

Rinzai Zen in the Modern World

It is an honor to commemorate and a joy to celebrate together this 1,150th anniversary. For I owe my life to Rinzai Zen practice. That is no exaggeration. Without it, my life would surely have been wasted. For me, there is no doubt: Rinzai Zen is vital and alive in the world today.

However, it is also in crisis. Beginning with a brief overview of Rinzai Zen's introduction in the modern world, I will then turn to the present crisis and offer some suggestions. Your frank response and cooperation are deeply appreciated.

How was the Rinzai branch of Japanese Zen Buddhism introduced to America and to the modern world? How has it been experienced and understood?

In 1549, Francis Xavier had already written in general about Zen practice in letters that arrived safely in Europe. The first of these letters was written in Malacca, two days before Xavier even departed for Japan, based on information he had learned from his Japanese interpreter-assistant.¹

Engelbert Kaempfer arrived in a closed Japan in 1690 and returned to Europe after two years with an encyclopedic knowledge of things Japanese, including zazen and satori. These were eventually published in several languages.²

However, it is generally considered that Shaku Sôen (1860-1919; aka Sôyen) introduced Zen to the modern world at the World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago in September 1893, twenty-five years after the Meiji Restoration. The seventeen-day parliament of religions was part of the Chicago World's Fair (aka Chicago Columbian Exposition), commemorating the 400th anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. An extraordinary gathering of religious leaders from around the globe.

Shaku Sôen was extraordinary by any standards. He completed his formal Rinzai practice in his mid-twenties, went on to study at *Keiô Gijuku* (presently Keio University), then traveled to Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) where he studied and practiced the Theravada tradition before becoming head abbot of Engakuji.



This fellow was a son of Nobusuke Goemon Ichenose of Takahama, the province of Wakasa. His nature was stupid and tough. When he was young, none of his relatives liked him. When he was twelve years old, he was ordained as a monk by Ekkei, Abbot of Myo-shin Monastery. Afterwards, he studied literature under Shungai of Kennin Monastery for three years, and gained nothing. Then he went to Mii-dera and studied Tendai philosophy under Tai-ho for a summer, and gained nothing. After this, he went to Bizen and studied Zen under the old teacher Gisan for one year, and attained nothing. He then went to the East, to Kamakura, and studied under the Zen master Ko-sen in the Engaku Monastery for six years, and added nothing to the aforesaid nothingness. He was in charge of a little temple, Butsu-nichi, one of the temples in Engaku Cathedral, for one year and from there he went to Tokyo to attend Kei-o College for one year and a half, making himself the worst student there; and forgot the nothingness that he had gained. Then he created for himself new delusions, and came to Ceylon in the spring of 1887; and now, under the Ceylon monk, he is studying the Pali Language and Hinayana Buddhism. Such a wandering mendicant! He ought to repay the twenty years of debts to those who fed him in the name of Buddhism.

July 1888, Ceylon.

Soyen Shaku

And yet, Shaku Sôen's two addresses at the parliament did not mention Rinzai or even Zen. It was the lay-cleric known as Hirai Kinza (1859-1916) who

