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Where the Action Is Sites of Contemporary Sōtō Buddhism

This article considers reactions at various levels of the Sōtō sect to the problems of funerary Buddhism. There is a widening gap, not only between the necessities of mortuary practice at local temples (both rural and urban) and the doctrine of no-self ostensibly embodied in the foundational texts of Dogen and Keizan, but also within the very organizational structures of the Sōtō sect itself. From its official publications and regional conferences to innovative strategies being developed at individual temples, I argue that, far from being a unified body, Sōtō Buddhism speaks with an array of competing and often contradictory voices. The diversity of Sōtō responses to the “mortuary problem” reveals intriguing disconnects between the research arm of the sect, those responsible for training priests, and the daily realities of local temples.

KEYWORDS: Sōtō Zen – *genba* – mortuary rites – ordination ceremony – *sōsai mondai*

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THE “FUNERAL PROBLEM” (*sōsai mondai* 葬祭問題) is a catchall term for a broad range of doctrinal, historical, social, institutional, and economic issues confronting the traditional sects of Japanese Buddhism. While these issues are clearly interrelated, this “problem” means very different things to different groups, even to those within the same organization.¹ This article will explore the complexity of these issues by considering contrasting conceptions of the *sōsai mondai* at two “sites” of contemporary Sōtō Zen: within the activities of sectarian intellectuals and at a popular Tokyo temple.

According to Sasaki Kōkan 佐々木宏幹, a leading Sōtō intellectual and professor emeritus at Komazawa University, for most Buddhist groups and temple priests, the funeral problem refers to the growing popularity of non-religious funerals (*mushūkyōsō* 無宗教葬), such as scattering ashes or the recent Tokyo practice of “direct funerals” (*chokusō* 直葬), in which the body is cremated and immediately buried without the involvement of a priest (SASAKI 2003a, p. 50). For Nara Yasuaki 奈良康明, head of the Sōtō Research Center and former president of Komazawa University, the issue includes both practical concerns—how the sect will survive in the future—and ideals—how temple priests can connect to their followers and help them through the mourning process (personal conversation, 31 March 2004). For others, the funeral problem stems from the negative public image of money-hungry priests evidenced by the largely pejorative expression “funeral Buddhism” (*sōshiki bukkyō* 葬式仏教), and epitomized in a scene from Itami Jūzō’s 伊丹十三 award-winning 1984 film, *The Funeral* (*Osōshiki* お葬式), where the priest shows up in a chauffeur-driven Rolls Royce wearing a robe heavily embroidered in gold.²

As I shall argue, the *sōsai mondai* is also emblematic of deeper issues. A constant point of discussion among Sōtō intellectuals is the apparent contradiction

1. Long used as a synonym for *sōshiki* 葬式 (funeral), recently the term *sōsai* 葬祭 has been adopted by Buddhist scholars in an attempt to move away from the negative connotations of *sōshiki Bukkyō*. By deploying the term *sōsai*, Buddhists are able to move beyond the image of an overpriced, inscrutable, antiquated ritual (the funeral proper) so as to include the more traditional and “Japanese” ideas of ancestor worship and services for departed spirits. Further, *sōsai* evokes the term *kankon sōsai* 冠婚葬祭, or “the major ceremonies of life” such as coming of age, marriage, funeral, and ancestral rites, and thus reinforces the positive images of family, ancestors, and the life cycle. In publications and conferences, Sōtō scholars take pains to use the term *sōsai* exclusively.

2. Though in part a parody of the degree to which contemporary Japanese have lost touch with the meanings of traditional funeral customs, the film was based on Itami’s own father-in-law’s death and is actually a highly accurate account of a Japanese funeral. For details see Itami’s diary of the funeral (ITAMI 1985).

between Buddhist doctrinal ideals of no-self and the economic, historical, and social reality of most temples having to perform ritual services for the peaceful repose of the dead. This dilemma manifests itself in a variety of forms: from debates over the relationship between Buddhism and folk beliefs, to concerns over the dissonance between the training of priests and the day-to-day work of local temples, to irritation over institutional gaps among the different sectarian research organs. The debate over funerals is in fact a debate about the very meaning of Sōtō Buddhism in Japanese society.

In 1999, the newly-formed Research Center for Sōtō Zen Buddhism³ undertook its first major joint project—a four-year study of the mortuary problem. According to Sasaki, social and religious problems connected to funerary rites have been an issue in Japan since the 1970s and have become particularly acute over the last decade. In response, the Research Center brought together the three research divisions of the sect in an all-out effort to develop a unified response (SASAKI, 2003a, p. 50). Sasaki admits that the decision to focus on funerals was far from unanimous and that “several of the research staff wondered if it would not be better to chose a more suitable theme such as ‘The current meaning of Dōgen’s Zen,’ or the ‘Internationality of Zen.’” For these researchers, the “mortuary” issue was far removed from the doctrinal ideals espoused by Shakyamuni and the sect’s founders. Yet Sasaki insists that it would be impossible even for Buddhist scholars or elite monks to accomplish their work with absolutely no contact with mortuary rites. “Even those who fervently pursue Buddhist ideals, if they are Japanese, must to some extent live amidst ‘funerary culture’ and ‘funerary society’” (SASAKI, 2003a, p. 49).

Though Sasaki identifies the 1970s as the start of funeral problems for Buddhists, one could also argue that the publication of TAMAMURO Taijō’s “Funeral Buddhism” (1964) most visibly brought the issue to public attention.⁴ Within the Sōtō sect one could also point to Hattori Shōsai’s 1956 essay “Funeral Recommendations,” which appeared in the first issue of the Sōtō Missionary

3. The Sōtō sect currently operates three separate research divisions. The Division of Sōtō Zen Studies (Sōtōshū Shūgaku Kenkyū Bumon 曹洞宗宗学研究部門) was established in 1954 and the Division for Mission of Sōtō Zen Buddhism (Kyōka Kenshū Bumon 教化研修部門) was established in 1955. Recently it was decided that the sect also needed a research organ that could respond to modern societal changes and problems. Specifically mentioned on the sect’s official homepage are “the problems of human rights, bioethics, the environment, and the emphasis on doctrinal explanations of funeral rites and ancestor worship” (www.sotozen-net.or.jp/, accessed 5 July 2004). In response, the sect created the Division of Contemporary Sōtō Zen Studies (Gendai Shūgaku Kenkyū Bumon 現代宗学研究部門) in 1994. These three research divisions were then brought together under the auspices of the Research Center for Sōtō Zen Buddhism (Sōtōshū Sōgō Kenkyū Sentā 曹洞宗総合研究センター) which was established in 1998 to produce multi-disciplinary approaches that move beyond doctrinal studies to include folklore, educational, anthropological, and sociological methods. The English names of the respective centers represent official Sōtō translations.

4. For a short English summary of anti-funeral criticism in Japan over the last century see MURAKAMI 2000, pp. 346–49.

Research Center journal *Kyōka kenshū* 教化研修. While advocating a reexamination of funerary methods, Hattori strongly opposed the idea that funerals and memorial services are not the true work of priests (HATTORI 1956). Regardless of the modern origins of the funeral issue, it is clearly a central concern to the Sōtō sect and one that parallels, in terms of institutional response, but not academic attention, the well-known Machida incident and subsequent attempts by the Sōtō leadership to address issues of social discrimination within the sect.⁵

Although the *sōsai mondai* is not as politically charged as the problem of discrimination, it has been a public issue for longer and may well be far more crucial to the ongoing survival of the sect. And while it has not warranted the creation of its own central division or the attention of Western scholars, the public perception of Buddhist mortuary rites has been a principal concern to certain research divisions of the sect for as long as they have existed and an object of joint studies since at least 1969, with the implementation of a three-year joint project aimed at clarifying a unified stance on the issue and surveying parishioner opinions.⁶ Later surveys and publications, such as “Issues for the Future of Religious Groups” (*Shūkyō shūdan no ashita e no kadai* 宗教集團の明日への課題, 1985), “The Religious Consciousness of Urban Parishioners” (*Toshi danshintō no shūkyō ishiki* 都市檀信徒の宗教意識, 1993), “Seeking Distinctive Characteristics of Sōtō Funeral Rites based on the *Shushōgi*” (*Shūmon sōsai no tokushitsu o sagaru: Shushōgi to no kanren ni oite* 宗門葬祭の特質を探る—修証義との関連において, 1985) as well as those relating to this recent four-year project, indicate that if the problem itself has not grown more acute, the sect’s concern over funeral issues certainly has.

Building on the work of previous research projects and spearheaded by Sasaki and Nara, the current project brought together all three research organs of the Sōtō sect in its most concerted effort to date to address the mortuary issue. Inviting Sōtō and outside scholars from a wide array of disciplines, the Research Center began by holding open forums at each of Sōtō’s nine regional precincts (*kanku* 管区) across the country. Approaching the issue from cultural, historical, anthropological, and doctrinal standpoints, these conferences were

5. In response to the public outcry over Machida’s infamous proclamation at the 1979 World Conference on Religion and Peace that “In Japan today an ‘outcaste problem’ does not exist,” the Sōtō sect, in 1982, formed the Central Division for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights (Jinken Yōgo Suishin Honbu 人権擁護推進本部). Since its formation, the Human Rights Division has held conferences, published its own material, and throughout the 1980s and 90s put out numerous book series relating to discrimination, human rights, and doctrine (BODIFORD 1996, p. 6). Bodiford describes two central ways in which the Human Rights Division tries to spread its message. The first involves regional seminars and the second takes the form of academic conferences aimed at reforming the “education and training of Sōtō clerics.” These seminars and conferences generally take two different approaches to Sōtō doctrine: historical/social or doctrinal/philological (BODIFORD 1996, p. 18).

