sasaki Roshi became the first female Soto Zen bishop (of Europe) and Yuko Wakayama Osho was invited to teach monks on Dogen at Eiheiji, the monastery established by Eihei Dogen Zenji himself and one of the two head monasteries of Soto Zen" (Ruff 2018). In contrast to the low status of nuns during the time Aoyama was growing up, the achievements of Aoyama Rōshi and her students represent major flash points in Japanese religious history.

Aoyama Rōshi is known for emphasizing the value of beauty in daily living (Arai 2011, 201). She embodies this appreciation for beauty not only in her practice of the traditional Japanese arts of tea, calligraphy, and flower arrangement, but also in the words, gestures, and ordinary activities of everyday life. "Without bifurcating 'sacred' and 'profane' realms, as is found in several other cultures, concrete everyday activities are ultimate. Therefore, cleaning floors and cooking food can be done as supreme acts of importance. With this context, meaning is abundant in daily life" (Arai 2011, 109). The attention she gives to ordinary everyday activities resonates with women, who are often responsible for daily chores while caring for their families. In dealing with human relationships, she playfully recommends that people who are angry with each other bow with folded hands before they start to argue (Arai 1999, 159).

Image 3: Aoyama Rōshi calligraphy (courtesy of Monja Coen).

Among the activities of everyday life, Aoyama Rōshi is especially attentive to the power of words in conveying meaning, nuance, and beauty. Even a few words expounding the true teachings can be a turning point that transforms our thinking. Speech may simply be innocent noise, but inconsiderate words have the power to wound people for the rest of their lives. She explains that the Buddha was always careful to speak honestly, for the benefit of the hearer, at the appropriate time and place. Her heartfelt view is, "Beautiful words spring naturally from a considerate and beautiful life" (Aoyama 2019, 32). She feels great sympathy for the frustrations, regrets, and sadness that plague many people in the world today. She repeatedly reminds her disciples about the reality of death and says, "The best offering to the departed is for us, those left behind, to live meaningful lives so that they need not worry about us and can continue tranquilly on their journey in the afterlife or peacefully attain buddhahood" (106).

Although Aoyama Rōshi has always lived a traditional Zen nun's life, she is keenly sensitive to the needs of laywomen and laymen seeking to find their way through the vicissitudes of life in challenging times. As Paula Arai expresses it, Aoyama Rōshi's primary concern is shaping the heart through following the Buddhist path: "The Way is made up of the formal disciplines (kata) of daily tasks like eating, cleaning, and bathing … These disciplines are not arbitrary but are based on what is needed to care for each object" (Arai 2011, 36). The general public appreciates her wisdom and compassion, and interviews with her frequently

appear in the media. Aoyama Rōshi has been heard to say that "women are designed to be mothers." She believes that "women have an advantage over men, because women's bodies have wombs, which 'are a place of deep peace, pure compassion, a source of life, like the ocean is the womb of earth'" (121). She includes all women in this expansive statement, not just biological mothers. She believes that all beings have a wish to return to their mother, meaning that they wish to return to their heart-mind or their true nature. Paula Arai notes that many Zen rituals are associated with conception, birth, and the well-being of children and families. Examples include writing prayers on wooden plaques (*ema*) for protection and healing, going on pilgrimage (*meguri*), chanting, and copying *sūtra*s (*shakyō*). There are also special events such as the Daihannya ritual, which combines thunderous sounds, rhythms, visuals, and sensations to convey the inseparability of dependent arising and emptiness–the inseparability of this present moment and the universe (121). Aoyama Rōshi refers to these ritualized activities as occurring in "circle time" (*ensō jikan*), endless and beginningless in each complete present moment (144).

Notable Contributions of a Female Zen Master

Aoyama Rōshi helped to elevate the social status of women in many important ways. Her writings inform our understanding of the contributions and increasing visibility of Sōtō Zen nuns in modern times. Stereotypes about women abounded during the Tokugawa era (1600–1868), including preconceptions about the impurity of women, which required expiation. At that time, it was believed that women needed to counteract the negative karmic consequences of menstruation and childbirth through specific ritual practices. The primary means of offsetting these transgressions of pollution taboos was to commission Sōtō Zen priests to ritually intercede to free women from the horrors of the Blood Pool Hell by reciting an apocryphal text titled the *Blood Pool Hell Sūtra* (Ketsubonkyō) (Meeks 2020a; 2020b).[2] These texts are non-canonical and draw heavily on folk traditions to convey "messages of sin and salvation" to society in general. Nonetheless, the messages they sent about the inherent flaws of the female body were widely influential in shaping attitudes toward women (Ambros 2016, 4).

