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Traversing the *Nenbutsu*

The Power of Ritual in Contemporary Japanese Buddhism

Japanese Buddhism is often disparagingly called “funeral Buddhism” due to its supposed focus on death care. This is accompanied by a belief that contemporary Buddhism is spiritually bankrupt, merely carrying out meaningless rituals. However, the women in the *Bukkyō josei no tsudo* and the *nenbutsu* meeting affiliated with the Jōdoshū, one of the sects of funeral Buddhism, reveal how contemporary Buddhist women actively work through ritual to create meaningful relationships with one another. Utilizing Catherine Bell’s concept of ritualization and Ronald Grimes’s concept of ritual phases, this ethnographic study shows how the different phases of the meetings work together to create both formal and informal ritual that is intentional, effective, and important to the women who perform it. These women illustrate the enduring dedication to traditional Buddhist ritual practices that they see as important for personal and spiritual growth.

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AT THE October meeting of the *Bukkyō josei no tsudoï* 仏教女性の集い (Women's Buddhist Gathering) in Kyoto, the nun leading the group, Aoki,¹ has finished a particularly challenging sermon on the human condition (*ningen mondai* 人間問題) and we have settled into copying the sutra we chanted earlier. There are eighteen of us in the room. Six of us are seated in the back row on chairs: five elderly women and me, the foreigner who cannot sit on a cushion for the three-hour gathering. The two laywomen at the right end of the table finish their copying and begin a rapid and not particularly quiet conversation about their families. After several minutes, Tachikawa, one of two temple wives (*jizoku* 寺族)² who helps run the *tsudoï*, emerges from behind the partition where she has been preparing the upcoming tea. She walks slightly hunched over across the *tatami* mats, with the quick movements of practiced feet, to stand behind the two women. She admonishes them to keep quiet so that they can listen to the *nenbutsu* 念仏 being chanted by the aged nun sitting off to the left and feel it in their hearts. Instead of going back behind the partition once she has finished talking to the women, Tachikawa seats herself in the front row. She puts her hands together in front of her heart in *gasshō* 合掌, her Buddhist rosary (*juzu* 数珠) draped between her fingers, and begins to chant *nenbutsu* in unison with the nun. One of the two women who had been chatting gets up to use the bathroom. The other alternates between staring at her watch and the back of Tachikawa's head. Later, when nobody volunteers to talk during the conversation period, the organizing nun, Fujimoto, encourages people to speak up. One laywoman jokingly retorts that they are all scared to talk in case Tachikawa berates them again. Everybody smiles and Tachikawa bows her head and smiles a little abashedly.

These women are taking part in an open monthly gathering of Buddhist women. The *Bukkyō josei no tsudoï* is affiliated with the Jōdoshū 浄土宗 (Pure Land Sect) of Japanese Buddhism, although it is open to all Buddhist women. As evidenced by Tachikawa's admonition, the heart of Pure Land practice is the *nenbutsu*. In the Japanese Pure Land sects, this refers specifically to the vocal recitation of the phrase *Namu Amida Butsu* 南無阿弥陀仏 which roughly

1. All names of people and locations have been changed to protect privacy.

2. Temple wives are the wives of Buddhist priests; they take care of their temples, administer to parishioner needs, and train their sons, and sometimes daughters, to take over the temple. Richard M. JAFFE (2001) discusses the development of the temple wife as a distinctive figure in relation to the development of monastic marriage in Japan; see also KAWAHASHI (1995).

translates as “Homage to Amida Buddha.” Multiple recitations of the *nenbutsu* reverberate around the room here and in all Jōdoshū temples and religious sites around Japan. This supplication addresses Amida Buddha, the central figure of Pure Land practice who vowed eons ago to save all sentient beings who call on his name and bring them to his Western Pure Land of Bliss (Gokuraku jōdo 極樂淨土) at death. Jōdoshū’s focus on the peaceful afterlife secured through *nenbutsu* practice has led to criticism that it turns practitioners away from the rigorous disciplines and practices required for ultimate liberation from the cycle of birth and death.³

In fact, much of contemporary Japanese Buddhism has been criticized for its focus on funerals and death, earning it the derogatory name “funeral Buddhism” (*sōshiki Bukkyō* 葬式仏教). Over the course of the twentieth century, as local temples (*danka dera* 檀家寺) raised the cost of services in an effort to offset the prewar and postwar loss of parishioners and land that had once provided much of temple income (ROWE 2011, 23–31), complaints about the increasing costs of funerals complemented existing frustrations by Buddhists scholars, priests, and laypeople who felt that Japanese Buddhism had lost its way. In this context, scholar TSUJI Zennosuke (1942) developed his “corruption theory” (*daraku setsu* 墮落説) arguing that from 1500 onward, Japanese Buddhism had entered into a long decline due to the corruption of the priesthood (*sōryo no daraku* 僧侶の墮落) and the formalization (*keishikika* 形式化) of Buddhism.⁴ These two aspects of contemporary Buddhism or “funeral Buddhism,” as TAMAMURO Taijō calls it (1963), have been the focus of many critiques of contemporary Buddhism from both within and outside of the Japanese Buddhist community.

The critiques of “formalization” extend to what many consider the empty ritual aspects of contemporary Buddhism. Stephen Covell summarizes Ōno Tatsunosuke’s (1961) assessment: “According to Ōno, by accepting state backing and the financial stability it brought, Buddhists allowed themselves to become ‘mere’ ritual performers” (COVELL 2005, 15). Another critic, Watanabe Shōkō, similarly finds Buddhist ritual lacking: “One might say that Japanese Buddhism has fallen into formalism, and that its true nature has been forgotten.... With such an attitude [of temples as places for sightseers] it is natural that religious activity was completely degraded simply to recreation having no spiritual meaning” (WATANABE 1964, 59; translation from COVELL 2005, 16). Recent ethnographic

3. This is a common critique leveled at Pure Land sects by the Zen sects, as exemplified by the great Zen reformer Hakuin’s 白隠 (1686–1769) criticisms of Jōdoshū that its focus on people’s degenerate capabilities in the last age of the dharma (*mappō* 末法) distracted people from their true potential to achieve enlightenment. See INGRAM (1973) for a review and analysis of Zen critiques of Pure Land.

