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SOKOJI AND ZEN CENTER¹

Sokoji and Zen Center are two organizations that have many things in common, most importantly, the sharing of a common religious philosophy. Yet, there exists deep-seated friction and tension between the two. Sokoji is a Soto Zen Buddhist Temple in San Francisco that was founded in 1934 by a group of Issei². Zen Center was established ten years ago by the present Zen Master when interest in Zen Buddhism among whites was first aroused, which was revealed by the enthusiasm shown in the Zen Master's lectures in English. The Zen Master, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi, then took on the heavy responsibilities of the guidance of two groups. Since that time Suzuki Roshi has been the shared teacher of both his Japanese congregation and his Zen Center students. Three other priests have since come from Japan to help the Roshi with one or both of the groups. Besides the sharing of the Zen Master and the instructors, the two organizations also share the Temple. Legally the building is owned by the Japanese congregation but it is used by both, by the Japanese for Sunday services and meetings, and by the Zen Center for daily periods of zazen³ and lectures.

The situation does not seem to warrant serious conflicts

but they do exist. The basic trouble is that there is almost no interaction between the two despite their supposedly shared religious views and much of the interaction that does take place has unfriendly undertones. The present characteristics of the relationship between them is unnecessary and something must be done to change the condition of the relationship in some way. These conditions are discussed near the conclusion of the paper.

The goal of this paper is not to arrive at the ideal solution for a problem. There very possibly exists no such ideal solution. Rather it will dwell on the nature of the problem by exploring the feelings of people involved in the situation and the solutions that they feel are possible. A survey of the opinions and views of fifteen involved people was compiled through interviews and is here presented.⁴

The basic question that was asked was: What do you think are the feelings that interact between the Sokoji and Zen Center from your point of view? Secondary questions were then asked to get a clear idea of the subject's opinions.⁵

Suzuki Roshi and the two other priests that were interviewed have unique positions relative to Sokoji and Zen Center because they are the teachers of both groups. Suzuki Roshi, when asked the basic question about the Issei's feelings toward the Zen Center, replied that he couldn't tell about all the Issei but that most Japanese people in the com-

munity did not understand the Zen Center. When they see "people with beads and long hair, they don't like it." The Roshi says that those Issei who study or have studied about Zen don't make such hasty conclusions. Some of the Issei have respect for the Zen Center students and some others are watching without definite ideas. He says probably about fifty to sixty percent of the congregation have a misunderstanding concerning Zen Center. He added that he feels that most of the Nisei⁶ are indifferent. Eighty percent of the troubles, he guesses, is caused by the majority of the Japanese congregation's general dislike for long hair and unusual clothing. His estimation is probably very accurate, substantiated by the statements to the same effect of the two Issei women interviewed. Mrs. Michiko Komiya, a member of the Sokoji since 1945 and Mrs. Fuyu Kawashiri, one of the founders, agreed that the outward appearance of the Zen Center students was of definite concern to the Issei. Mrs. Komiya said that most of the Issei have great respect for the students for being able to wake up so early every morning to practice zazen but the image of the "hippie" tended to contend with this respect. Mrs. Komiya also suspects that perhaps, the students are too egotistical to be able to change their appearance. George Hirano, an Issei and a founder of Sokoji, is custodian of the Temple and is in regular contact with Zen Center members. He feels that the situation is better than it has ever been

before because the Issei are beginning to understand the Zen Center students. Still, about one-half of the Issei, he says, don't understand them. He says that the Issei did not like the beatniks who comprised most of the members of Zen Center in its early days. But now, he says there are no beatniks. "They all want to study Zen." "The Issei don't come to see them everyday like I do." He feels that if the Issei could see the seriousness of the students each morning, they would be infinitely more ready to accept them despite their appearance. George Hagiwara, a Nisei, secretary of the Temple's Young Zen Buddhist Association, and active member of the Sokoji since 1952 claimed that when Zen Center was first established there was no resentment on the part of the congregation. "It wasn't a real welcome, but they were accepted." As more "Ginsberg followers" became apparent, the older members' wish to see more "normal" people within the Temple became stronger and their feelings still remain the same. Sakae Kawashiri, the Nisei President of the Sokoji Board of Directors, also says that regardless of a person's religious or educational background, bad appearance cannot be erased easily from the beholder's impression. A Sansei⁸ non-member of the Sunday School, Kuni Kawashiri, comments that the Issei should be more broadminded in their views. They must realize that probably their only contact with young white people is in the Sokoji Temple and that most other people

within the same age range dress relatively in the same way. She adds that perhaps the Zen students should "think harder about what others see in them."