6. See SŌTŌSHŪ KYŌKA KENKYŪJO 1969, 1970, and 1971.

intended both to propagate the ideas of specialists as well as to gather input from local priests. The contents of the forums were then carried in the sect's monthly report, *Sōtō shūhō* 曹洞宗報, placed on the sect's home page, and republished together in abbreviated form in 2004. *Sōsai*-related articles and special issues of journals by each of the three research divisions were also published during this period and special sections were created in the annual conferences.⁷

The culmination of the project came with the 2003 publication of "Mortuary Rites: Contemporary Significance and Issues" (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ, hereafter "*Sōsai*"). In addition to twenty short articles, the book also contained the transcripts of three round-table discussions among the top researchers of the project, as well as the results of a detailed, nationwide survey of 1122 temples. Made up of two distinct surveys, one of temple priests, and one of parishioners at each of the temples, the survey covered issues such as conceptions of the spirit, knowledge of the doctrinal underpinnings of mortuary services, and concerns over apparent contradictions between fundamental Buddhist tenets of no-self and memorial services for spirits of the deceased. Only small portions of the survey results, along with analysis, were printed in *Sōsai*. A second volume containing all the data, but little interpretation, was published in March 2004.

The first printing of two thousand copies of *Sōsai* was paid for by the Research Center and distributed for free to all seven hundred and eighty-six Sōtō parishes (*kyōku* 教区). Copies were then passed around between the individual temples in each parish. A second print run of a thousand copies, paid for by the sect's headquarters (Shūmuchō), has sold out, and a third printing is under consideration. In addition, the initial four-year research program has been extended for at least two more years to allow the Division of Contemporary Sōtō Zen Studies to conduct further field research and to address the voices and opinions of parishioners who have taken part in funerals.⁸

In the article mentioned above, Bodiford contends that the conferences and publications organized by the reform-minded members of the Human Rights Division have had a significant impact on the social policies of the sect and on fields of research at Komazawa University. He reminds us, however, that "the inherent tensions between the social conservatism of Sōtō institutions and the reform of Sōtō social attitudes are not likely to disappear any time soon" (BODIFORD 1996, p. 18). He also indicates that attempts by the division to educate the sect's clergy has tended to alienate local temple priests, who resent being told how to run their temples. In the case of the *Sōsai* issue, we see analogous

7. At the Research Center's fifth annual conference in October 2003, an entire section including eleven papers was dedicated to the *sōsai mondai*. The keynote address by cultural anthropologist Namihira Emiko 波平恵美子 was titled "*Sōsai* and the Modern Person."

8. A common complaint from parishioners about the *Sōsai* book was that it focused only on the priests and had nothing from the point of view of the mourning family.

attempts to affect the sect's policies (with equally ambiguous results) as well as similar institutional fissures. The first part of this article will focus on the activities of the Sôtō sect through a study of the Research Center: its publications, conferences, and interviews with researchers. The second half will provide a completely different take on the issue through an ethnographic study of Tōchōji, a large Sôtō temple in central Tokyo which, through its unique response to the *sōsai mondai*, has brought in over five thousand nine hundred "members" in the last eight years.

The Problem With Spirits

The question of what happens to the deceased after death is one upon which the historical Buddha remained steadfastly silent, but one that continues to plague Buddhists. Sasaki summarizes the issue in the following way: "It should not be expected that the Buddhist tradition, which preaches the emptiness of all existence and idealizes a lifestyle with no attachments to essences, would logically correspond to a folk tradition that accepts the actual existence of spirits and places great importance on living under their guardianship" (SASAKI 2003b, p. 55). As Sasaki is aware, however, this seeming contradiction has done little to impede the long history of Buddhist mortuary rites in Japan. Indeed, the tension between doctrinal norms and mortuary realities has inspired a great deal of innovation on the part of Buddhists from at least the thirteenth century, with the Japanese adaptation of Chinese monastic codes to lay funerals and the subsequent inclusion of posthumous ordination (BODIFORD 1992, pp. 152–55).

The term for posthumous ordination that appears throughout Sôtō literature, *motsugo sasō* 没後作僧, has been used almost exclusively by the Sôtō sect for some time and refers to the ritual process by which a lay follower is symbolically shaven (*tei-hatsu* 剃髮), given the precepts and lineage chart (*kechimyaku* 血脈), and transformed into a priest (SHIINA 2003, p.186).⁹ For Shiina Kōyū 椎名宏雄, the problem with this process is that it neither reflects the will of the lay follower nor is properly understood by the participants, including the priests performing it. "It goes without saying that neither the priests nor the mourning family understands the inner meaning of posthumous ordination and are just happy to simply believe that the deceased has been transformed into a Buddha (*jōbutsu suru* 成仏する). Shiina laments that, despite the fact that priests who truly understand the meaning of posthumous ordination are as rare as "stars at sunrise," the ritual is still single-mindedly performed and thus reveals the disjunction between doctrinal understanding and ritual practice (SHIINA 2003, p. 187).

9. For the most part, Sôtō funerals for lay followers are laid out in the book *Sôtōshū gyōji kihan* 曹洞宗行持軌範 [Standard Rites of the Sôtō Zen School]. The rules governing lay funerals were first codified in 1950 with the publication of the revised edition, *Shōwa shūsei gyōji kihan* 昭和修正行持軌範. Prior to 1950, mortuary rites for laity were modeled on those for monks (SHIINA 2003, p. 187).

The question of posthumous ordination is also taken up in a series of three roundtable discussions (*zadankai* 座談会) between Sōtō and other scholars that were then published in the second section of the *Sōsai* book.¹⁰ Tsunoda Tairyū 角田泰隆, while accepting the posthumous transformation of the deceased through the granting of precepts and the passing of the *indō* 引導, expresses fundamental doubt whether one can be enlightened so quickly or easily.¹¹ “In Buddhism, one cannot achieve enlightenment (*jōbutsu*) simply by receiving the precepts. One achieves enlightenment by training, for example, in Zen doing *mondō* 問答 exchange with one’s teacher. In the funeral, however, this is all done in one go” (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ 2003, p. 309). For Tsunoda, and for many of the participants, bestowing the precepts on the deceased makes him or her a priest in name only. The question of what becoming a Buddha (*jōbutsu*) actually means is a thorny one for scholars and priests. Through repeated references to Dōgen’s use of terms such as “the endless cycle of rebirth and death” (*shōjōseze* 生生世世) and “the infinite Buddhist path (*harukanaru butsudō* はるかなる仏道), the scholars agree that the bestowing of the precepts and passing of the *indō* do not signify the enlightenment of the deceased, but rather the first step on a very long journey.

This is not simply a question of scholarly debates over doctrinal interpretation, however, as the importance of receiving of precepts is very clearly laid out in both the Sōtō sect’s Constitution and in its primary doctrinal text, the *Shushōgi* 修証義. Initially written in 1888 by lay Buddhist Ōuchi Seiran 大内青巒, the *Shushōgi*, a broad collection of snippets from Dōgen’s writings edited into a short, five-section, thirty-one-paragraph text, was initially an attempt to incorporate *nenbutsu* practice into Sōtō so as to increase the popularity of the sect (READER 1983, pp. 105–11). Unable to find any justification for adopting the *nenbutsu*, the author instead focused on equating the taking of the precepts with practicing *zazen*, as in the expression “meditation and the precepts are identical” (*zenkai ichinyo* 禪戒一如).¹² To date, the only extended study of the *Shushōgi* in English has been undertaken by Ian Reader, who argues that the text provides a doctrinal foundation for the sect that is incorporated into Sōtō’s very constitution.¹³ Summarizing the text’s place in the sect’s history, Reader informs us that “Article Five, which has its historical origins in the events of the Meiji era, asserts the principles expressed in the *Shushōgi* and in the underlying principles that the practice of *zazen* and the practice of the preceptual path are one and the same. In this view, the precepts are the gate to enlightenment just as

10. All of the researchers to whom I spoke agreed that the *zadankai* section was the best part of the book, in that it produced the most lively and honest discussion of the issues.

11. For more on the *indō* see BODIFORD 1992, pp. 158–64, and ROWE 2000, p. 358.

12. This expression is not found in *Shushōgi*, but does appear in the sect’s constitution.

13. Steven Heine has written an article on the *Shushōgi* and modern Sōtō (HEINE 2003). The dearth of Western scholarship on the *Shushōgi* should be rectified in large part by John LoBreglio’s forthcoming dissertation.

much as is the practice of *zazen*. The assertion of this notion was one of the major aims of those who compiled the *Shushōgi*, for it provided an entry to Sōtō that was more accessible than that of *zazen* for the laity” (READER 1983, pp. 178–79).