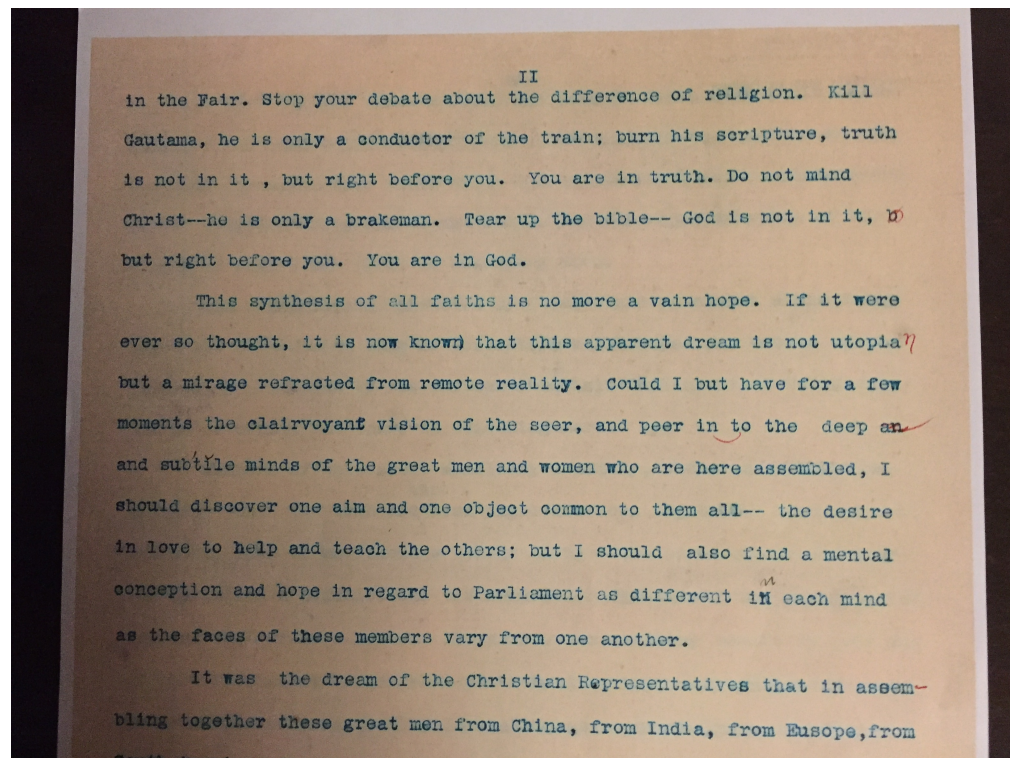
introduced Rinzai Zen to America and the modern world at the 1893 parliament in Chicago. Like Shaku Sôen, in his parliament addresses Hirai Kinza did not mention Rinzai or Zen as such. After all, Americans at that time had little knowledge of Buddhism, let alone the various branches of Japanese Buddhism.

But Hirai did boldly declare – in fluent English – in his address on “Synthetic Religion” at the parliament:

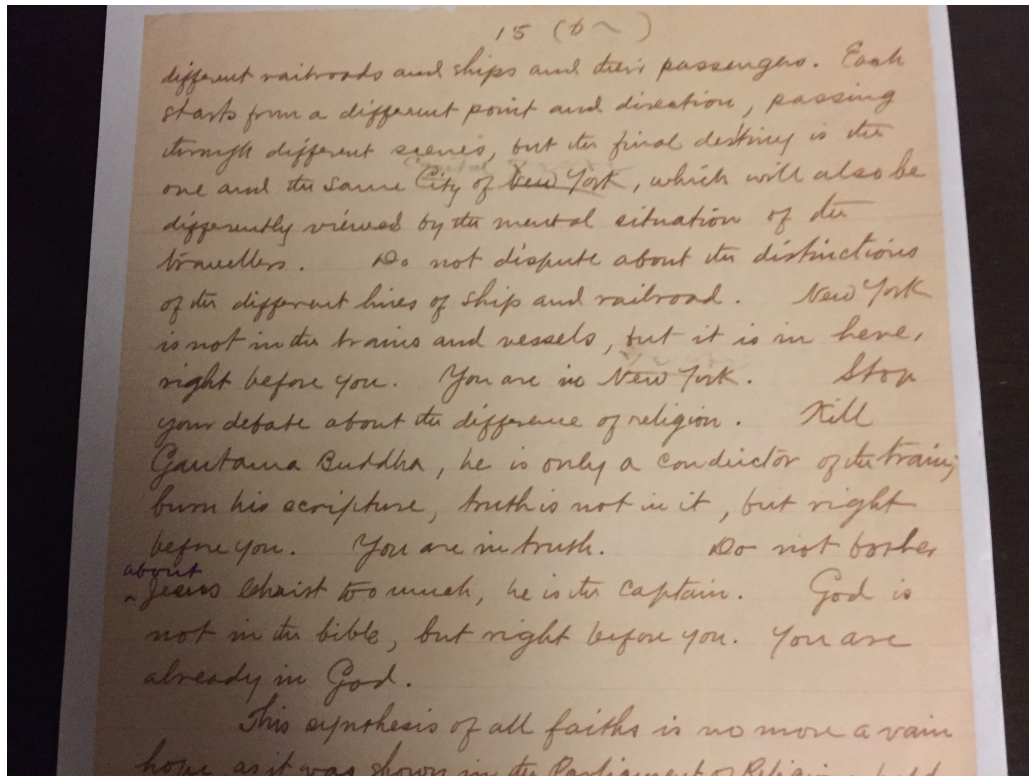
Stop your debate about the difference of religion. Kill Gautama, he is only a conductor of the train; burn his scripture, truth is not in it, but right before you. You are in truth. Do not mind Christ – he is only a brakeman. Tear up the Bible – God is not in it, but right before you.