Claude Dahlenberg, a novice priest and associated with Zen Center for the past fifteen years, says that the Issei sees the younger generation just as the older generation, in general, sees them, as a "bunch of hippies." Mel Weitsman, recently ordained as a novice priest, says that the student cannot be asked to shave or cut their hair before their own realization. Suzuki Roshi says that the students should not change just to please the Japanese congregation but for mutual understanding. "The understanding should come from within as one sits."

Another factor in Zen Center being felt as another point of tension is its constantly growing size. Claude Dahlenberg feels that the increasing size of Zen Center makes the Sokoji congregation ill at ease. He referred to the traditional policies of the United States is always to expand and that of Japan has always been to be left isolated, at least until recently. He hypothesizes that the same phenomenon is happening now, where Zen Center expands like the United States expands and the Sokoji's answer to its dwindling congregation depends on its own people in its isolated world. Ryogen Yoshimura Sensei⁸ believes that the main body of Sokoji members wish to protect the status quo in the Temple and would resent any

outside interference in this respect. Mrs. Chieko Tashiro, involved in both the Zen Center and the Sokoji Sunday School as a mother of three children in the Sunday School, believes that the threat involves the whole religion, that the Issei are afraid the whites will take over the entire religion which is not such an impossible theory. Both Mrs. Fuyu Kawashiri and Sakae Kawashiri, however, deny that the Issei have such fears. They are quite confident that a take-over by the Zen Center would be absolutely impossible because the Issei feel that, since they are the rightful owners, nothing can tear the Temple away from them.

The same lack of understanding that the Issei feel for the Zen Center students is also felt by the students for the Japanese congregation. George Hagiwara has been personally asked several times by Zen Center students about what takes place during Sunday services, attended mainly by the Issei. Just as the Issei may not understand zazen, the Zen students do not understand or even know of the rituals that the Issei perform weekly. Some newer students, don't even realize that there exists a Japanese congregation at Sokoji until months after their arrival. The level of communication and interaction is at a very low point. The attitude of the Japanese congregation toward the physical appearance of the Zen students has come to the point where they are no longer invited to certain Buddhist festival day celebrations at the Temple.

Communication and interaction is very difficult between two vastly different groups. There are very diverse reasons why each group happens to be Zen Buddhist. During the Meiji period in Japan, which covers the years 1867 to 1912, Suzuki Roshi relates, there was an all-pervasive spirit of Westernization. Naturally Buddhism, which flourished during the Tokugawa period before the Meiji, was suppressed, being so very Oriental. Shintoism, more of a traditional set of rituals and values than a religion, was adopted as the national religion and the Issei were brought up to be critical of Buddhism. They were impressed with the values of Western culture. Still, the family officially remained Buddhist. During the Meiji period priests had a very difficult time maintaining their temples because of very small congregations and the fact that all financial aid from the government was going to the Shinto churches. The priests often had to find outside jobs to support themselves. Naturally, they found little time to teach their followers and apparently the priests did a very poor job of emphasizing the practice of zazen. All three priests mentioned this fact. What the Issei brought with them to America, then, was not Zen Buddhism in its pure form but a form of ancestor worship which has always existed in the tradition of the Japanese. Yoshimura Sensei feels that the immigrants did not accept Buddhism as thought, but rather as a way of life - a way of life passed down to them from ances-

tors long gone.

Reb Anderson, a Zen Center student, estimates that eighty to ninety percent of the present students at the Zen Center have had experiences with drugs or meditation or both before they became members. He says, the Zen students needed something that would help them to forget their European and American heritage, if only temporarily, which they found could not give them strength or could never help find a solution to the chaos in the world. Many of the students found that Zen could help them to understand. Zazen, they found, was just as involving as drugs. "In America, man becomes a function." Every way he turns something is beckoning him to buy or do, beckoning him to try something. Zen just sits there waiting for the individual to find it. As Reb Anderson says, the Japanese are at this temple because Zen is already a part of them. The Americans are there and practice zazen searching for the same thing. Therefore, he says, zazen would add to the practice of the Japanese - add to the Zen that is already a part of their daily lives. Mel Weitsman adds that the Japanese came to the United States pursuing middle-class goals, while the Zen students were trying to escape middle-class values. Yoshinori Mizoi, the only Japanese, besides the priests, presently involved with Zen Center, made another comparison. Western people are bored with the West and turn to the East and the Orientals, very quickly Westernized, turned to the

West.

In these statements by the priests and the three Zen Center members one finds the very basic differences between the make-up of the membership of the Sokoji and the Zen Center.⁹ One can, then, expect basic differences in the way that they practice Zen.