Through her teachings and the example of her life, Aoyama Rōshi has played a pivotal role in transforming attitudes toward women in contemporary Japanese society. She has accomplished this through her skillful and persistent work to train a new generation of female Zen masters and through her generosity and kindness in teaching and personally interacting with the lay Buddhist community, especially women. Her life's work coincided with major changes in the status of women in

Japan overall and Sōtō Zen in particular. Despite Dōgen Zenji's egalitarian attitude, during the Tokugawa era, nuns' activities were strictly curtailed (Uchino 1983, 178–9). Although the Meiji era (1868–1912) brought modernization and many changes in education and religion, the status of Sōtō Zen nuns did not improve. However, three schools were established where nuns could get some education. After the Taishō Era (1912–25), progressive ideas about democracy and women proliferated, and Sōtō nuns gathered to petition the sect authorities for greater rights (181–5). After World War II, changes in Sōtō Zen policies brought improvements both for nuns and for temple wives (185–93).

As religious studies scholars Barbara R. Ambros (2016) and Paula R. K. Arai (2000) have documented, Aoyama Rōshi and the nuns at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō have played a pivotal role in sustaining the Anan Kōshiki–a ritual expressing gratitude to Ānanda, the Buddha's close disciple who advocated for the admission of women to the Buddhist monastic order. In 2003, to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of Aichi Senmon Nisōdō, a quorum of specially trained nuns performed the lengthy ritual, establishing an historical link of continuity with the courageous nuns who insisted on equal representation in the sangha. Devotional practices and offerings by nuns to commemorate Ānanda's compassion for women can be traced to India, as documented in the annals of the Chinese monks Faxian (337–422) and Xuanzang (602–64) (Ambros 2016, 209). The performance of the ritual is said to elicit a response in the form of protection and blessings for women from Ānanda, who is believed to answer their prayers (213). Aoyama Rōshi reprinted the ritual text twice, once in 1985 and again in 2003, and also permitted the filming of the ritual.

In 2009, Aoyama Rōshi became the first nun to be appointed to the rank of Daikyōshi (Great Teacher) in the Sōtō Zen School. The concept of lineage in Japanese Zen is disputed. In one sense, it is simply the chronological transmission of a school of practice from one generation to the next. In another sense, it involves a passing of authority. A talented or realized disciple is authorized to teach or recognized as a successor by a teacher. For others, it is a sense of presence or an experience of awakening, often precipitated by a personal encounter between master and disciple. In this latter sense, lineage is sometimes known as "mind-to-mind transmission" of wisdom or even of enlightenment that is thought to be traceable all the way back to Buddha Śākyamuni himself. Sōtō Zen lineage to date includes over ninety patriarchs, though it is impossible to verify an unbroken continuity or even that all these figures were historical personages. During the Tokugawa era, the notion of lineage became incorporated into precept ordination ceremonies (*jukai e*) attended by large numbers of lay and ordained followers, female and male. As Duncan Ryūken Williams notes in *The Other Side of Zen*, the ordinants received a name (*kaimyō*) and a lineage chart (*kechimyaku*) that linked

them in an unbroken succession that began with Buddha Śākyamuni (Williams 2004, 26–7). However, one thing is certain: women are very conspicuously missing from the lineage of Sōtō Zen masters. To address this lacuna, several Western Buddhist centers have created lineages of matriarchs. The names of these women are chanted in place of the traditional lineages of Zen patriarchs. These new female lineages begin with Mahāprajāpatī, the Buddha's foster mother who became the first Buddhist nun, and memorialize female masters up to modern times. In *Women of the Way: Discovering 2,500 Years of Buddhist Wisdom*, author Sallie Tisdale (2006) imagines a lineage that begins with "mythical ancestors" in India and winds through China and Japan until it reaches Boston and Los Angeles.

Image 4: Aoyama Rōshi at Aichi Senmon Nisōdō (photo by Tomomi Ito).