4. See the discussion of “corruption theory” in WATT (1984, 188–89) and COVELL (2005, 14–18).

scholarship has started to counter this narrative, showing that contemporary Japanese Buddhism is neither solely concerned with funerals nor morally bankrupt (COVELL 2005; ROWE 2011; NELSON 2013). However, the narrative of corruption and degradation is still common among practitioners and the Japanese public at large.

Examining the story recounted above through the lens of “funeral Buddhism” might lead one to believe that these women are in fact enacting the empty rituals critiqued by the early scholars. Tachikawa’s concern for proper comportment during the sutra-copying period seems to indicate overt concern with formalized participation. Yet her sentiments also indicate that her concern with proper performance stems from a desire for an experience of deep spiritual connection—what she refers to as the *nenbutsu* entering one’s heart—that is enabled by formal ritual. And though the women are disgruntled at having to stop their conversation, it becomes a joke during the conversation period that helps ease tension and restart the flow of conversation.

These varying registers of formality point to the variety that characterizes these women’s groups, with different interactions choreographed to occur over the course of three hours. Here I will consider two sites: the *tsudo*i and the related *nenbutsu* meeting (*nenbutsu e* 念仏会) that takes place at the nearby Jōdoshū temple Jidōin. At both sites, meetings follow the same general format: a formalized period that largely—but not completely—follows the program laid out in the sect’s “Jōdoshū Adherents’ Everyday Service Ritual” (*Jōdoshū shinto nichijō gongyō shiki* 浄土宗信徒日常勤行式) booklet, followed by a tea time and conversation period. Despite the differing appearance of the two periods of the service, I argue that the entire service demonstrates ritualization, with the formal first section paving the way for the informal second section that is intentional, effective, and important to the women who perform it. The service as a whole works to bring women together through ritualization.

My analysis relies upon two concepts I borrow from ritual studies: ritualization and ritual phases. Catherine Bell asserts that it is important to consider the processes by which people differentiate sacred from profane activities: “In a very preliminary sense, ritualization is a way of acting that is designed and orchestrated to distinguish and privilege what is being done in comparison to other, usually more quotidian, activities” (BELL 1992, 74). Rejecting the term “ritual” that she feels is too stationary for the dynamic creation of ritual activities, Bell utilizes the term “ritualization,” which she sees as an embodied process of creating ritual actions. Ritualization is always in the moment of transformation; it is always “contingent, provisional, and defined by difference” (BELL 1992, 91). Furthermore, ritualized actions are layered, what Bell describes as “a particularly ‘mute’ form of activity. It is designed to do what it does without bringing what it is doing across the threshold of discourse or systematic thinking” (BELL 1992, 93).

Thus, for Bell, what differentiates ritualization from ritualistic everyday activities is the non-discursive meaning layered into and inherent in ritualized performance.

Bell's concept of ritualization usefully draws attention to the spatial aspect of ritual, but in these gatherings a consideration of temporality is also necessary. Ronald Grimes defines "ritual phases" as "chronological subunits" that narrate or give rhythm to ritualized time. Rituals can have macro- and micro-phases as well as recursive loops; they can be linear or nonlinear and may be experienced differently by participants and observers (GRIMES 2014, 266–67). Ritual phases implicitly or explicitly signal when ritualization begins and ends. I combine Bell's mute quality of ritualization with Grimes's ritual phases to illuminate the ways that temporal and spatial ritualization takes place among Pure Land women.

Over the course of six months in Kyoto, I conducted participant-observation at both the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting and interviewed ten participants. There are three categories of women who participate regularly at both meetings: nuns, laywomen, and *jizoku*. Nuns lead the ritualization and are visible by their billowing black robes and bald heads. Laywomen largely follow the lead of the nuns during the first half of the meetings but dictate the varying pathways made available through the flexible nature of the second half; their pastel or dark-colored clothing mark them as visitors in the temples. Temple wives, or the wives of Buddhist priests, are essential to making the meetings run smoothly but are not the focus of this article. Their kimono-clad bodies will enter into and out of the narrative, just as they enter into and out of the meetings.⁵ As there are a number of nuns and laywomen who figure into this work, I will introduce them as they naturally appear in the text. I will begin with a description of the two meetings and proceed to an analysis of the ways that the women are actively and meaningfully participating in traditional Buddhist ritualization, concluding with remarks about how these meetings prompt us to interrogate the notion of funeral Buddhism.

*Constructing Space and Time at the Tsudo*i and *Nenbutsu* Meeting

The *tsudo*i takes place in the *nisō dōjō* 尼僧道場 (nun's training hall) in Kyoto. The *dōjō* is a slightly shabby two-story tan building set back from the road and completely unmarked. Inside the building the sense of shabbiness disappears and it feels like a well-kept if worn space. There is no central air conditioning or heating so it is hot in the summer and cold in the winter; however, the main worship space has a dual heating/cooling unit that hums softly in the back of the

5. For more about temple wives, see KAWAHASHI (1995) and UCHINO (1983). For the related but distinct category of *bōmori* 坊守 (temple guardian) in Jōdo Shinshū 浄土真宗 (True Pure Land Sect), see STARLING (2012; 2013).

relatively large room. An altar sits on a wooden table in the middle of the front of the room with a standing image of Amida Buddha surrounded by flowers, lanterns, and offering plates. A smaller altar sits to the left of the main altar and holds flowers and *ihai* 位牌 of deceased nuns.⁶ To the right of the main altar stands an old-fashioned, well-worn blue chalkboard. The walls along the sides of the room are lined with bookcases: on the left, hundreds of Buddhist-related books; on the right, storage for the guests' belongings, vhs tapes, and floor cushions. The middle part of the floor is raised and covered in *tatami*—the woven grass mats, softer than wooden floors, that one finds in temples and traditional homes throughout Japan. Although the entrance area has a shoe rack with slippers for guests, participants must remove the slippers before entering the main worship space.