Yoshimura Sensei built a bare framework of what he believes are the purposes of the Japanese at Sokoji. The Issei go to the Temple to worship the spirits of their ancestors. Cultivation of the self is a minor purpose. The Nisei attend both to worship the dead and for self-cultivation. The Sansei go to the Temple with little or no thought for the spirits of the dead. All ceremonies are done for the self and self-cultivation. Dainin Katagiri Sensei adds that most of the Issei emphasize funerals, ancestor worship (often in the form of memorial services) and appeasement of the spirits of the dead. This was extremely important for the Issei coming to a strange land because the spirits were known to protect those who worshipped them. However, the regular Sunday services do not consist only of ancestor worship. There is the symbolic burning of incense, the bowing, and the chanting of the sutras.

Except for the burning of the incense, the service following zazen for the Zen students is very similar. But the main emphasis for the Zen students is put on the practice of

zazen. When the Japanese subjects interviewed were asked why they thought the Japanese did not practice zazen, everyone gave as their first reason the lack of time. Hard work has always been a necessity for the immigrants with their goals to succeed in the middle-class always ahead of them. Most have succeeded in reaching this goal but they still work on. Mrs. Komiya says that most Nisei and Issei just don't have the "eagerness" to wake up so early and the Sansei probably don't either. Mrs. Kawasiri also mentioned the lack of time but added that a short session of zazen, about ten minutes, was practiced before each Sunday service. Most Nisei and Issei would agree with Mrs. Tashiro that they are pretty content with their present situation and they don't want it to change for any reason. Apparently they believe that this satisfaction should be passed onto their children because George Hagiwara believes that Japanese children don't seem to be as religious as their white brothers. Also Suzuki Roshi mentioned the fierce competition that exists among the Sansei, especially in school. Competition of this sort would not allow the passing of time "sitting, doing nothing."

The difference, then, between the two groups, as Reb Anderson put it, is the placing of energy and effort. The Zen students place their energy and effort in zazen. The Japanese place their energy and effort in the rituals and ceremonies. He continues, "The point ^{of} separation is the practice of zazen!"

and the phenomenon depends on the Japanese. However, Yoshimura Sensei argues, zazen is not a necessity for the Issei because they achieve religious satisfaction with their rituals. These rituals "require deep thought," involving the symbolism, a deep mind, and thought of the situation of the self. This achievement, he says, is just as difficult as zazen. The mind is the same in both. Both lead in the same direction and to the same goal, but by different paths. Both Mrs. Komiya and Mr. Hirano mentioned the sameness of the minds despite the different outward acts. Thus, a true understanding may be arrived at when both groups understand the actions of the other without actual active participation in it.

The mind may be the same but the lectures that the priests give to each of the groups are very different. Suzuki Roshi cites the difference in this way. To the Zen Center students he lectures on fundamental ideas, while to the Japanese congregation he speaks with the purpose of correcting their "mixed up understanding and strong attachment to their own understanding and way of life." He finds this extremely difficult to do because the Issei were brought up in a nationalistic Shinto environment. The Roshi's main reason for coming to America is to teach the "pure way of Zen Buddhism" in the Sunday School and to the young in general, finding the Issei and many of the Nisei so difficult to change back to the pure

form of Zen. Yoshimura Sensei also used the words "basic" and "fundamental" to describe his lectures to the Zen students, but he speaks to the Japanese with the knowledge that in their minds is a quality which he calls "a folk feeling," a certain religious mind that the Japanese, he believes, possess. He adds that the Zen students do not have this folk feeling." Katagiri Sensei says that to the Zen Center he explains logical and practical Buddhist points. To the Japanese, he says, he lectures more generally. As an example, he tells the Japanese congregation to pay homage to Buddha in a certain way but gives them no reason. They do it without a reason. But the Zen students can't believe in something, he says, without being given a reason.

So with these differing teaching methods, which should be used for the Sunday School? This is a very important question in the minds of those who believe that the Sunday School is the only bridge that can now be opened between the two communities.

Claude Bahlenberg felt that the Zen Center should not interfere in any way with the Sunday School, the possibility existing that the situation could worsen. But most of the others interviewed thought the easing in of the Zen Center children in the Sunday School was a good idea. Yoshimura Sensei and Mel Weitsman feel strongly that the Sunday School should be a medium between the Sokoji and Zen Center. The

Nisei parents are not true Buddhists but they want their children to learn the pure way, Yoshimura Sensei, believes. Cultivating the children will cultivate the parents. The parents' weak religious interests can be revitalized through the children. "The young Japanese in America are in the warm water of Buddhism." Somehow, they must be stimulated. Mel Weitsman visited the Sunday School once and found it too American and too Christianized. The students should be taught not as Issei but as Japanese-American Sansei. The ideal teaching method, then, is the method used by the priests to teach the Zen Center students - to fulfill the Roshi's wish to teach the pure way of Buddhism to the young. But, Mel Weitsman says, the perfect balance between the Japanese and American ideas and values to be introduced must be experimented with and found to satisfy both the Sokoji children and the Zen Center children, plus all of their parents. The Issei and Nisei still want their children and grandchildren to learn the significance of their ancestors. But the Zen Center children must also be able to relate.