Shiina Kōyū, presenting the sectarian studies position on the funeral problem and the state of the deceased, takes umbrage at the ambiguity of what happens to one after receiving the precepts. “The problem for me is the way in which the meaning of taking the precepts laid out in the *Shushōgi* is premised on an interpretation of the phrase ‘When sentient beings receive the Buddhist precepts, they will enter the ranks of the Buddhas, the rank equal to the great awakening, and they will truly become children of the Buddhas’ in the Brahma Net Sutra. But what is the meaning of ‘the ranks of the Buddhas,’ ‘the rank equal to the great awakening,’ or ‘children of the Buddhas?’ I think it is essential that the priests answer this from the standpoint of their individual faith” (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ 2003, p. 280).¹⁴

Shiina’s last comment highlights a central aspect of the funeral problem for intellectuals and sect leaders: that all of their doctrinal interpretations mean little unless they can reach local priests and parishioners. Thus, in addition to their own concerns over the proper interpretation of postmortem status in Dōgen’s writings, the scholars involved in the round-table discussions are also focused on the issue of how temple priests can actually respond to the needs of parishioners. Matsumoto Kōichi 松本皓一 brings the discussion back to the reality of temples when he points out that, “Of course, if you don’t take the first intention of pursuing enlightenment (*shohosshin* 初發心) as already entering the ranks of the Buddha, then you will have nothing to say to the average lay person” (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ 2003, p. 312). Sasaki extends the discussion into a question of divergences among the different sects. “It may be that it is necessary for a renunciant always to engage in ascetic practices, but if you tell a group of lay followers that when you die you are made a monk and must always continue training, there will be those who think ‘we don’t want to put the dead through such hardship.’ In the Jōdo schools they have Amida, or at least people think they want to go to Shakyamuni’s side and take a leisurely rest on a lotus pedestal” (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ 2003, p. 314). This soteriological branding of the different sects is one that comes up often in my discussions with priests and scholars. In one conversation with a group of Jōdo intellectuals I was told that not only were Sōtō funerals far too complicated, but also that they had no ready solution, such as a Pure Land, to parishioner fears over the posthumous fate of a loved one.¹⁵

14. Here I have followed the official translation of the *Shushōgi* that is included in the *Sōtō School Scriptures for Daily Services and Practice* (SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪMUCHŌ 2001, pp. 85–96).

15. Of course under a strict doctrinal interpretation, rebirth in the Pure Land does not equal enlightenment so much as it does greatly ease its achievement.

The funeral survey results in *Sōsai* confirm that there are a variety of responses (tending toward ontological and spatial transformation) to questions over what happens to a person after death. With priests allowed to choose multiple answers from seven possible choices, the most popular response (46.1 percent) was that the deceased had become enlightened as a child of the Buddha (*hotoke no ko toshite jōbutsu* 仏の子として成仏). Nearly 45 percent of the priests chose “gone to a Buddhist land” (*bukkokudo e itta* 仏国土へ行った), while almost one-third chose “gone to a Pure Land paradise” (*gokuraku jōdo e itta* 極楽浄土へ行った). Other choices included “gone to the other world” (23.4 percent), “to the temple or grave” (3 percent), and “to the ocean or mountains” (1.2 percent). More than 8 percent of the priests responded that they do not deal with the spirit at all (SUGAWARA 2003, p. 382). Note again the ambiguous use of “*jōbutsu*” as well as a wide variety of responses that include the Pure Land and thus point to a lack of unified Sōtō sectarian response to fundamental questions over the state of the deceased.

Fears over the thinning of sectarian identity appear to be a major factor both driving the discussions in *Sōsai* and exacerbating tensions between various elements of the sect. Articles such as Awaya Ryōdō’s 粟谷良道 “From folk belief to doctrine” are part of the *Sōsai* project’s larger goal to promote a deeper sectarian awareness among parishioners and temple priests through instruction in doctrine and in the uniquely Sōtō elements of funerary practices. This is in part a reaction to the successful entrance of new religions into the ancestor worship market, as well as an attempt to provide local priests with a stronger sense of identity and the doctrinal ammunition they need to distinguish themselves from the funeral companies with whom they have become so closely associated.¹⁶ For many of the scholars, however, this attempt to stress sectarian elements of funerals carries certain inherent dangers, not the least of which involves forced attempts at doctrinal interpretation.

A frequent example cited by those who criticize a doctrine-only approach is the 1985 project by what was then the Mission of Sōtō Zen Research Center (Kyōka Kenkyūjo 教化研究所) to create a uniquely Sōtō funeral based on the *Shushōgi*. In his introduction to the *Sōsai* book, Nara writes about the attempt and the subsequent publication of the previously-mentioned book “Seeking Distinctive Characteristics of Sōtō Funeral Rites based on the *Shushōgi*.” According to Nara, the ultimate failure of the project came about because Buddhist funerals are a mix of folk beliefs and Buddhist ritual and world view and thus cannot be understood or explained only through sectarian or Buddhist studies (NARA 2003, pp. ii–iii). While Nara is certainly pushing toward the inclusion of different aspects of what constitutes Buddhism in Japan today, he makes no

16. For more on the connection between priests and the funeral industry see SUZUKI 2000 and ROWE 2000.

attempt to hide his loyalties. As a specialist in Indian Buddhism, trained in classical Buddhology at the University of Tokyo, Nara is very open about his bias toward, in his words, “original Buddhism” (*genshi Bukkyō* 原始仏教). What bother him are the forces within the Sōtō sect that insist on coming up with doctrinal explanations to justify the perceived contradictions arising from the intermingling of doctrine and practice. Attempts, such as the publication of a book aimed at creating funeral rites based on the *Shushōgi*, are, in Nara’s words, “like trying to graft bamboo to wood” (*ki ni take o tsugu*). Furthermore, he believes this to be an ongoing trend and cites secret Sōtō transmission documents (*kirigami* 切り紙) relating to funerals in the medieval period, as another example of trying in vain to bring popular practices under the purview of doctrine.¹⁷ For Nara, Buddhism cannot exist without both its transcendental (*shusseken* 出世間) and secular (*seken* 世間) forms. The fact that they are distinct is precisely what allows them to be compatible (*ryōritsusei* 両立性).¹⁸

In addition to concerns over doctrinal acrobatics, the doctrine/funeral divide is also producing a certain degree of anxiety for young Sōtō priests. As Sasaki notes during one of the round-tables, “The reason that priests at local temples do not have confidence is that they are taught at the head temple and university that ‘Real Buddhism is not about conducting funerals, and that the spirit at the funeral is *atman*. For a monk who preaches emptiness to take part in this is strange.’ This gap causes the priests great distress. Contradictions emerge because priests take the strict doctrine they are taught to the local temples and try to cut off the idea of a spirit” (SŌTŌSHŪ SŌGŌ KENKYŪ SENTĀ 2003, pp. 283–84). The concern with priestly confidence is also reflected throughout the *Sōsai* survey, which revealed that less than one-third of the priests think that mortuary rites are consistent with Buddhist teachings. It is even more significant when we realize that local parish leaders chose the respondents intentionally and that their answers generally represent the best-case scenario. This is something that the researchers themselves are well aware of, admitting in the book that there were a large number of “model responses” (*mohan kaitō* 模範解答) (SUGAWARA 2003, p. 379).¹⁹

In his article, “The dead and the next world,” Sasaki describes the gap between Buddhist doctrine and the day-to-day realities of temples. Paraphrasing a similar argument in the Jōdo sect’s own *sōsai* book, Sasaki notes, “From the point of view of priests whose existence depends on funerals, there are a

17. The quintessential study of *kirigami* remains Ishikawa Rikizan’s series of twenty three publications spanning eleven years of Komazawa University’s Buddhist Studies Department research journals. These have since been included in a two-volume set. See ISHIKAWA 2001.

18. Personal conversation, 31 March 2004. For more on Nara’s position in English see READER and TANABE 1998, pp. 97–100, and NARA 1995.

19. One senior researcher confided that he was sure the number of priests who actually think that mortuary rites directly contradict Buddhist teachings is much higher than the 5.2% result they got in the survey.

growing number of young priests who are becoming aware of the gap between the main role of a priest at a temple (*genba* 現場) and the doctrine taught in Buddhist studies. This is becoming a problem for the entire Buddhist world. In other words, as the understanding of Buddhist studies and religious studies at educational organs in each of the religious organizations grows deeper and deeper, the number of priests who loose confidence in the activities they carry out at their temples will increase” (SASAKI 2003b, p. 56, paraphrasing ITO and FUJII 1997).²⁰ Jōdo Shinshū scholar Ōmura Eishō 大村英昭 argues that scholarly monks in every Buddhist sect “have come to place a very low value on the heart-wrenching efforts of priests at the *genba*, referring to their activities as ‘diverging from the spirit of the founders.’ However, I do not think the efforts of the priests at the *genba* are in vain. Nor do I think that their efforts are a betrayal of the founders of the sect. On the contrary, I think the priests at the *genba*, from the position of the *genba*, should establish a ‘religion of the *genba*’” (ŌMURA 2003, p. 20).²¹ This, however, begs the question that all the sects are facing—of the tens of thousands of temples across Japan which one represents the *genba*?

The consistent emphasis on the local temple, or *genba*, again reveals the significance of the *sōsai mondai* for the entire sect. As Nara himself admits, there is little consensus among scholars even on such fundamental questions as the postmortem fate of the deceased (NARA 2003, pp. iv–v). Their debates reveal that, in the end, it is up to the local priest to decide how to deal with such issues in the course of his work. The sect’s intellectuals are worried, however, that without the proper intellectual and spiritual training, local priests may not be adequately prepared to prevent further erosion of the mortuary base of the sect. This would indicate that the most important thing for the sect to do is to train its priests in both elements—doctrinal and practical. And yet Nara’s introduction to *Sōsai* reveals that this is precisely what is not happening.