The *nenbutsu* meeting takes place at Jidōin, a small temple and former nunnery run by the elderly yet spry nun Fujimoto, who also helps run the *tsudo*. Jidōin consists of a network of one-story buildings in the traditional Japanese temple style: dark wooden structures with tile roofs and connected by elevated covered walkways. Down the first walkway and to the right is a building with two meeting rooms, a kitchen, and a traditional tea room, all with *tatami* floors. To the left of the entrance building sits the main hall (*hondō* 本堂). The room is long and rectangular, with an elaborate altar taking up the entire front wall. The altar includes the same elements that appear on the altar at the *dōjō*, but it is much more resplendent: designed to look like the Pure Land, it is decorated with golden metal lotus blossoms that cascade down in chains from the ceiling. Two of the room's four walls are paper sliding doors that open to the outside; these usually remain shut to keep out insects. The fourth wall has sliding doors leading to a back area and bathroom. Unlike the *dōjō*, Jidōin does not have an air conditioner, instead relying on two electric fans in the summer and two space heaters in the winter.

At the *tsudo*, the ninety-four-year-old nun and central leader of the meeting, Aoki, stands through most of the first phase of the ritual while everybody else spends most of their time seated. The arrangement of the *dōjō* during the formal first phase of the ritual consists of three rows of seats: two rows of large cushions for floor seating placed behind black lacquered tables and a third row of folding chairs accompanied by the same low black tables, stacked two high. A single folding chair sits off to the left of the room with a large wooden fish-shaped drum (*mokugyo* 木魚) on the left and a large metal bowl-shaped bell (*daitokujirin* 大徳寺りん) on the right. A nun named Murata, doubled over with age, occu-

6. *Ihai* are black lacquered tablets inscribed with Buddhist posthumous names (*kaimyō* 戒名) that represent the deceased. At about a foot in height, these *ihai* are larger than the ones I typically observed in home altars but smaller than the ones in temples for a priest's family.

pies this chair; she performs all the musical accompaniment to the service. Two cushions in the front row are reserved for the two temple wives, Tachikawa from the introductory story, and Murakami. The remaining seats are free for participants, although the back row of folding chairs is implicitly reserved for elderly women and others who cannot easily sit on the floor.

At both the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting, women begin by sitting on the cushions in *seiza* 正座, the formal sitting position with the knees together and the buttocks resting on the feet. However, throughout the three-hour service, their positions shift. Some women continue in a modified *seiza* with their bottoms resting on the cushions and their feet slightly off to the side while others end up sitting with their legs crossed or extended out to the side. There are also extra cushions available on the right wall; one woman whispers an apology for taking a cushion and gestures apologetically at her pelvic area. Although *seiza* is expected, nobody looks askance at women shifting out of the position for comfort; the extra cushions seem to indicate some comfort is encouraged. The folding chairs in the last row are not particularly comfortable and the women occupying them also shift position occasionally. There is, it seems, an unspoken agreement that women ought to sit in variations of *seiza* that are relatively comfortable.⁷

The seating at Jidōin is a little different. There are only two long rows: the front consists of cushions on the *tatami* floor like the *dōjō*, while the back row consists of short wooden stools with golden cushions affixed to the top. Both options are immensely uncomfortable and women in both rows adjust their position multiple times. In terms of offering the opportunity to adjust one's seating position, the temple is no stricter than the *dōjō*; indeed, for the women sitting in the front row, there is much more space for them to spread out, given the larger room and fewer participants; some even extend their legs flat out in front of them during the dharma talk. This informality despite the temple setting is likely encouraged by the fact that the dharma talk is an audio-recording of Aoki's sermon from the previous *tsudo*i played on a stereo; the women do not need to impress the stereo, allowing them to relax.

The first phase of the service exhibits formality, rigidity, and repetition; three qualities BELL (1992, 92) identifies as common among ritualization, although not intrinsic to it. This is exemplified by the practice of *nenbutsu ichi e* 念仏一会 (*nenbutsu* as a gathering), which is the extended chanting of *nenbutsu*. It ranges from two minutes at the *tsudo*i to as many as thirty minutes at the *nenbutsu* meeting. The staccato sounds of the wooden drums accompany the first, third,

7. This differs significantly from other Buddhist practices such as Zen-style meditation (*zazen* 坐禅) where participants are struck on the back if their meditative position changes. A few women told me that at "regular" temples—ones headed by male clerics—they would sit in *seiza* long after their feet fell asleep in order to maintain proper form; that is decidedly not the case at the *tsudo*i or the *nenbutsu* meeting.

and fifth syllables of chanting “*namu Amidabu*.” The nun Fujimoto, who helps run both meetings, says she rises “very early in the morning” to chant for an hour straight but she balances an understanding that laypeople cannot do the same thing with the rewards a shorter but still taxing period of chanting can provide: “The *nenbutsu* on its own, it’s only thirty minutes but at around fifteen minutes, the people who have to do it think, ‘A couch [would be nice]!’ But it’s an accomplishment for a person to traverse (*jūkan* 縦貫) the *nenbutsu*.” By “traverse” here, Fujimoto seems to mean the mental and physical journey one takes as one repeats the *nenbutsu*, suggesting an understanding of the toll that a repetitive and fixed action takes on the practitioner.