This statement clearly echoes the Record of Rinzai, which Hirai was familiar with. He was a lay-cleric of the Myôshinji school and was also known by his Dharma name “Riuge”

These and other controversial statements of Hirai were expunged from the official account first published in 1893 and edited by parliament chairman John Henry Barrows. However, they were published the following year in Neely’s account, and also in newspapers and magazines from New York to California.³



Page 11, typewritten manuscript of Synthetic Religion, delivered by Hirai Kinza at World’s Parliament of Religions.



Revised, handwritten manuscript of Synthetic Religion, delivered throughout the United States.
Above "the City of New York" is written "Capitol of Washington" in English & *katakana* syllabary.

A decade later, in July 1902, Ida Evelyn Russell (1862-1917; aka Mrs. Alexander Russell), along with a small group, arrived in Japan and spent several months practicing at Engakuji under Shaku Sôen. This seems to be the first time Americans were allowed to do traditional Rinzai practice. Through the invitation of Ida Russell, Shaku Sôen made a second trip to the States in 1905. With the help of his lay-disciple and interpreter D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), Shaku Sôen gave further instructions in Zen practice and offered the traditional practice of *sanzen*, again without regard to gender. These two events, in 1902-1903 at Engakuji in Kamakura and in 1905-1906 in San Francisco, could be considered the second introduction of Rinzai Zen – this time of formal Rinzai practice – to the modern world.⁴

Ten years later, on July 11, 1915 – one century ago – Thomas Kirby was ordained and given the name Shaku Sôkaku (aka Sôgaku; 宗覺) by Shaku Sôen. Kirby was an Englishman who became a Roman Catholic monk in Canada before traveling to Japan. Unfortunately, the year after his ordination he fell ill and had to return to Vancouver to convalesce. Kirby eventually recovered and worked to spread not Rinzai Zen but the broader Mahayana faith. He seems to have been the first Westerner to become a Rinzai monk, though it was not through the traditional Rinzai ordination ceremony:

As a special mark of esteem Mr. Kirby was accorded the longer and more elaborate Pâli ordination (which the Rt. Rev. Sôyen Shaku himself

received in Ceylon) rather than the usual ceremony which Japanese priests receive.⁵

Samuel L. Lewis, a friend of Kirby's who studied both Rinzai Zen and Sufi teachings, reported hearing the following from Kirby:

There he was, an almost aristocratic Englishman in a far off land, having surrendered home, family, customs, everything, and all he was receiving in turn were beatings. He finally could stand it no longer and determined to run away. After being severely chastised he fled down a hill and in his agony dropped to the ground, grasped a pine tree and cried aloud. In that moment It happened.⁶