For Nara, the funeral issue, or rather its exclusion from sectarian studies, is

20. Though beyond the scope of the present paper, a detailed study of the connections between the strategies employed to counter the *sōsai mondai* by Jōdo and Sōtō research centers should reveal both the trans-sectarian nature of the problem and the strong influence a small number of intellectuals have on the direction of their respective sects.

21. It is difficult to identify the first use of *genba* by Buddhist scholars to refer to local temples, but everyone I have asked believes it to be a recent phenomenon. Literally, “the site of appearance,” *genba* is best represented in English as “the scene of the action” and is used in Japanese to refer to the site of an accident or the place where actual work takes place. In police dramas and films, for example, the detectives go to the scene of the crime (*genba*) while the higher-ups issue orders from HQ. In his work on the Japanese hip-hop scene, Ian Condry notes the way his informants use the term to refer to the actual dance clubs as opposed to the globalized effort to market hip-hop culture. Condry deploys the term both as a way to speak about globalization and as a way to locate a field site when one’s research is no longer bounded by a village or specific locale (CONDY 2001, pp. 374, 384). It is worth noting that *genba* is not used by Japanese anthropologists, who prefer the term “field.” The Buddhist use of the term would seem to be consistent with the idea of the site where the actual work of Buddhism takes place, though it is much more frequently used by the sect’s intellectuals than by temple priests.

what unifies the various Japanese Buddhist sects. “One problem that all Japanese Buddhist groups have in common is the fact that funeral rites have no place in sectarian studies. The faith and practice expounded by the founders have crystallized as sectarian studies in each of the sects and are thus seen as flawless. However, what do you call a sect’s studies that ignores the funerary and devotional rites that form the economic foundation of the group” (NARA 2003, p. ii)? In another passage, Nara rails against the sectarian focus on doctrine and the enlightenment of the Buddhist elite, as well as commentaries on faith, practice, and ethics. Such a view ignores customs and folk traditions as “not-Buddhist” and thus beneath notice. “However,” he asks, “Are the funerary and devotional rites, which are the reality of the religious group, really ‘not Buddhism’ and therefore not to be discussed in Buddhist studies? If so, then funeral rites are not to be recognized at the level of sectarian education” (NARA 2003, p. iii).

Considering the fact that *Sōsai* was ostensibly written for local priests and parishioners, Nara’s comments may seem like preaching to the choir, particularly given the fact that according to the sect’s official surveys, 90 percent of Sōtō temples depend on the income generated from mortuary rites.²² If, however, we pay attention to his repeated references to “sectarian education,” we begin to get a sense of who Nara is actually addressing: the group within the sect and Komazawa University that is in charge of the study and teaching of doctrine, whom we may call the “doctrinal faction” (*kyōgakuha* 教学派). Nara’s introductory remarks allude to a strong rift within the institutional structure of the Sōtō sect between those at the Research Center who are dealing with the sect’s continued existence in Japanese society, and those focused on normative doctrine, who consider issues such as funerary ritual and the maintenance of graves (and human rights) to be mere societal problems that have nothing to do with “true Buddhism.” While most Buddhists and scholars are aware of the wide gap between local temples and the sect’s leadership, the division within the sect between those attempting to propagate the teachings and those in charge of transmitting the teachings to young priests and scholars, has yet to receive the attention it deserves.²³

The official position of the Research Center is represented on the Sōtō home page by a drawing of an apple tree (www.sotozen-net.or.jp/, accessed 5 July 2004). The sunshine and rain falling on the tree signifies “the teachings” (*oshie* 教え), while the three research divisions are denoted by apples. The earth below symbolizes the Sōtō faithful (*kyōdan* 教団) and society at large, with the Research Center standing as the tree trunk feeding energy both down to the

22. Quoted in SUGAWARA 2003, p. 385.

23. Though beyond the scope of the present article, it would be useful here to track course content at Komazawa over an extended period to see when the *sōsai* issue appears and what kind of object of study it becomes. In speaking to various professors in the Buddhist Studies department I was assured that there are very few courses that take up the *sōsai mondai*.

believers and up to the tree.²⁴ Though perhaps not in a way intended by its designers, the image is also particularly revealing in that the teachings, represented as they are by the very elements of nature, are entirely beyond the reach and influence of society, the sect, or the sect's intellectuals.

A Genba

Located on three-quarters of an acre (900 *tsubo*) in central Tokyo, Tōchōji is hardly representative of the nearly 15,000 Sōtō temples across Japan.²⁵ Established early in the Tokugawa period (1600–1868) and last rebuilt in 1989, Tōchōji is a wealthy urban temple that offers an intriguing mixture of traditional and modern imagery. The main hall, though large, is sparse and is constructed of concrete and cypress, not yet stained by decades of incense smoke. The central image is a 160-centimeter, simple, unfinished-wooden carving of Shakyamuni with his bodhisattva attendants Manjusri (*Monju* 文殊) and Samantabhadra (*Fugen* 普賢) on either side. Less than half of the wooden floor is covered with tatami mats, and the walls are lined with 120 small stools—a concession to the comfort of both the elderly and the large number of potential members, who come to view the monthly ceremonies.

Throughout the precincts one is struck by a series of juxtapositions not often encountered in Japanese Buddhist temples. The bell tower by the front gate houses one of the temple's two elevators. The immaculate modern French toilets can compete with those of any luxury hotel, yet there is a statue of Ususama Myōō 鳥芻沙摩明王 to greet you as you go in and the traditional, monastic *tōsu* 東司 sign above the door.²⁶ There is also a small, but elegant coffee shop in the basement under the main gate (*sanmon* 山門), with a piano, art exhibits, and regular music performances, and throughout the temple buildings one finds modern and abstract ceramics left over from the days when the room underneath the main hall was taken up by “P3,” a well known Tokyo pottery gallery that hosted regular exhibits and events up until 1996.

Though clearly not an “average” Zen temple, Tōchōji is highly influential

24. In many ways the Research Center is the conduit that connects the different elements of the sect together. Conducting surveys on issues that are important to local temples may cause temple priests to feel that the sect shares, or is at least aware of their concerns. Sect officials then use the data gleaned from these surveys to identify and address important issues. The data and its analysis are also repackaged in the form of books and local symposiums and fed back to temples.

25. According to the sect's general survey, there were 14,738 Sōtō temples in 1995 (*SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪ-MUCHŌ* 1998, p. ii).

26. Tōchōji pamphlets emphasize the temple's adherence to the “seven structure” layout (*shichidō garan* 七堂伽藍) of Zen monasteries from Sung period (960–1279) China. We are told that the *tōsu* is one of these seven structures, that it must be located in the eastern part of the precincts, and that it houses the deity Ususama who holds the power to purify. Along with monk's hall (*sōdō* 僧堂) and the bath house (*yokushitsu* 浴室), we are also informed that the *tōsu* is one of the three areas of silent practice in a monastery.

both within and without the Sōtō School. There are two reasons why I have chosen this site rather than the small rural temple that I imagine Ōmura was envisioning. First, instead of trying to find a temple that matches some ideal held by sect intellectuals, I thought it would be more productive to choose one that represents the cutting edge of temple approaches to the funeral problem. Second, the members of Tōchōji's new grave system offer us a view of the *sōsai mondai* that is much less concerned with normative doctrinal positions than it is with the social, economic, and emotional realities of trying to secure grave space in contemporary Japan.

The biggest reason for Tōchōji's success is undoubtedly the eternal memorial tomb (*eitakuyōbaka* 永代供養墓) and burial society, En no Kai 縁の会, that it formed in 1996. With seven hundred parishioner families (*danka* 檀家), Tōchōji was already considered quite prosperous, yet by early 2004, eight years after being established, En no Kai was approaching six thousand new members, with plans to accept four thousand more.²⁷ These numbers would be staggering anywhere, but they are made even more so by the fact that the temple is located in downtown Tokyo, where any land, let alone that for graves, is at a premium. Indeed, after raising the money needed to rebuild the temple in 1989, by selling part of its graveyard across the street, Tōchōji could only accommodate the displaced parishioner graves by moving them to an indoor grave in the basement of the new main hall.

The En no Kai, or "En Society," was formed in 1996 in response to changing family structures and to the increasing control by funeral companies over every aspect of death management. Until the late 1980s, it was nearly impossible to secure a new grave without proof of descendants who would maintain it. Though descendants were not legally required in order to purchase grave space, temples would find reasons to deny certain applications. Furthermore, starting a grave at a new temple has always been premised on becoming a parishioner family of that temple—a commitment of no small financial consequences that still requires one to carry out memorial rites for family members as well as to contribute time and money for temple upkeep and improvements.

Eternal memorial graves such as Tōchōji's, however, are revolutionary precisely because they have no restrictions based on descendants, nationality, or sectarian affiliation.²⁸ Rather than becoming a parishioner, applicants become members (*kaiin* 会員) of what I have termed "burial societies," groups of people who either already have friends or relatives in the eternal memorial graves, or who have reserved a spot for themselves. En no Kai members pay a one-time fee

27. The average number of *danka* households per temple in the *Sōsai* survey was 185.6 (SUGAWARA 2003, p. 376). The sect-wide survey in 1995 found an average of 146 *danka* households per temple (SŌTOSHŪ SHŪMUCHŌ 1998, pp. 149–57).