The *nenbutsu ichi e* is not the only aspect of the formal phase: Aoki’s doctrinally complex hour-long dharma talks are a central part of it. These talks from the venerated nun sometimes inspire women to take notes and pay rapt attention while other times cause the women to check their cell phones briefly or—as happened at the November meeting of the *tsudoi*—finish their sutra copying, absorbing but not actively listening to Aoki. Quick rhythmic chanting of the *Four Vows Gatha* (*Shiseige* 四誓偈) and the *One Sheet Document* (*Ichimaiki shōmon* 一枚起請文) comprise the longest periods of non-*nenbutsu* chanting.⁸ Prostrations to the statue of Amida Buddha, accompanied by melodious versions of *nenbutsu* chanting, help inscribe their practice on the women’s bodies while simultaneously infusing the space and each other with their recitations. Each of these pieces play out according to a fixed timeline repeated at every meeting, recreating the space in the image of its past iterations while permeating it with the immediate enactments of the current day. Women speaking and moving in unison or in a prescribed call-and-response framework craft a demarcation between the sacred space of the *dōjō* or Jidōin and the profane street and construction noise audible outside.

The formal phase can be long and tedious and when women check their phones or begin to copy their sutra during the dharma talk, it can seem like they are not invested in their actions. Nevertheless, the formal phase infuses the room and the women’s hearts with sound, sensation, and meaning. Kaori, a well-respected laywoman with a deep knowledge of Buddhist doctrine despite being the youngest participant of the meetings by a generation, and Noguchi, a lively laywoman in her mid-sixties with sparkling eyes who regularly attends both services, broach this topic:

8. The *Shiseige* is an excerpt from the *Sutra on the Buddha of Infinite Life* (*Muryōjūkyō* 無量壽經) that summarizes the forty-eight vows Amida Buddha made in anticipation of becoming a buddha. The *Ichimaiki shōmon* is a brief statement on Jōdoshū doctrine written by its founder Hōnen 法然 (1133–1212), considered by the sect as the culmination of his teachings. Both are essential parts of contemporary Jōdoshū doctrine.

Noguchi: Aoki has truly entered my heart.... I have time to focus here, in the center of my heart. It's quieting (*ansei shite* 安静して) and I have to go, you know? I open up. My heart says "Ahhh." [laughs] I say that at home after having dinner. If I listen here...

Kaori [talking over]: It's a tender feeling (*yasashii kimochi* 優しい気持ち).

Noguchi: Exactly. It's a feeling of truly listening to the choices of my heart, my spirit (*seirei* 精霊). So, after a month, I ask myself, "Where did it go?" I've forgotten that image.

Kaori: Exactly.

Noguchi: Right? You can understand that, Kaori.

Kaori: Yes.

Noguchi: My heart gets muddy. When I hear Sensei's words and considerations, all my worries are gone.

Kaori: Exactly.

Noguchi struggles to find a way to express how she feels after going to the *tsudo*i, eventually deciding on the phrase "Ahhh" as one might use it to express relief. She tries, and struggles, to articulate what happens within her at the meetings; it is an affective experience, difficult to describe in words. Once Noguchi describes her personal experiences, Kaori feels that she can articulate the feeling of tenderness. They both feel the need to return to the *tsudo*i, at least in part to help clean their muddy hearts, bringing them from what Noguchi describes a little later as "low [spirits]" (*shizun* 沈ん) into this sense of tenderness and tranquility through the words and actions of the women at the meeting.

At the *tsudo*i, the formal phase of the service ends with Fujimoto saying variations on "Thank you! Now, let's have some sweets and talk!" At the *nenbutsu* meeting, it ends with Fujimoto inviting everyone to tea. Although these announcements could be construed as indicating the end of the ritual, I argue that these proclamations actually signal the shift from the first ritual phase to the second, that is, from formal ritual to ritualized informality. Through the formal first phase, the women have established the ritual space among themselves and in the room and suffused it and themselves with the sounds of *nenbutsu*. The physical transformation of both spaces marks the shift to the second phase of ritualization.

For the tea and conversation phase at the *tsudo*i, laywomen rearrange the tables and cushions into a square with a gap in the corner closest to the door so that the temple wives and Fujimoto can easily go in and out to serve tea and sweets. The women in the back row remain where they are while the other women rearrange the tables, removing any unoccupied tables and cushions to make the square appear as fully occupied as possible. The two cushions closest to the doorway are reserved for the temple wives while the chairs on the short side of the square—aligned with the front wall and altar—are occupied by the nuns.

Aoki takes the end seat of the short side of the square which is invariably near the Amida statue on the central altar. Instead of facing the altar, however, she turns her chair inward toward the square and the women sitting around it, with her back to Amida.⁹

Nobody comments upon the configuration but this reorganization is significant. First, it emphasizes Aoki's position as the women's guide. She is their guide to Amida so she faces the women just as Amida faces them, willing to answer questions and give advice in Amida's place. Yet she is also approachable now—more so than during the first phase—because she faces the group and is seated, bringing her physically closer to everybody else's level. Second, the temple wives occupy the other side of the gap so that they can easily sit down once they have finished serving. Yet their position is important because it begins the other side of the bridge across the space in the square; they help continue the lines of human connection important to this phase of the service. Their absence from the tables produces a sense that something fundamental is missing. Only when they and Fujimoto, who sits in the *seiza* position in the gap between the tables during the conversation period, sit down does the room feel complete. The circle of women is then also complete.