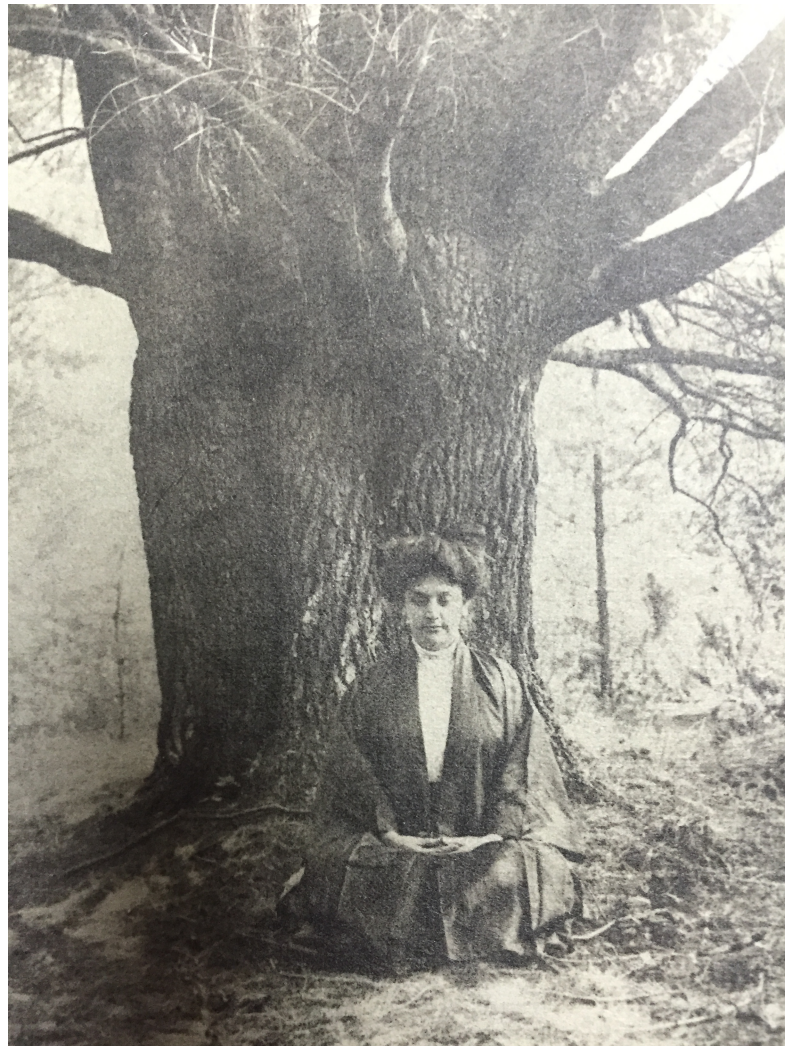


Thomas Kirby (Shaku Sôkaku), unidentified, Shaku Sôen, D. T. Suzuki, Beatrice Lane Suzuki at Engakuji c. 1915-1916.

At about the same time, Beatrice Erskine Lane Suzuki (1875-1939), D. T. Suzuki's American wife, was also practicing. Her reminiscence is quite a contrast from Kirby's monastic initiation:

Some years ago I had the privilege of living within the temple of Engakuji, sitting for meditation in the Zendô under the direction of the Master who, at that time, was the Rev. Tenshin Hirota, although I had already received some instruction in Zen from the Rev. Sôyen Shaku when he was in America. The Rev. Tenshin permitted me to sit in the Zendô with the monks and to attend the Sanzen interviews. I was given a kôan, that is a problem upon which to settle my consciousness.

I was able to take part in a number of the Sesshin periods, including the December one, when each student makes strenuous efforts to master his kôan. I had a special mat assigned to me and clad in a black robe in order to look less conspicuous as a woman and a Westerner, I took part in every detail of the monkish discipline during the Sesshin periods, and I came to know the Engakuji Zendô in all seasons and aspects. Eventually I was given my Zen name of Seiren [青蓮] and counted as one of the Rôshi's disciples. Even now the memory of those days is happy and comforting.⁷





Beatrice sitting under a tree in the USA in 1907; Beatrice Lane Suzuki in Kamakura, 1915

By this time, her husband D. T. Suzuki had already been translating and writing about Zen Buddhism, culminating in his influential three-part series *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, first published in 1927, 1933, and 1934. Rinzai Zen practice was presented in some detail in these essays, along with works such as *The Training of the Zen Buddhist Monk*, first published in 1934.

Ruth Fuller Sasaki (1892-1967) is another woman who first learned the basics of Zen practice in the States and then did traditional Rinzai practice in Japanese monasteries. After meeting D. T. Suzuki in 1930, in 1932 she began practicing under Kôno Mukai (aka Nanshinken) at Nanzenji in Kyoto. She was also instrumental in developing Zen scholarship in English and presenting translations of Zen works, including the Record of Rinzai. Here is her reflection from 1954:

I am always happy when I can sit again in the zendo. The first night I sat in Nanzen-ji zendo I knew that at last I had come home. That was many years ago, but the memory of that experience, perhaps the experience itself, is as vivid today as then. Unfortunately, times have changed and no zendo is quite what it was in the "old days." But under any circumstances sitting in a zendo is wonderful. There is an atmosphere which no other place can quite duplicate. The big quiet room, the dim light, the faint smell of coarse incense, the cold fresh air, the sounds of the night coming in from a distance – passing voices, the throb of the Nichiren drum, the notes of a flute, the Chinese noodle man's whistle, all melt into you and you into them. You are not unaware of them, but they are not outside of you. You include them all. Some time I hope you may all know the experience.⁸

Shaku Sôen visited the United States twice: in 1893 and in 1905-1906. In 1906 his adopted son and Dharma heir Shaku Sôkatsu traveled to California with a few of his disciples and stayed for four years, though Shaku Sôkatsu concluded that the time was not yet ripe. Senzaki Nyogen, another disciple of Shaku Sôen, arrived in California about the same time and decided to stay. The other disciple of Shaku Sôen who stayed in the United States was Sasaki Shigetsu (aka Sôkeian and Sôkei-an). Sôkeian remained in the States until 1919, then traveled back and forth between the States and Japan while continuing his practice under Sôkatsu. Sôkeian finally settled in New York City where he founded the First Zen Institute of America in 1930.