28. There are a small number of first- and second-generation Koreans and Chinese in En no Kai. Judging from the increasing percentage of temple-run eternal memorial graves that include clauses about nationality in their advertising, this is a growing market.



FIGURE 1: The “water garden” at Tōchōji. Photo by author.

of ¥800,000 (\$7,400), which is roughly one-quarter the cost of a regular grave. Unlike traditional grave costs, this price includes the interment ceremony, yearly memorial rites, and space for one’s cremated remains for up to thirty-three years, the length of time for which individuals are traditionally memorialized before becoming anonymous “ancestors.”

Like other successful eternal memorial tombs at Myōkōji 妙光寺, a Nichiren temple in Niigata, and Kudokuin 功德院, a Shingon temple in Tokyo, Tōchōji’s new grave bears little outward resemblance to traditional extended family graves. Entering the front gate of the temple, one encounters a large reflecting pool that extends all the way to the main hall. This “water garden” (*mizu no niwa* 水の苑, FIGURE 1) contains forty-two “islands” each made up of eighty-one granite grave markers. The tops of these stones are inscribed with the living name (*zokumyō* 俗名) of the departed and have a small space inside to place some favorite item of the deceased.²⁹ The importance of the *mizu no niwa* is emphasized by the fact that one cannot approach the main hall directly, but must walk around the water on either side. The site is extremely striking visually in the way that it reflects the main hall. It is even more impressive on the first evening of every month, when a

29. This practice resonates with the custom of placing a favorite item belonging to the deceased in the coffin before cremation. In the case of Tōchōji, however, the item neither is destroyed, nor does it accompany the deceased to the other world.

memorial service for En no Kai members is held and the one hundred or more attendees float small votive candles in the water during the “memorial service of ten thousand lights” (*mantō kuyō* 万灯供養). Temple literature emphasizes the physical, spiritual, and propagative elements of the site: “Constructed as a forecourt to the main hall, the *mizu no niwa* contains earth (stone), fire, wind, and space, and represents the teachings of Shakyamuni and the bonds (*en*) of the members spreading out across the world like a ripple in water.”

In place of a spot in the water garden, members can choose to have a stone in the moss garden (*taitei no niwa* 苔庭の苑). Located to the side of the main gate beside the bell tower, the garden holds the same stone islands, but interspersed with thick green moss rather than water. The third possibility is to have one’s name engraved on a small, ten-centimeter square gold lacquer plaque located on the walls along the side of the water garden. These walls are lined with brightly colored, lacquered pictures depicting a Chinese artist’s “interpretation” of the life of Shakyamuni. One double panel shows the bodhisattva Kannon sitting by lotus blossoms with what appears to be a mushroom cloud exploding in the background. On the accompanying panel we see the continuation of the lotus blossoms, a self-immolating priest in full conflagration, and an all-too-familiar scene from a busy subway station, presumably Shinjuku, with station attendants straining to cram passengers into a packed rush-hour train.

No matter which of these three memorial spots a member chooses, the actual remains and memorial tablet (*ihai* 位牌) are located two floors below the main hall in the Hall of Arhats (Rakandō 羅漢堂). The Rakandō (FIGURE 2) is a large open room with three of the four walls taken up by sixteen-tiered, red-lacquered shelves holding the small gold memorial tablets of members. One is immediately struck by the sheer number of tablets, lined up side by side and stretching nearly the length of the room. The urns (*kotsu tsubo* 骨壺) of the individual members are stored out of sight beneath the shelves. At one end of the room there is a freestanding six-sided altar that resembles the traditional Buddhist altar (*butsudan* 仏壇) one still finds in many Japanese homes. Inside is a painting of Shakyamuni and his two bodhisattva attendants, along with the sixteen arhats. In front of the altar is a small shelf with a single memorial tablet that reads: “The site of the spirits of departed En no Kai members” (*en no kai bukkosha shoseireii* 縁の会物故者諸精霊位). At the behest of the temple, those who come to visit friends and family are asked first to offer incense before the main altar for the benefit of those who may not have any other visitors. The Rakandō, secluded below the main hall, offers members a more private space to pray for the dead, while also providing a sense of community, if not family, before the Society’s group altar.

En no Kai literature describes its dual grave system in the following way: “The first site is the ‘*en* monument’ (*en no ishibumi* 縁の碑) in the water garden. These memorial monuments to the lives of the members offer a place to pray for the

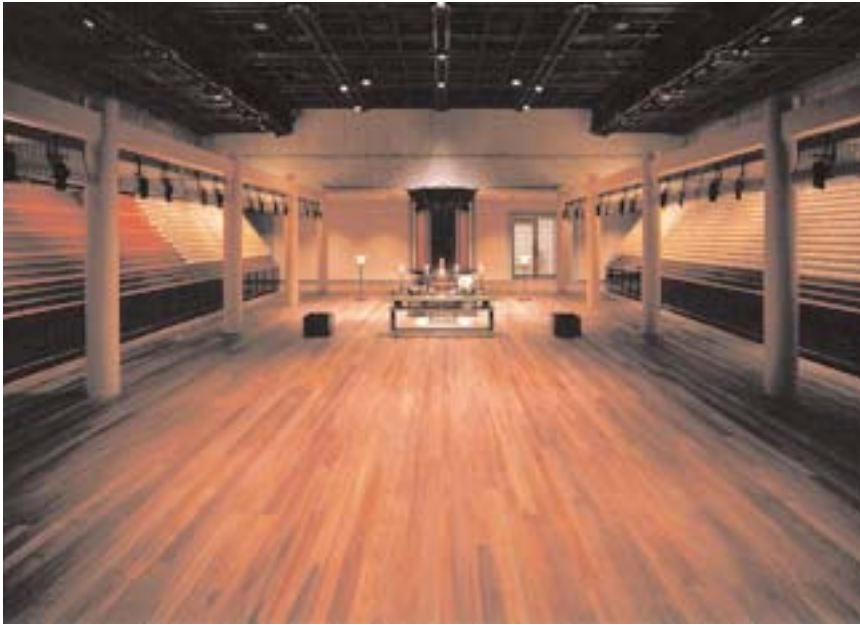


FIGURE 2: The Hall of Arhats (Rakandō). Photo courtesy of Tōchōji temple.

well being of their spirits. The other site is an ossuary for the remains of the departed and is meant as a quiet resting place. Here in the Hall of Arhats one prays to the images of Shakyamuni, his two attendants, and the sixteen arhats. All members are provided with these two graves.” The En no Kai grave system thus offers an intriguing take on the double burial system so long discussed in ethnographic studies of Japanese burial practices. In certain areas of Japan, graves are divided into two sites, a burial grave (*umebaka* 埋墓) that contains the actual remains and is to be avoided, and a worshipping grave (*mairibaka* 詣墓) that is visited and where memorial services are held.³⁰ Conversely, Tōchōji’s grave system, though dual, is not premised on a pure/impure distinction, but rather on one of “rest” (*nemurubaka* 眠る墓) and “reminiscence” (*tsuioku no haka* 追憶の墓). This reading of memorialization is not unique to Tōchōji and seems to signify a broader shift in how the living are meant to relate to the dead.

Interpretive models of the double grave system are often premised on the concept of avoiding death impurity. Moreover, much is made of the fear of malevolent spirits in Japanese culture and of the processes built into mortuary ritual both to protect the living and to ensure the pacification of the spirit. Again there are no such references in Tōchōji literature, which instead contrasts

30. For an English summary of the debates over the origins of the double-grave system see SUZUKI 2000, pp. 33–35.

the bright and public space of memory of the deceased in the pond, and the quiet repose of the transformed remains below the main hall in the presence of the Buddha and his attendants.

The question of memory and memorializing here is informative not only for the possible shift it indicates, but also for what it may teach us about Japanese responses to the dead. Consider that in any Japanese-English dictionary the term *irei* 慰霊 is translated as “memorial,” as in “memorial service” (*ireisai* 慰霊祭) or “memorial tower” (*ireitō* 慰霊塔), but in Japanese dictionaries the word maintains the distinctiveness (and caution) of its two components: “to soothe or comfort” (*nagusameru*) the “spirit” of the deceased. In English, the emphasis is on the living, while the Japanese term is attentive to the potential agency of dead spirits. Tōchōji literature, in contrast, centers on a more passive and individualized view of the deceased. It is important to note the use in the pamphlet of the term *annei* 安寧 in regards to the stones in the water garden while *anchi* 安置, or “enshrine” is used to refer to the memorial tablets (*ihai* 位牌) in the Hall of Arhats. While the latter is traditionally used in references to the remains and spirit of the deceased, the former refers to peace or well being on either a personal or societal level. It appears, then, that the division Tōchōji seems to be making (and bridging) may also be characterized as one between a traditional idea of memorializing—the *ihai* and remains in their quite secluded place alongside the enlightened, and a modern concept of memory—the stones in the gardens, inscribed with the living names of the deceased and holding, in suspended animation, objects of recollection.

The dual grave system at Tōchōji also parallels the multi-locality of ancestors more generally. The apparent contradiction of praying to ancestors before the family altar at home, while also visiting them at graves and inviting them home from the other world (*anoyo* あの世) for summer *obon* festivities, has long been puzzled over by anthropologists, but rarely seems to trouble informants. Within En no Kai as well there are a variety of interpretations over the two main sites. While the pamphlet informs us that the water garden is the site for family and friends to visit the deceased, and I have often encountered members praying beside the side of the pond, an En no Kai staff member assured me that the garden was “just for show.” One member, whose mother is interred at Tōchōji, told me that since there was no memorial item in the stone, she had no feeling toward it. She then confided that she had been talked out of putting in her mother’s glasses by an elderly acquaintance, who assured her that, “in the next world you don’t need glasses, or a cane, or anything.”