At Jidōin, by contrast, women move into another building for tea and conversation; the remainder of the *nenbutsu* meeting takes place in the formal tea room with cushions on a *tatami* floor. Everybody sits *seiza* unless there is an elderly woman who needs a stool, in which case Fujimoto or one of the laywomen will pull a stool from the back room and offer it to her. Many of the elderly women, however, refuse the stool even when they appear to need it. I too refused a stool on my second visit because I had felt so out of place having used one on my first visit, at the kind invitation of a fellow laywoman. Using the stool just once made clear to me that the use of stools changes the dynamic in the tea room. In the main room, there is a row of stools so there is a row of people at the same height behind another row of people at the same height. However, the tea room is small and square with everybody at the same level on the floor, sitting in a circle. Stools disrupt the flow of the room.

Positioning in the tea room is important. At the November *nenbutsu* meeting, the vast majority of women hang back in the entrance room because nobody wants to be the first person to enter the tea room. When Fujimoto appears briefly and tells us the tea is ready, we have no choice—we must enter the room. But the elderly women look pointedly away. Thus, the young and knowledgeable Kaori

9. At most Japanese Buddhist temples, it is not unusual for the leader to face the altar during certain parts of the service and face away from the altar during other parts. This usually coincides with whether the leader is addressing the deity or the audience. This occurs regardless of the gender of either leader or audience.

and I enter the tea room on our knees, pulling our crouched bodies along by the knuckles,¹⁰ as Watanabe, the stern-faced jokester from the introductory story, teaches us what is proper. Ishida, a friend of Fujimoto who took monastic vows following the death of her priest husband and who now serves as the resident priest of her own temple in a neighboring town, sits in the place of honor, which is closest to the hole in the floor upon which rests the tea kettle. I take a seat in the corner where I usually sit but this is Kaori's first visit and she is unsure what to do. She looks to the corner and starts walking in that direction but two of her friends from the *tsudo*, her fellow laywomen Watanabe and Noguchi, loudly proclaim that she should take the seat of honor and learn how to lead a tea ceremony. Ishida smiles serenely and moves away from the kettle to the neighboring seat, beckoning a protesting and embarrassed Kaori to the recently vacated seat. Sputtering, Kaori sits down red faced. Ishida smiles and tells Kaori that she will be our guide; it is a great honor to sit in the head guest's seat. Kaori spends the remaining time asking questions and working diligently to perform her assigned task to the best of her ability.

The tea ceremony is performed in similar ways in each location, adapted to the physical limitations of each space. At the *tsudo*, the strong green tea is prepared behind a screen by the temple wives who then bring out non-matching cups one by one to each woman, offering them with a bow which the recipient returns. At Jidōin, the matcha is prepared in the tea room using the kettle and open flame in the colder months, and in the backroom/kitchen during hotter months to avoid warming up an already quite warm, non-air-conditioned tea room. There are very strict rules on how to drink the tea based on the formal tea ceremony with abbreviations for time and accessibility.¹¹ Sometimes, one woman will like the look of another woman's cup or the serving dishes and ask to see them, which almost invariably leads to passing them around the room for everyone to admire. This happens almost every month at Jidōin but only occasionally at the *dōjō*.

Both the *tsudo* and *nenbutsu* meeting allow brief periods of individual conversation, especially at the *nenbutsu* meeting where there is usually a five-to-ten-minute break right before the sermon so that people can use the restroom but often instead stay to talk with each other. There are also two periods specifically dedicated to conversation: following the tea ceremony at the *tsudo* and during

10. Although this is supposed to be a graceful act, both Kaori's and my own novice attempts at its performance were far from the beauty demonstrated when the nuns performed it.

11. The form of a traditional tea ceremony is followed more closely at the *nenbutsu* meeting, including respectful observation of a seasonal scroll and flower arrangement, while the *tsudo* focuses more on the stylized serving and consumption of sweets and tea, taking about twenty minutes rather than the three to five hours of a full ceremony; see KONDO (1985) for a description and analysis of a full ceremony.

the tea ceremony at the *nenbutsu* meeting. Without these conversation periods, the services would consist only of lectures and chanting, implicitly important to the spiritual development of these women but missing the moments of personal transformation that arise during the conversations. The women talk relatively freely both with one another and with the nuns, joking and laughing. (In fact, some portions of my recordings of these sessions are unintelligible due to the eruptions of laughter.) The physical rearrangement of *dōjō* seating into a square allows everybody to see each other, encouraging the air of informality that lets some women relax enough to talk freely about themselves and their troubles. This even occurs in the tea room at Jidōin despite its rather formal construction and the stricter adherence to the tea ceremony.

Ritualization of Conversation

Through the varied actions of sutra copying, *nenbutsu* recitation, and the tea ceremony, women create multiple levels of meaning, including sacralizing the room and transforming their emotional states. These formal, fixed, and repeated activities are readily recognizable as processes of ritualization (BELL 1992, 92). The second phase, however, only occasionally displays these characteristics, instead favoring an open and less formal conversation among women. Nevertheless, I argue that this second section is not cut off from ritualization but rather continues it. Grimes's concept of "ritual phases" (GRIMES 2014, 266) draws attention to the temporal qualities that enable this second phase to continue rather than disrupt the ritualization of the formal phase. A set of connected conversations will illustrate this different form of ritualization.

The October *tsudoi* coincides with the third anniversary of the death of Kaori's mother. During the conversation period, Kaori reveals that although her mother has been gone for three years, because she was only in her mid-thirties when her mother passed away, the death still haunts her. She asks Aoki how to deal with her loss when she "wants to go to the next stage" to see her mother again. Aoki continues a prior discussion of *kue issho* 俱会一処 (to be reborn together), a complicated piece of Pure Land doctrine about rebirth. But noticing the troubled and slightly puzzled look on Kaori's face, Aoki changes tactics, taking up a vivid image borrowed from Kegon Buddhism:

There's the example of Indra, who is a celestial being (*tentaisha* 天体者). He made a net, right? At each of the knots there is a star and if you look at it from the side, there are jewels existing mutually together (*otagai no otagai ni* お互いのお互い). Right? So, in the middle of one of those jewels, you can see everyone's reflection, whether you look over here or over there. Everyone! Reflected here. What do you think of that?... Kegon thought is incredible. The person I am today is rooted in those ideas.