Here is a translation of a poem written in Japanese by Senzaki Nyogen (1876-1958) and published in 1934:

Thoughts as they come
By Senzaki Nyogen

*It all started out as a journey for the time being, with me a dharma friend,
But now, just seeing these zazen chairs, how they fill me with nostalgia.
Day after day that dear flower in the crannied wall was my Buddha,
And oh how I would worship you as I held you in my hand.
Calling on friends of old in Frisco
Hither and thither I'd take lodging never knowing where.
As poor as I was at the country's language I had to lecture on Dharma,
Oh you people listening, won't you hurry up and become Buddhas!
However deep that Frisco fog rolling in, thinking of my friends then,*

*How constant they were in their bright and sunny outlook.
 Oh, puh-lease come to the rescue of this most clumsy of translators,
 Flat out I pray to you, O statue of great patron saint Jion Daishi!
 Those little tears in my black buddha robes I had to fix by myself,
 How this earned the sympathy of others many a time.
 The only thing waiting for me after returning from a day out and about,
 Just one sweet potato left over from breakfast that I happily partake.
 If it is my goal to make the buddha bloom in the American heart
 Then I have to master those words that go crawling across the page.
 No home to call my own am like a snail with nowhere to go,
 Happy to go on unknown dreaming of that grass hut down the road.
 Midsummer morning service, the sutra chanting is great,
 This voice, that voice weaving in and out like a fresh breeze,
 Born into a human life where people live to be a hundred,
 How dreadful to let even a single day go to waste⁹*

In the ensuing decades, many other Rinzai Zen representatives followed in the footsteps of Shaku Sôen and his disciples by visiting the States and elsewhere, and by offering opportunities for practice in Japan. They include Miura Isshû, Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, Hirata Seikô, Shibayama Zenkei, Ômori Sôgen, Hôzumi Genshō, Morinaga Sôkô, Fukushima Keidô, Harada Shôdô and others. (With the exception of Miura Isshû and Harada Shôdô, all of them, as well as D. T. Suzuki, taught at Hanazono University; Shaku Sôen, Ômori Sôgen, and Morinaga Sôkô served as presidents.) These efforts, along with the lifetime work of D. T. Suzuki, laid the foundations for Rinzai Zen in the contemporary world.

By the late 1950s-early 1960s a Zen boom was in full swing. The writings of D. T. Suzuki were finally becoming known to the masses, more Zen teachers were coming west, and more Westerners were going east. The Summer 1958 issue of *Chicago Review* was devoted to Zen and included D. T. Suzuki's "Rinzai on Zen," containing a few pages of translation and a brief commentary which begins: "What follows is the first English translation of a sermon from the *Sayings of Rinzai (Lin-chi Lu)*." In 1957 a workshop was held in Cuernavaca, Mexico, resulting in the volume *Zen Buddhism and Psychoanalysis*, published in 1960, which included 10 pages of the Record of Rinzai in D. T. Suzuki's translation. In 1972, psychotherapist Sheldon B. Kopp's self-help book became a bestseller, its title a now-familiar Rinzai paraphrase: *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*

Over the last several decades, scholarship by the international community has called much into question. This includes Zen's connection with martial arts and warfare. The naïve notion that Rinzai Zen equals koan Zen, for example, is cleared up by examining the Record of Rinzai: the term koan is not used once, and when similar terms are used, they are invariably being condemned.¹⁰ None of this has had much effect on the way Zen is actually being practiced, so I will leave it at that for now.

By the early 1960s, however, Western Zen practice started to go terribly wrong, resulting in the present crisis. In a nutshell, several Japanese monks who had spent time in Rinzai monasteries travelled to America and later to Europe. There they used their privileged position to abuse their disciples sexually and psychologically. Continued abuse, cover-ups, and widespread deceit over the last fifty years poisoned the practice environment. This made anything approaching genuine practice impossible, and caused many Westerners to dismiss Zen as a corrupt and dangerous cult. To this day, Japanese Rinzai Zen – its institutions as well as its monks and masters – have failed to respond. Sadly, this is the face of Rinzai Zen in much of the West today.¹¹

I met the two monks in the United States who were posing as leading Rinzai masters – one of the reasons I left the States and came to Japan to practice. At the time, however, I had no idea how troubled they were and what damage they were causing. (Similar tragedies and travesties over money, power, and sex have occurred within Sôtô Zen and *Sanbô Kyôdan* as well, but the focus here is on Rinzai Zen.)