Over her lifetime, Aoyama Rōshi earned a reputation for her unique contributions in upholding a time-honored lineage of Zen aesthetics. Her artistic sensibility is evident in the covers of her books, which are refined and aesthetically pleasing. Some of these covers are light-hearted and contemporary, almost whimsical, but almost all of them reference the natural world. The cover image of *Quiet Talks on Zen Tea: Twelve Tales of Tea* portrays a rock garden emblematic of Japanese Zen minimalism, and the calligraphy used for the book's title is itself a

work of art. On the cover of her book *Fully Living Sky and Earth*, is an evocative painting in Chinese style featuring a willow tree against a surrealistic moonscape. The cover of the popular book *The Path is a Little Far* features photographs of two flower arrangements, both in a rather modernistic style, but with the title in a traditional calligraphic brushwork. Perhaps most traditional of all is the graphic selected for the cover of *Zen Wisdom: Lessons Learned from the Shōbōgenzō Zuimonki*, Aoyama Rōshi's reflections on the discourses of Eihei Dōgen Zenji (1200–53), founder of the Sōtō School. The graphic is a simple circle (*enso*) symbolizing the emptiness that encompasses totality–a profound paradox. In this case, instead of the wispy freestyle calligraphy typical of the genre, we find a very solid circle that seems to signal endurance as well as immediacy. These qualities of endurance and immediacy are evident not only in the material aspects of Zen culture with which Aoyama Rōshi surrounds herself, but also in the graciousness and beauty that she manifests in every movement and interaction.

Aoyama Rōshi has received numerous awards in recognition of her leadership and valuable contributions to Japanese society and Buddhist culture. In 2006, she received the 40th Bukkyō Dendō Bunka Award–a lifetime achievement award for transmitting Buddhist teachings and culture (Kōeki Zaidan Hōjin). This prestigious award is presented by the Bukkyō Dendō Kyōkai (Society for the Promotion of Buddhism) to those who advance the Buddhist teachings and transmit the tradition with meritorious achievement. The award honored Aoyama Rōshi as a leader of nuns, notable for her numerous writings and public presentations that connect women with the Dharma. This is just one of the many accolades that Aoyama Rōshi has received. At the 50th anniversary of the All Japan Nuns' Association, held in Tokyo in 2010, she was undoubtedly one of the most highly revered among the senior nuns, respected by her peers and by the younger generation of nuns as well.

Image 5: Aoyama Rōshi at the 50th anniversary of the All Japan Nuns' Association in Tokyo, 2010 (photo by Tomomi Ito).

Empathy and Discipline

Shundō Aoyama Rōshi trained from early childhood as an acolyte in a Zen temple, became a respected Buddhist scholar, and spearheaded a rigorous training center for nuns, emerging as a leading figure in the hyper-masculine world of mid-twentieth century Japanese Zen. In her role as a Zen master, she has been a major force in the spiritual formation of countless devoted seekers of wisdom from across Japan and around the world. She faithfully conveys the heart of the Sōtō Zen lineage, while simultaneously creating space for ordinary women to grow in both understanding and experience. As a spiritual master, she empathizes with the inevitable difficulties of life and teaches her followers to face the tragedies of the human experience with insight and fortitude. Recalling the hardships that Buddha Śākyamuni underwent in his quest for liberation, she enjoins her students to accept every situation as a blessing, "just as it is" (Aoyama 2019, 51). Aoyama Rōshi's admonition to embrace the difficulties of life may appear a bit extreme or

anachronistic for modern people. Yet her responses to human weakness, illness, and tragedy are dignified and courageous. She sincerely believes that, with effort, all difficulties can be overcome, and she speaks from experience.

Now, in an era of greater prominence for Buddhist women, Aoyama Rōshi unquestionably occupies a respected place as a teacher and pioneer. Considering the near-invisibility of female teachers during the twentieth century, her many achievements are especially remarkable. Under her leadership, Aichi Senmon Nisōdō has become a model Zen training center for women, attracting highly qualified, dedicated practitioners. The importance of her contributions toward ensuring the survival and flourishing of Sōtō Zen monasticism cannot be overestimated, and her concerted efforts to educate and train female practitioners from around the world are especially notable. Aoyama Rōshi uses the metaphor of a valley stream to connote the steady flow of the Buddha's teachings, which fortunate sentient beings can access and transmit in accordance with their affinities. With insight and sincerity, she sheds light on the beauty of timeless truths in the phenomenal world–the blessings of the Buddha reflected in a single remarkable flower.

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Notes

1. Another category of female Sōtō Zen practitioner is the *jizoku*, or priest's wife. See Noriko Kawahashi, "*Jizoku* (Priests' Wives) in Sōtō Zen Buddhism: An Ambiguous Category," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 22:1–2 (1995): 161–83.
2. Beata Grant and Wilt L. Idema, *Escape from Blood Pond Hell: The Tales of Mulian and Woman Huang* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011) includes translations of two such texts written in Chinese. As Grant and Idema note, these texts were recited and shaped the religious worldviews of women in imperial China. In medieval Japan, too, preconceptions about women's karmic hindrances, moral failings, and bodily pollution became widespread. See also Barbara R. Ambros, *Women in Japanese Religions* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), 84–9.