Kaori seems a bit taken aback by the story but even as the conversation progresses beyond her, the expression on her face changes from mild confusion mixed with heartbreak to one of concentration as she appears to struggle with the day's conversation. Afterwards, she mentions to me that she feels a little better but needs to think on the conversation with Aoki. At the next month's *tsudoï*, she provides her interpretation of the teachings:

I've been thinking [about what Aoki said] over the last month. Listening to today's talk, and the talk from the Jūya Hōyō 十夜法要,¹² I think I understand. I am in the country where the Buddha is. I understand Sensei's promise. Well, I, the first time I heard it, I [wanted] to go to the Pure Land. To meet my mother. I said it was a reunion (*saikai* 再会). The announcement, everybody probably remembers it right? Well now, I did *nenbutsu* in order to do that. I did *nenbutsu* only to go to the Pure Land for a reunion.... But through Aoki's talk, I started to think, "Well the world is one, right?" It is a huge world of one (*ōkina hitotsu no sekai* 大きな一つの世界). So, because of this, I started to consider what if perhaps hell and Amida's country are all the same one?

As Kaori speaks, a middle-aged woman with thin lips and short hair named Ōta, attending the *tsudoï* for the first time, nods vigorously. It is plain that Kaori's words affect her deeply. After Kaori finishes, she jumps into the conversation, explaining that she struggles with the recent death of her own mother, just six months prior:

Because you all heard me talking about my youth [earlier], now I'm thinking about it. In life, Sensei, I feel a really deep importance in things she said for my current status.... There were times when I thought, "Yeah, sure" and times where things were left unsaid and things that I didn't say [to my mother].... But [today] I listened to myself. To life. So, when I get angry, I can say "No, that's wrong. You must be yourself." So even if I am angered, listening to these words will really help me.

Ōta glances around the room a few times but speaks almost directly to Kaori, who watches her intently as she speaks. There is an obvious, if unspoken, emotional connection between the two women who struggle with the same crushing grief.

Despite Kaori addressing her speech to Aoki, her words inspire Ōta to recount her own issues with her mother's passing, tying the women together. Both women illustrate the open character of the conversation, which allows

12. This is one of the biggest Jōdoshū festivals of the year and occurs in late October through November where participants observe a service and chant *nenbutsu* to earn extra karmic merit. The specific one Kaori speaks of here took place at Tachikawa's temple the week prior to this conversation where Aoki gave a sermon.

women to jump in when they feel moved to do so and to contribute in ways that feel meaningful to them. The conversation period is constructed in such a way as to give it a layered quality, enabling every woman to occupy the positions of conversation participants, teachers, and/or learners. At the October meeting, Kaori acts as a student to Aoki, listening to her guidance. At the November meeting, Kaori then becomes Ōta's teacher, giving her an example of a way to incorporate Aoki's complex teachings into her own life. And both conversations occur within a room of women who pay rapt attention to these conversations; even in occupying the visible role of student, Ōta acts as a teacher to the other women in the room by sharing her personal understanding of Buddhism.

It is significant that the conversation period occurs after the formal phase and builds on the ritualized space the women created together. This joint experience establishes relationships among these women which enables them to reimagine and reinterpret the multivariate meanings of the conversations during the second phase. Because the conversation continues its layered quality, the women continue their process of ritualization into the second informal phase that transforms their conversation from talking between individual women to communal teaching and learning about Buddhism.

These conversations also visibly affect the women, giving them ways to think about and interpret their lives. As Ōta recounts her feelings about her mother's death, her voice breaks and she wipes away tears while smiling at Kaori, as if thanking her for the opportunity to talk about this meaningful but heartbreaking experience. Ōta's emotional reaction to the conversation appears to come from two places: the difficulties of talking about the death of a loved one alongside gratefulness for communicating with someone who appears to truly understand her dilemma. The atmosphere of both phases of the meeting cultivates a sense of belonging and openness among the women, which enables Ōta to talk about such an intimate topic with strangers. And she learns from the conversation between Aoki and Kaori how to interpret Aoki's teachings, in such a way as to turn Kaori's narrative into a model for Ōta's future behavior. The stories and experiences the women at the *tsudo* and *nenbutsu* meeting tell can transform other participants.

The type of ritual-based narrative transformation the women utilize and experience at the two meetings is reminiscent of testimonials in other religious communities. Testimonials in general are personal accounts of encounters with religion that mark a fundamental shift in one's identity. Helen Hardacre examines the use of testimonials in the Japanese new religion Reiyukai Kyōdan 霊友会教団, where participants give highly emotional testimonials to crowds, some as large as five thousand people, that recount their struggles and eventual personal transformation through the teachings and guidance of Reiyukai. They are rehearsed, but because they respond directly to a specific crowd, they can vary

greatly in narrative structure and performance (HARDACRE 1984, 157–58 160). Additionally, R. Marie Griffith examines the Agloe Women’s Fellowship, an evangelical Christian women’s organization in the United States. She reveals that the testimonials women tell at the Agloe meetings and in the group’s literature reshape women’s identities, gifting them “healing, transformation, liberation, and deliverance,” a learning process she describes as “a capacity for ritualization” (GRIFFITH 1997, 16–19). People in both organizations come together to learn, telling stories about themselves in ways that help transform others. Although the stories women tell at the *tsudo*i and *nenbutsu* meeting are much less rehearsed and do not follow a particular format as is the case with both Reiyukai and Agloe testimonials, the use of narrative as a teaching tool for other participants is readily apparent (HARDACRE 1984, 186; GRIFFITH 1997, 16). Aoki’s narrative of Indra’s Net teaches Kaori a way to deal with death she had never considered; Kaori’s subsequent narrative about her personal transformation in relating to death and Buddhism then becomes a model for Ōta’s own life. Even Aoki’s recounting of Indra’s Net points to the narrative processes that teach these women how to make meaning from Buddhism because she asserts that it helped her become the person she is today. Although the women of the *tsudo*i and *nenbutsu* meeting do not participate in what Reiyukai or Agloe members would recognize as testimonials, they illustrate the transformative power of religious narrative.¹³