Bonds and Precepts

In addition to refiguring how members deal with memory and memorialization, Tōchōji is also offering a new take on social relations. Traditionally, social bonds in

Japan are based either on blood (*ketsuen* 血縁) or region (*chien* 地縁). Significantly, in the name of Tōchōji’s burial society, En no Kai, we see the term *en* offered without any modifier. As temple literature and En no Kai members will alike attest, the group is striving to break free of traditional bonds, in order to allow people to choose where and with whom they are interred. This requires a new concept of social relations based on friendship and choice that can alleviate fears of dying without someone to tend one’s grave—of becoming a “disconnected Buddha” (*muenbotoke* 無縁仏).³¹ As the pamphlet for Tōchōji’s En no Kai explains, “The members of En no Kai create bonds that transcend those of blood and region, and pray for each other’s souls. To have no bonds (*muen*) does not mean loneliness, but rather that one can connect to people without any limits. As this temple moves into the future, we will pray for the souls of all those resting here.” This positive refiguring of dying without connections, traditionally seen as a lonely and frightening possibility, represents a fundamental change in the conception of family and reveals, in ways statistics on increased numbers of nuclear households cannot, how far removed many urban Japanese are from the ideals of the extended household (*ie*).

Tōchōji’s attempt to create new bonds among its members and between members and the temple is based on more than liberalizing grave restrictions. Within two or three months of joining En no Kai, members are expected to take part in the “First Day Service” (*tsuitachi hōyō* 一日法要) that culminates in them receiving the Buddhist precepts. Held on the first day of every month, this event is designed to provide the participants with a medley of traditional monastic experiences. Roughly thirty to forty new members arrive at noon and are asked to put on monastic work clothes (*samue* 作務衣) and a nametag. The group is divided in half, and the rest of the afternoon is spent taking turns wiping down the main hall, sitting *zazen*, copying out the Heart Sutra (*shakyō* 写經), and attending memorial services in the main hall. The events are tailored to the generally elderly members and are thus not overly taxing—the *zen* work (*samu* 作務) of cleaning the hall lasts about ten minutes while the *zazen* session is only fifteen, with several members doing their sitting in chairs. Though it might be easy to discount this brief “tasting” of monastic ideals, all the members I interviewed spoke positively about the day and felt that it had drawn them closer to each other and to the temple. The priest who designed the program at Tōchōji pointed out that the average Japanese has an image of life at Zen temples as

31. *Muenbotoke*, literally “a buddha (corpse) with no bonds,” is used to refer to those who die without relations to take care of the grave. Abandoned graves are called *muenbaka* and may be emptied and replaced after a prescribed series of notifications in national newspapers. The remains that were in the grave are then moved to an anonymous group ossuary. This is still considered a most ignominious fate.

being very severe, and thus would not be satisfied unless they had at least done some zazen under the watchful eyes of a stick-wielding (*kyōsaku* 警策) monk.

At four in the afternoon, all the new members who have spent the day at the temple, along with a few, who for physical reasons, could not participate in the day's events, gather in the main hall for the precepts ceremony (*jukai shiki* 授戒式), a one hour adaptation based on the traditional seven-day ceremony (*jukaie* 授戒会). As this ritual is considered the most important for En no Kai members and is the point where Sōtō propagation (*kyōka* 教化) is most evident, it will be described here in some detail.

More significant (at least for the ethnographer) than the ceremony itself is the way it is explained to the members by one of the eight junior priests who take part. Before the actual ceremony begins, there is a dry run during which the attendees are told what will occur, what they must do, and the significance of each act. Members receive a yellow piece of paper called the repentance register (*sangechō* 懺悔帳), which advises them to “write down mistakes, second thoughts, or disagreeable events from your past. The *jukai* is the point at which you reflect on your past and, as a disciple of the Buddha (*hotoke no miko* 佛の御子), take the first step of a new life.”³² In large print below this is a passage in Chinese *kanbun* that reads “I take refuge in the honored Buddhas of the ten directions and transfer merit to the great saint Shakyamuni. Thus the winds and rain are favorable, the people are at ease, and the ten stages of the Bodhisattva are instantly transcended.”³³ Members are asked to write as many regrets or misdeeds as they like on the paper which will be burned during the *jukai* ceremony. When the young priest explains this to the participants, he takes pains to contrast the “Buddhist *sange*” with the “Christian *zange*.” While the latter is interpreted as an apology (*ayamari*), the former is focused on self-reflection (*hansei* 反省). To help the participants during the ceremony, posted on the front wall beside the altar are large posters that hold key texts for the ritual.³⁴ Included among these is the Repentance Verse (*sangemon* 懺悔文), which is taken directly from chapter two of the *Shushōgi* and reads: “All my past and harmful karma, born from beginningless greed, hate, and delusion, through body, speech, and mind, I now fully avow” (SŌTŌSHŪ SHŪMŪCHŌ 2001, p. 72).

After offering incense before the main altar, the members then receive their *wagesa* 輪袈裟 (a sort of “abbreviated” robe that is worn around the neck), take

32. Note here the similarity to the discussions of *jōbutsu* in the *Sōsai* book.

33. *Namu kie jippō butsu* 南無帰依十方佛, *Ekō daishō shaka nyōrai* 回向大聖釈迦如来, *Fūchō ujun min anraku* 風調雨順民安樂, *Jūji junchō bunanji* 十地頓超無難事. These were pieced together from different texts. The priest was doubtful that more than a handful of En no Kai members would understand the text, but was sure that all would believe in its efficacy.

34. I was told these were put up to mimic the atmosphere of Chinese temples. It was also clear from the numerous sideways glances that they provide helpful guidance to those participating in the ceremony.

refuge in the three treasures of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, and then promise to uphold the three ideals of a bodhisattva (*sanju jōkai* 三聚淨戒) and ten prohibitions (*jūjūkai* 重十戒).³⁵ After each of the prohibitions is named, those in attendance respond “I will uphold it well” (*yoku tamotsu*). During the explanation for the ceremony the priest informs the participants that there were more prohibitions in India, but in Japan only ten. Another important distinction is that, while in India the prohibition is against any drinking of alcohol, in Japan it simply warns against drinking too much. This is a good thing, he confides, since he, too, is fond of a cold beer now and then (1 March 2004).

After swearing to uphold the prohibitions, the new disciples circle around the front again to receive the small card that holds their posthumous name and connects them in a direct line of descent through the head priest back to the historical Buddha (*kechimyaku*). A priest then sings (*shōmyō* 唱名) the names of ten Buddhas and bodhisattvas to which, after the recitation of each name, all gathered respond with “Honored Buddhas of the three worlds” (*namu sanze shobutsu* 南無三世諸佛).³⁶

Next, the head priest Takizawa sets the *sangechō* on fire and mounts the main altar, which has been cleared for the event. The members pass before him in turn as he taps them lightly on the head with a small brush that has been dipped in water and first touched to his own forehead. This is explained to the group either as “water of gratitude” (*arigatai mizu*) or “water of wisdom” (*chie no mizu*) and is meant to signify the bond between the members and the head priest, as well as to indicate that they are all the same. After all the members have been so anointed, they mount the platform in three groups of about thirteen people. The eight junior priests and Takizawa then perform nine full supplications before the new, rather nervous-looking disciples. Finally, the members take the four Bodhisattva vows, which are also written out at the front of the hall.³⁷ The ceremony ends with all the priests circling the room ringing bells and chanting. The group of initiates then moves downstairs, where they partake in the evening monastic meal (*yakuseki* 薬石) and ask the junior priest to explain their posthumous names.

How the new members perceive the *jukai* ceremony is a difficult question. Though a cynical reading of the ceremony might see it as just so much smoke and

35. The three sets of ideal precepts are: keeping all precepts, practicing all virtuous deeds, and granting mercy to all sentient beings. For more details see the Digital Dictionary of Buddhism at www.acmuller.net/ddb/. Accessed 5 July 2004.

36. *Namu* 南無 is often seen in liturgical formulas and means “to pay homage to” or “to submit oneself to” (Digital Dictionary of Buddhism: www.acmuller.net/ddb/. Accessed 5 July 2004). The priest explains *namu* to the group as an extremely polite form of address that means something similar to the honorific, Japanese term “*sama*,” used in extremely polite situations after someone’s name.

37. The vows read: “Sentient beings are innumerable, I vow to enlighten them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to eradicate them. The Dharmas are limitless, I vow to master them. The Buddha way is unsurpassed, I vow to attain it.”

vows, the finale, when the new members are standing atop the dias with the priests and other members bowing before them is an undeniably powerful moment that none of them has ever experienced in a temple before (FIGURE 3).³⁸ It is also vital to note here that, for almost all lay Japanese, including the *danka* of Tōchōji, the Buddhist name, *kaimyō*, along with precepts, are given posthumously.³⁹ For laity to actually take the precepts while still alive is extremely rare, even in a shortened ceremony such as that offered by Tōchōji.



FIGURE 3: The precepts ceremony (*jukai shiki*). Photo by author.