Kumi Kawashiri is not a member of the Sokoji Sunday School because she feels she'd be bored by "maps of India, and stories of old." "Teachers are students always,"¹⁰ and they must learn to relate the Buddhist way of life through the students' daily lives, not necessarily through reading, but through something more vital, more alive, Yoshimura Sen-

sei feels. One of the first steps, Mel Weitsman believes that should be taken in this respect, is the replacing of the name "Sokoji Sunday School" to something more pleasant. Another idea is the use of tatami mats¹¹ for the service instead of chairs. Changes such as these would bring the whole level of religion down to the children themselves. A direct relationship between the child and the religion can be developed. A very good relationship also could develop between Zen Center and Sokoji through the relationships of the children.

One can see that there are many levels on which a solution to the problem can be found. Following are more thoughts on the situation of some of the interviewed and the paper will end with the very calm, hopeful words of a Zen Master.

Separation of the two groups is not an entirely unfeasible idea to Katagiri Sensei. The ideal solution would be harmony between the two groups based on mutual understanding but because we deal with human beings and not idealized situations, a more practical solution must be found. Because of Zen Center's growing size and the Sokoji's preoccupation with the remodeling of the Temple, perhaps the separation would be practical for both. Bob Halpern, a Zen Center student commented that the Zen Center was in an ideal environment to study Zen - a Japanese community. Living among Japanese - seeing them on the street was an aid to the students' practice. Moving apart would eliminate the opportunity.

Katagiri Sensei agreed that the contact was very important and beneficial but the friction that has been produced so far because of such contact was not worth it. After a time of development of the two groups as completely separate entities they could ideally come together as a true whole. He added that the New York Zen group whose only contact with the Japanese was the priest was apparently succeeding very well.

Claude Dahlenberg suggests that no interaction can take place at this point. The solution can only come when the Japanese and the Zen students feel more secure with each other, perhaps when the Zen students have "mellowed." He feels that avoiding the question until crises develop is the best policy at this time.

George Hirano says we must meet together and talk. "Cooperation will come very soon."

Mel Weitsman believes that the renewed sharing of festival day celebrations could be another bridge. The Zen Center would prepare for the festivities making Sokoji the guests. "They're (the Japanese congregation) the parents and we're (Zen Center) the children, and now the children are rich enough to take the parents out sometime."

Yoshimura Sensei says both groups must learn, if not to actually carry out, but at least, to understand: sitting in Zen, living in Zen, and ritual in Zen. Living in Zen, everyone practices. "Living in Zen is washing your face, eating

breakfast, luncheon, and dinner, going to the bathroom, everything," with the same mind as sitting in Zen and ritual in Zen. The Zen students practice sitting in Zen very diligently and the Japanese practice ritual in Zen equally as diligently.

Katagiri Sensei says we must view the problem from a complete understanding of the human being. "We must be quiet and patient and carry out our duties."

Shunryu Suzuki Roshi believes that an agreement between Zen Center and Sokoji will finally come and the best solution will be freedom in the Sokoji Temple for everybody. But he doesn't discuss the situation excessively with either group knowing that soon they will come to a mutual understanding. He says he must be very patient with both groups. Sometimes, he says, this is his practice - to learn to have patience with both Sokoji and Zen Center.

1. A research paper undertaken for Anthropology 3 at the University of California at Berkeley.
2. First generation Japanese in America.
3. sitting meditation
4. I feel that I stand in a unique position in this situation. I officially am a member of the Japanese congregation, my grandmother and parents being active members, but I do not necessarily have the same feelings that the main body of Japanese have toward the Zen Center. On the other hand, I am not a member of Zen Center but I have friends among the members and practice zazen with the Zen Center occasionally. Individually I stand between the two groups, thus, having a birds-eye view of both.
5. The secondary questions were roughly the following:
 - Are there different reasons the two groups come to a Zen Buddhist temple?
 - What are the differences in the ways the two groups practice Zen?
 - Why don't the Japanese practice zazen?
 - Why have there been so few Japanese in the Zen Center?
 - What should the role of the Sokoji Sunday School be?
 - What do you feel is in the future for the two groups?
6. Second generation Japanese in America.
7. Third generation Japanese in America.
8. Teacher
9. I found that the Issei, especially the two women, were very concise and to the point with their answers. They didn't elaborate. So, I used the priests' facts, expecting that to be what the Issei would have told me had they wished to.
10. Commonly known fact
11. Woven straw mats

A DIAGRAM OF A SOLUTION BY
YOSHIMURA SENSEI

Different paths but the same mind
and they both go to the same place

Each deed of togetherness

(Getting together for an interview)