The transformations effected through these narratives are not only internal. Kaori’s and Ōta’s interactions led to establishing a relationship with one another. At the end of the service at which Ōta discusses the death of her mother, Kaori and Ōta practically rush to each other, giving heartfelt, if formal, greetings. They chat for a little while and then exchange contact information, bow to each other, and promise to contact one another soon. This is not an empty promise: at the next *tsudo*i, they greet each other like old friends with smiles and laughter and no more pretense of formality. They ask about each other’s families and sit closely to one another during the service. Contrary to the corruption theory of Japanese Buddhism, these processes of ritualization enable deeply meaningful connections for the women who participate in them. They provide spaces to transform what in other instances could be construed as idle chat into a powerful connection, enabling the participants to create friendships and provide narrative examples of confronting some of the most challenging aspects of human life.

13. For example, to my knowledge they are generally not rehearsed, they are not recorded or disseminated beyond the rooms where they take place, they do not necessarily recount a logical progression of transformation or religious discovery, and there is no expectation that the narratives end happily. Often the narrative ends unhappily with the woman seeking guidance from the nuns and other laywomen. In fact, Ōta spoke earlier at the November *tsudo*i about her struggles with her mother, without any sense of closure until Kaori spoke.

Despite the criticisms that funeral Buddhism focuses too much on death, it is the very discussion of death that brings Aoki, Kaori, and Ōta together in this ritualized space. Kaori's encounter with Aoki reshapes her understanding of the Pure Land, moving her from thinking of it as a distant location only reachable after death to one that recognizes non-duality as the basic nature of the universe. The Pure Land—and therefore her mother—is right here in this “huge world of oneness.” But her recounting of Aoki's assistance and her reinterpretation of the meaning of death and liberation is not for her benefit alone. Kaori's narrative in turn allows Ōta to reconsider her own understanding of death and gives her a model for dealing with loss. Together, the women utilize Buddhism throughout the conversations to address their own relationship with death in a way that helps them personally and simultaneously teaches other women how to think about this inevitability.

The ritualization that enables healing amongst the women resonates with the work of Paula Arai, who examines Japanese women's Zen rituals in the home. Arai points to the importance of looking at aspects of women's lives and work that are often ignored because they are not within the purview of traditional philosophical, textual, and historical scholarship. This is a particularly fraught topic within the study of Zen, because, as Arai argues, the focus on Zen's image as an “iconoclastic, antiritualistic tradition” obscures the meaningful contributions of “women to Japanese culture and society” (ARAI 2011, 4). Zen women, like the women at the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting, perform the essential activities of creating meaning and addressing emotional stress through ritualized action. Many of these rituals provide necessary emotional healing and comfort to their practitioners, much as the conversations among the women at the *tsudo*i and *nenbutsu* meeting address and provide comfort for grief. The ritualized nature of the conversation, like the rituals the Zen women perform, imbues it with meaning, significance, and ultimately emotional healing, that the conversations would not have in other circumstances. While Arai focuses her research on the independent and home-based rituals of Japanese women, my research shows that similar healing takes place in the public, communal *Jidō*in and *dōjō*, enabling women to connect to one another.

This type of communal religious healing also calls to mind those found in Japanese new religions. *Rissho Kosei-kai* 立正佼成会, for example, is famous for providing *hōza* 法座 (counseling sessions), which are considered by members to be one of the religion's most important activities (GUTHRIE 1988, 25).¹⁴ *Hōza*

14. *Rissho Kosei-kai* broke off from *Reiyukai*. In fact, *Reiyukai* originated *hōza* as a group religious meeting focused on healing but HARDACRE (1984) found that many of their participants prefer to seek guidance individually rather than as a group (56–58) so I will limit my discussion here to *Rissho Kosei-kai*.

typically involve around twelve members sitting in a circle with a designated leader who, according to their official description, has a “thorough, practical knowledge of all the Buddhist doctrines embraced by Rissho Kosei-kai, especially the Four Noble Truths” (RISSHO KOSEI-KAI 2019). Participants seeking assistance then bring up whatever ails them, with medical issues being the most prominent concern, followed by interpersonal problems, and extending to practically anything of concern to participants (GUTHRIE 1988, 125). The leader then responds with a “knot” (*musubi* 結び), which represents an attempt to discover the underlying connections behind troubling events, calling upon karma and fate. Thus, “implicitly, and often explicitly, the counselor aims to overcome members’ feelings of unconnectedness, dissociation, and lack of pattern” (GUTHRIE 1988, 127).

Although there are some similarities between *hōza* and what happens at the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting, there are also important differences. First, conversations at the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting are limited to Buddhism and problems that women deem related to Buddhism; not one participant at either meeting asks for guidance about medical ailments or even openly about interpersonal problems. Instead, laywomen ask questions that they think relate directly to Buddhism, especially to the issues of grief and death. Moreover, *hōza* are structured around expert leaders who dispense advice. While respected and revered by the women of the *tsudo*i, Aoki is but one of many participants in the room who discuss Buddhist doctrine; the laywomen Kaori and Noguchi in particular are respected for their deep understanding of Buddhism and many women look to them for guidance. The emotional healing done by the women at the Jōdoshū meetings through ritual is implicit rather than explicit as it is in *hōza*, but it is no less central.