En no Kai Events

The head priest of Tōchōji, Takizawa Kazuo 滝沢和夫, hopes that receiving the precepts will lead members to participate actively in the wide variety of temple events and rituals available to them. Members are kept up-to-date on temple happenings through *Banki* 萬亀, a glossy, forty-page quarterly magazine that is sent to all members. In addition to a message from the head priest Takizawa and regular contributions from members about the meaning of En no Kai, the

38. To stand atop the main altar in front of a hall full of people while nine or more priests are supplicating themselves before you is not an average temple experience in Japan. A typical Buddhist ceremony involves briefly offering incense before the central image while priests chant sutras.

39. According to one of the priests at Tōchōji, since the beginning of En no Kai, about one *danka* a year has decided to take the precepts while alive.

magazine also includes information on the Dharma talk and vegetarian meal club (*Hōwa to shōjin ryōri no kai* 法話と精進料理の会), the monthly Buddhist Culture lecture, the zazen club, the origami and flower arranging circles, the chorus, and the yearly trips, both local and abroad, sponsored by the temple. *Banki* also features regular articles by priests, scholars, and En no Kai staff on a wide variety of subjects from the *Shushōgi* to Alzheimer's disease.

Another important event for integrating En no Kai members into the Tōchōji community is the yearly *hōza* 法座. Though these meetings may include a certain degree of sermonizing by the attending priest, it would be misleading to call them dharma talks. The ninety-minute gatherings of up to twenty people are taken up primarily by self-introductions that turn into long narratives about how each person came to join the group. Outside of the *jukai* services and trips, the *hōza* provides the longest and most intimate space available for members to bond. The first time I took part in a *hōza* at Tōchōji, my group's meeting was held in the coffee shop in the lower levels of the temple and was led by the head priest of another Sōtō temple in Tokyo who often helps out at Tōchōji. During the self-introduction period, it became apparent that the main reason that everyone had joined En no Kai was in order not to burden his or her children.⁴⁰ In addition to confounding the ethnographer, who was under the impression that most Japanese were entering eternal memorial graves precisely because they had no children (or at least no sons), this also produced a strong response from the priest. He told the group that, in the past, before the advent of funeral companies, it was a lot of trouble to organize and to carry out a funeral, and therefore people appreciated the importance and gravity of death. As the funeral and care of the dead have gotten easier, the importance of death has become "lighter" and every successive generation of young people holds life in lower regard. He therefore urged all of the members to trouble their children (*meiwaku o kakete*) and to cause them worry (*shinpai o saseru beki*) so as to teach them the significance of life and death. Though the priest's lecture fed off of broad societal fears over increased violent crime by children and reaffirmed the "golden age" bias of the elder members, it also seemed to contradict the primary reason that most choose En no Kai. And while much has been written about the practice of ancestor worship in Japan, the popularity of eternal memorial graves among those with children points to what some are calling descendant worship (*shison sūhai* 子孫崇拜).

40. According to En no Kai staff, 60 percent of all members have children. Furthermore, according to the internal survey carried out on the members, the number one reason for seeking out an eternal memorial grave was to avoid burdening family members (58 percent) whereas only 17 percent were doing it because they had no descendants.

The Business of Religion

The En no Kai counter in the downstairs lobby of the temple provides a recognizable and approachable access point for guests. There are five regular staff members who interact with En no Kai members, potential members, and temple priests. None of the staff is a priest, and all work for Annex, the business consulting company that manages En no Kai in partnership with Tōchōji. When someone inquires at the temple about joining, it is one of the staff who outlines the process, takes them on a tour of the grounds, and will later become their liaison with the group and the temple. Each of the En no Kai staffers is in charge of anywhere from five hundred to one thousand five hundred members. They dress in regular clothes in the temple and would never be mistaken for priests, though one senior staffer always wears Buddhist work clothes (*samue*).

Staff members explained that their role at the temple was to take care of the office work and consultation, while the priests take care of the religious rites. This distinction is not always so clear in practice, however, as is demonstrated by their role in helping new members choose their posthumous names. With roughly forty people joining every month, I was told that the head priest is unable to meet with all the new members personally. The job of helping new members choose their *kaimyō* and explaining its significance then falls to the En no Kai staff. One young staff member admitted to me that when he discusses the *kaimyō* he does not really understand the religious meaning and simply explains it as a way to look back upon one's life. He feels that, through their job of talking to new members about their lives, the staff are like "new counselors" (*atarashii kaunserā*). He also added that, at thirty-five, he was just the right age to be a son to most of the members, who are in their sixties. Other staff members are closer to the age of the average member and are thus able to interact on an equal level. In either case, he pointed out that there was an intimacy between the staff and the members of En no Kai that the priests of the temple could not attain. He also felt that the staff members, with a wide variety of real-life experiences among them, were better able to interact well with people and to speak before crowds. Intriguingly though, he told me that his experiences at Tōchōji have led him seriously to consider taking the tonsure.

This, then, is the paradox that En no Kai and Tōchōji pose, both to scholars of religion and to other Buddhist temples. For it is at this point that the business interests of En no Kai and the role sought by many Buddhist temples as centers of emotional and spiritual support coincide so successfully. Regardless of how one interprets the role of a business company co-operating a group on temple grounds, the effects of this partnership are undeniably improving relations between urban Japanese and Tōchōji. In speaking to several female members who have had their spouses interred at Tōchōji, what is most striking about their stories is the glowing terms in which they speak of how the various En no

Kai staff members took care of all the funeral and burial arrangements for the respective husbands. They often relate how, with one phone call, everything was taken care of. While this may not seem particularly striking, it is in fact quite rare, particularly in urban areas, for people to call a Buddhist temple first when there is a death in the family. Since at least the 1960s, there has been a conspicuous shift from temples to professional funeral companies in the shouldering of mortuary rites.⁴¹ It was therefore surprising to hear of a metropolitan temple being called upon to make all the mortuary arrangements, and my initial reaction was one of cynicism. Evidently, I thought, Tōchōji has simply bypassed the middle man and added the role of the funeral company to its long list of services. In fact, I was later able to confirm with the head priest Takizawa that this was precisely one of the factors in creating the burial society.

In talking to members of En no Kai, however, it became obvious that this was not simply a case of one-stop shopping. The women did not use terms like “convenience” (*benrisa* 便利さ) or “simplicity” (*kantansa* 簡単さ) that one usually hears in reference to business services, but rather “I was so relieved” (*hotto shita*) and “they put my mind at ease” (*anshin dekita*). Several of the women assured me that their emotional connection to the temple had in fact grown stronger through these interactions with En no Kai staff.

One metaphor that comes to mind for conceptualizing the place of the En no Kai staff within the temple is that of a computer operating system that provides an interface between the confusing and often indecipherable code which makes the computer run, and the casual user who needs access. The staff provide a middle ground within the temple precincts, between Buddhist priests, rituals, and customs that most Japanese know little about, and a public that is still very much bound to these services.

Michiko's Story

There are over 5900 different personal stories of En no Kai. To pick one as representative is like choosing Tōchōji to stand for all Sōtō temples, or Sōtō to characterize all of Japanese Buddhism. However, rather than trying to present a pastiche of different stories, combined into a constructed narrative, I have decided to offer one “case study.” The point is not to essentialize En no Kai members, but rather to hint at the diverse complexity that exists at the individual level and to offer some points of contradiction to the depiction of Tōchōji I have presented.

“Michiko” was born in Nagoya in 1942 as an only child.⁴² Her mother divorced when she was very young, and for various personal reasons, forty years

41. For information on the postwar rise of funeral companies, see ROWE 2000.

42. Michiko's name has been changed. I would like to thank her here for her willingness to speak with me so openly about her life.

ago the two of them moved to Tokyo, where they lived together until her mother died last year at age eighty-nine. Having broken ties in Nagoya, they wanted to get a new grave in Tokyo, but realized that this was impossible without having someone to take care of it. As Michiko told me, “Even if you go in and lie about having descendants, after you die there will be no one to keep up the grave and you will end up *muen*.” Around 1997 they began noticing ads for new graves that did not require descendants, including one for En no Kai.

On taking the tour of Tōchōji, Michiko was impressed by the temple architecture. “I really liked the main hall. It was so simple. Sōtō temples are usually so garish!” The other deciding factor was the professionalism of the En no Kai staff member that she met. “I never spoke to a priest, but the contract was solid and the staff member was thorough and professional (*shikkari shiteiru*). Michiko and her mother had seen other ads and stories, but what got their attention, and what cemented their decision to have Michiko’s mother join, was that the ads made clear that En no Kai was backed by an actual temple.⁴³ “It was very important to me that the name of the temple was included in the ads. Otherwise you don’t know what will happen, if there isn’t a temple behind it, the place might go under at some point.” When I pressed her on whether her desire for a temple backing the grave was only out of fear that a commercial site might fold, while a temple never would, she agreed that this was part of it, but insisted that she also wanted to make sure that someone would be there to carry on the *kuyō* for her mother. “I didn’t really have any religious feeling myself, but I wanted memorial services for my mother.” Michiko knew that even if she lived a long life she would not be alive to perform services for another thirty-three years. “I worried that if I didn’t find an alternative, then I would have no choice but to ask that my mother be accepted back into the family grave in Nagoya. And they probably wouldn’t even take her. This is why *muen* is so frightening. I don’t care if I am abandoned, but I could not let that happen to my mother.” By this time, her mother was physically unable to take part in the *jukai* ceremony, so Michiko did it in her place. Michiko jokes that this makes her one of the only members who has performed the ceremony twice. After she participated in the *jukaishiki* in her mother’s place, Michiko did not return to the temple again until her mother died in 2003, some six years later.