Although the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting take place in traditional Buddhist spaces, their open-door attendance policy differentiates them from other groups. Typically, Japanese religious groups are dictated by familial allegiance to a local sectarian temple as illustrated in the work of Jessica STARLING (2012; 2013), who examines the lives of temple wives and the Buddhist Women’s Association (*Bukkyō fujinkai* 仏教婦人会) in the Jōdo Shinshū. Unlike the assured membership and relationships stemming from these traditional types of women’s organizations, there is ambiguity and uncertainty inherent in the open nature of the *tsudo*i and *nenbutsu* meeting:

Kaori: From about the fourth time I came, Aoki said something like, “If you can, how about coming next month?” [both laugh] I had started to have an interest so I tried to continue coming the next month. I feel like that kind of tie (*tsunagari* つながり) must be a good thing but the foundation [of the *tsudo*i] is one instance, and then another instance...

Watanabe: It’s free participation. When you want to come, you can come. If you have the feeling of wanting to come, then come.

Kaori: Yeah, like that. A “that’s the way it goes” (*shō ga nai* 仕様が³無^い) sort of thing.

Watanabe: Yeah, that sort of thing. It’s that, but it’s freeing as well.

Kaori: Well, that sort of thing is fine, but I also think it’s a bit strange. Sometimes it can be strange for people who don’t always come. Why? For example, last month Zenshin¹⁵ wasn’t there, right? We thought that Fujimoto or Aoki or somebody would ask, “Oh why didn’t she come?” But, well, I haven’t ever heard that! [laughs].

Watanabe, a frequent participant in both the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting, is relatively happy with the free nature of the *tsudo*i while Kaori is more ambivalent. The open character of the meetings means both that membership is less formal than traditional organizations but also that the leaders and regular participants have to work harder to convince people to return. This makes the ritualization of the experience particularly important. Communal enactment of ritualized service, tea, and conversation provides a common vernacular for veteran and new participants; their shared experiences become starting points for communication with each other. Every month, the participants differ and most times there is at least one newcomer. Ritualization enables these newcomers to find ways to participate and help nurture community building. In particular, the ritualization of the less formalized conversation phase enables new participants like Ōta to feel comfortable jumping in with personal struggles and seeking guidance from other Buddhist women.

The Strength of Traditional Practice Among Women in Temple Buddhism

At the *tsudo*i following the one where Tachikawa admonished the chatting women, conversation rings out again during the sutra-copying period. Yet, Tachikawa does not stop them, leaving them to continue to chat. I believe that Tachikawa’s behavior at the previous *tsudo*i was influenced by my presence. It was at the prior gathering that she finally accepted me as a researcher and thus wanted to present the best image of the *tsudo*i and Jōdoshū as possible. However, the next month, she decided that there are more important things to attend to—like preparing the tea properly—so she let the women converse in peace. There is flexibility and negotiation at the heart of the *tsudo*i and *nenbutsu* meeting. The women infuse the meetings with their own personalities and concerns, adapting and adopting them to their needs, including the need to chat about family business.

These women actively participate in what is often referred to as “funeral Buddhism” but that term obscures the vibrancy of their practices and its impact on their everyday lives. The women interested in Jōdoshū who participate in both the

15. A novice Jōdoshū nun and Kaori’s friend.

*tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting are carrying out very traditional ritualized processes that provide them with deep meaning and insight. Even the conversation period is part of what nuns see as their traditional practice; over 80 percent of nuns from the Sōtōshū 曹洞宗 (Sōtō Zen Sect) believe that their most important social role and duty is to “be a kind and womanly listener to anything and everyone” (ARAI 1999, 146). By actively seeking out and performing chanting, sutra copying, and conversation, these women illustrate that there is still a drive within contemporary Japanese Buddhism for traditional practices unrelated to death care.

In talking with many of the laywomen who participate, it is clear that Pure Land Buddhism has played an essential part in their lives, and that their dedication to Buddhism does not stop at the doors of the *dōjō* or Jidōin. They talk about attending various rituals at their own family temples, cleaning the family grave, taking care of their family altars, and other traditional Buddhist practices. There has been some work on the efforts of religious visionaries within the sects to revitalize Japanese Buddhism which focus on the actions of singular visionaries who do remarkable and inspiring work or revolutionary approaches to Japanese Buddhist doctrine and practice (ROWE 2011; NELSON 2013). The women of the *tsudo*i and the *nenbutsu* meeting show that revitalization and transformation efforts are not always necessary; there are vibrant traditional practices going on within temples that draw in ardent practitioners.

Almost all participants in these groups are long-time and sincere practitioners of what Stephen COVELL (2005, 7) terms “temple Buddhism,” a neutral alternative to the charged “funeral Buddhism.” He also notes that many of the regular participants in temple Buddhism are women (COVELL 2005, 57), and this is very much the case from my experience. Men are not allowed inside the *dōjō* so it is no great surprise that the meeting consists solely of women. But at numerous other events I attended, including the *nenbutsu* meeting, women constituted the majority, usually the vast majority, of participants. Women are the backbone of everyday practice. Therefore, when speaking of temple Buddhism, it is important to discuss women’s activities and interpretations of their practices.

The nuns, temple wives, and laywomen of these two meetings show the strength and resilience of traditional practices within temple Buddhism. This does not negate the very real struggles that sects and temples face to attract clergy and participants but it does expand knowledge about the practices and processes of ritualization that not only continue to be performed but occupy an important place in the lives of women who choose to participate. Temple Buddhism remains a place of religious vitality that offers much more to devoted practitioners than death care. Through the traditional processes of ritualization created at these meetings, women learn about Buddhism, turn their knowledge of Buddhism into a salve for their own troubles, and open up its potential to craft lasting and meaningful relationships with one another.

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