Michiko decided to join En no Kai herself on the hundredth day after her mother’s death. “After my mother died, I couldn’t help but enter. I think she decided for both of us.” When I asked about her experience of the *jukai* ceremony, she admitted that she did not really understand the explanation of the

43. The popularity of eternal memorial graves is suggested by a guidebook, about to go into its fourth printing, to over 320 sites across Japan (BUTSUIJI GAIDO 2003). My research to date indicates that many of these graves, like the grave parks built during the economic bubble of the late 1980s, are actually run by stone masonry companies (*ishiya* 石屋) who have “borrowed” a temple’s religious persons (*shūkyō hōjin* 宗教法人) status. For a related example see HARDACRE 1997, pp. 212–16.

ceremony. “I was very nervous at that time. I didn’t really know what was going on. Most of us were just worried about falling off the platform, but what can you do? When I stood on the platform and they said we had become children of the Buddha—those words are the only ones that stuck with me. Later when I thought back on it, I thought that they do that because it’s a ceremony. Of course how you take it really depends on your age. I guess you could say that it brought out some religious feelings in me.” She then clarified this remark by pointing out that this was how she felt when she did the ceremony on her mother’s behalf, and she was not yet a member herself. “When I did it again recently, I did not think about these things. I just went about it like a ritual event.”

Since her mother died, Michiko visits the temple twice a month on the first and on the day of her mother’s death. She does not take part in the evening ceremonies on the first, but rather in the afternoon before the crowds arrive. She also attends temple services during the equinox services (*higan* 彼岸), the summer festival of the dead (*obon* お盆), and New Year’s Eve (*joya no kane* 除夜の鐘). When she visits, she first bows before the gate in front of the main hall but does not go to the water garden. She then goes straight downstairs to the Rakandō. She bows and offers incense before the En no Kai *ihai* and altar, and then she goes to her mother’s memorial tablet. She has the position memorized—“xx shelf xx from the left.” Like many En no Kai members, however, she also has a Buddhist altar in her home, where she speaks to her mother every day. When I asked where her mother is now, she answered without hesitation: “At home.”

Michiko does not feel that she is *danka* because she is not obligated to support (*mamoru*) the temple economically. Rather, she feels that the temple supports her and the other En no Kai members. When I asked her if she felt like Tōchōji was her home temple (*bodaiji* 菩提寺) she replied, “At some point I might feel that way, but not now. I know I am contradicting myself. Even though I want the temple to do my *kuyō*, I don’t yet feel like this is my *bodaiji*. As I get older, I think the feeling will slowly come. I haven’t been involved for that long. When I am older it will be more fun to come to the temple.”

Conclusions

In a wonderful passage on Buddhism in the Tokugawa and Meiji periods, James Ketelaar writes that “there is a preconception of Buddhism as a philosophically complete system trapped within a hopelessly inept institutional framework, such that the historical object called ‘Buddhism’ could never be adequate to the standards set by those who desired to control its promulgation and sociality; ‘Buddhism’ could only ever be tending toward, or attempting to revive itself from, its ‘destruction’” (KETELAAR 1990, p. 11). Though arguably free from government persecution today, Buddhism still suffers from this need to justify its actions and to account for its manifestation in society—namely in its primary role of providing

mortuary rites for the population. Within Japanese Buddhist groups there is an ongoing and internal struggle to define and maintain a pure center based in texts and in the lives of founders versus a religious tradition that is very much embedded in the vagaries of society. This is certainly not new to Buddhism or to any tradition premised on renunciation of the world. And yet the implications of the different images of Buddhism that are produced by this schizophrenia have yet to be properly addressed in our studies. Note even here the language of disease; of a malady that must be understood, and then, presumably, treated. Once diagnosed as sick, the patient is already trapped in a cycle of treatment, unable to step outside of the discourse of illness and recovery.

As a way to avoid reaffirming this cycle I have tried to follow those scholars who argue against dependence on an overarching, trans-historical, and transpatial “Buddhism,” and instead advocate conceptualizing forms of Buddhism that are specific to time and locale.⁴⁴ I have argued that there are a number of “Buddhisms” at play at different sites of contemporary Sōtō, and it is my hope that the switch from a discussion of the Research Center and Komazawa University to a prosperous Tokyo temple was a jarring one for readers. The sense of disjunction that I was endeavoring to induce is precisely the reality that Sōtō and other Buddhist sects are facing. This is reflected both in the different agendas of the various groups in charge of propagating the sect and its teachings and in the ways the sect struggles to adapt normative doctrine to everyday temple realities. There are those forms of Sōtō Buddhism, primarily doctrinal, that are taught at universities such as Komazawa, there are the different concepts of Buddhism taken up by the three research organs of the sect, there is the orthodox Buddhism that is taught at training monasteries such as Eiheiiji and carried in the minds of young priests, and there are the nearly 15,000 Buddhisms that they encounter at temples throughout the country.

Acknowledging the rhetorical flourish of “15,000 Buddhisms,” I would still argue that different groups within the Sōtō sect are focused on different aspects of what constitutes “Buddhism.” For doctrinal and sectarian scholars, Sōtō Buddhism is primarily the teachings of the sect’s two founders, Dōgen and Keizan, hermetically sealed in their writings and thus preserved against the ravages of history and decline. For the Sōtō Mission, Contemporary Sōtō, and the Comprehensive Research Centers, however, the focus is on Sōtō Buddhism as an organization—one that is deeply rooted in society and history. To those in the Zen Studies (*shūgaku*) Research Division and those in the Buddhist Studies Department at Komazawa, Buddhism is simply a different object of knowledge than it is for those focused on propagation (*kyōka*) or contemporary studies.⁴⁵ It

44. SHARF 2001, pp. 16–17. COMPANY ’s remarks on Daoism (2003, pp. 291–94) are also relevant here.

45. At the yearly conference of the Research Center, the two sides actually present on different days with the first day dedicated to the “*kyōka purogramu*” and the second to *shūgaku*.

is the Mission Division (*Kyōka kenshū bumon*) that is in charge of carrying out the sect's major internal surveys every ten years, and it is the Research Center, guided by Sasaki and Nara, that is leading an ethnographic turn toward the *genba*. Viewing the different research groups and departments at Komazawa as all working to perpetuate Sōtō misses the fact that maintaining the teachings and maintaining the organization are very different enterprises.

What kind of object then is Sōtō Buddhism at Tōchōji? As Ian Reader notes, what makes a temple Sōtō is its ceremonial form and its acceptance of Sōtō views and the teachings of Dōgen (READER 1983, pp. 396–97). Ceremonies at Tōchōji closely follow the Sōtō ritual manual and draw heavily on the *Shushōgi*, but when considering Tōchōji's approach to the teachings we must also bear in mind the way in which the staff of En no Kai market the temple and interact with members and parishioners. Professional copywriting, slick packaging, and “new counseling” serve to further the selective adaptation and eclectic mix that constitutes the Buddhism presented by the temple. In this way, the paintings that line the walls around the water garden, with their uninhibited fusion of rural and modern landscapes, classic Buddhist iconography, and stark images of contemporary Japanese society, are an apt metaphor for the combination of normative doctrine, tradition, marketing, and modernity that constitute Tōchōji.

Tōchōji forces us to reflect on what temple affiliation actually represents in contemporary Japan: what it means for someone to be a *danka* of a temple or to refer to a temple as one's *bodaiji* and how this is different from being a member (*kain*) of a burial society. Does En no Kai represent a break with past traditions or simply an adaptation of the *danka* system, replacing rhetoric surrounding the continuity of the extended family with ideals of individual freedom? Regardless of where one comes down on this question, Tōchōji has tapped into a desire by people to be interred and memorialized at a Buddhist temple without the traditional restrictions and responsibilities of being a *danka*. Municipal and commercial versions of communal graves exist throughout the Tokyo metropolitan area, many at much lower costs than Tōchōji, but these do not offer the soteriological comfort and stability of being interred at a temple.⁴⁶ Of course as Michiko's responses revealed, the wish to be buried at a temple may involve both the *desire* for Buddhist memorial services and a *belief* that a temple will never go bankrupt.

This article has presented diverse perspectives on the funeral problem at various “sites” of the Sōtō sect. The first concerns the struggle by sect intellectuals to safeguard the distinctiveness and purity of Sōtō doctrine in the face of a mortuary reality that is the cornerstone of the sect's economic and social base. The second centers on the activity of a Tokyo temple that, though seemingly atypical,

46. There are two municipal communal graves (*gassōshiki bojo* 合葬式墓所) in the Tokyo area. Neither offer *kuyō* services and they are priced between 65,000 and 108,000 yen per person (BUTSURI GAIDO 2003, pp. 44–47).

represents an increasingly popular response among temples of all the major sects to changing societal structures. We must also speak here of a third site, the members of En no Kai, who often have little understanding and even less interest in the doctrinal underpinnings of Buddhist rituals. A majority of these people, like many *danka*, are only concerned with securing grave space and memorial services for themselves and their loved ones. The challenge facing both the Sōtō sect and scholars of Japanese Buddhism is to devise the methods and conceptual frameworks that validate the often competing voices emanating from the diversity of sites that constitute Sōtō Zen.

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