The West has proved fertile ground for such abuse. Many Westerners, myself included, were driven by a strong desire for enlightenment. Some of the victims came to Zen psychologically troubled; they were especially easy prey. I have spoken with some of them, and with their therapists. It broke my heart. The sanctity of the *sanzen* room was actually being used to sexually abuse students.

Some victims admit that their own naiveté and ignorance contributed to the manipulation and abuse. The onus, however, lies squarely with the teachers. Some Japanese monks and masters already knew how troubled these Dharma brothers were before they ran away to the States. Others learned later. Who had the courage to speak up? Cultural differences aside, their silence is unconscionable. To many in the West, the failure to speak up makes Japanese monks and masters little better than accomplices, silently allowing the disease to fester and spread.

The disease runs deep. Some students continue to blindly believe in their master's enlightenment as if it were a magic wand. Overly literal, childish distortions of lineage and Dharma transmission fuel the magical thinking. All of this reveals an utter ignorance of basic Buddhist teaching and ethics, let alone Zen practice. It is not worth criticizing – except for the enormous damage done.

Some students continue clinging to their delusions for fear of losing their own cult status. There's no way around it: subservience to individuals who parade their delusions as enlightened activity is itself a delusion. And such delusions are still being transmitted as Zen in the West today. It brings tears to my eyes. From what I've seen, if someone were to gain a glimpse into the Dharma under such teachers, that glimpse would not be due to the teacher, but despite the teacher.

The situation has hardly improved. After several decades of scandalous behavior, lies, and cover-ups, have the perpetrators admitted their faults and mistakes, sought help, and offered their ill-gotten gains to aid those hurt? In true American-Zen style, one "master" and his "successor" have unwittingly proved themselves worthy of their stature – they sued each other.

Twisted individuals can become proficient in passing koans – without genuine transformation. They can then don robes and live off of, and prey on, their disciples. All the while propping themselves up as enlightened, compassionate beings. If Japanese Rinzai teachers are going to play a role in today's world, they need to face these facts and break free from their self-imposed ignorance and reticence.

Since *Sanbô Kyôdan* (and its branch-offs and breakaways) uses koans, it is often mistaken for Rinzai Zen in the West. This spawns further confusion and false or exaggerated claims. The ease with which a mere glimpse is mistaken for *kenshō* trivializes Zen into little more than psychological insight. It is not the *kenshō* of Rinzai Zen – and I have spoken with several teachers in this tradition who have the integrity to admit it. Frankly, most of the Zen I have seen in the West is not much of an improvement. Koan Zen needs to be redone from the ground up. (This will be dealt with next year, during events commemorating the 250th anniversary of Hakuin Ekaku's passing.)

Finally, what in Zen practice makes such corruption and abuse possible, and what can be done to prevent it? The loose manner in which almost anyone can be called a monastic, certified as a priest, and given some dubious authorization is one place to start. Related problems include the remnants of feudalism in contemporary Japanese Zen, the tendency to cut Zen off from its Buddhist context, distorting transmission and lineage into a kind of magic wand, using koan curriculum in a way that actually obstructs genuine inquiry, and depraved abuse of the sanctity of *sanzen*. Elsewhere I have addressed these issues in more detail and offered suggestions.¹²

What needs to be done now? Cult leaders, and those who have been virtually brainwashed by them, are difficult to reach. Sometimes those most in need of help assume that they are beyond such things. Their attitude already betrays them. Some have passed away. But it is still possible for those alive to have a genuine change of heart, drop the charade, and make amends. We must keep our hearts open and humbly offer the help needed, not only for those who have been conned, but also for the perpetrators themselves. All the while keeping our eye on what lies under our own feet.

To sum up: laymen such as Hirai Kinza and D. T. Suzuki introduced Rinzai Zen to the modern world; outstanding women such as Beatrice Lane Suzuki and Ruth Fuller Sasaki helped open monastery gates to the modern world. Despite the many false starts of Rinzai Zen in the West since then, there ARE genuine teachers quietly giving real guidance. From them a genuine Rinzai practice for the modern world will arise. It is this that we rejoice in and apply ourselves to.

There have always been deluded individuals who distort the teachings for their own selfish purposes. Following the death of the Buddha, a monk said not to grieve, for we are now no longer tormented by the Buddha telling us what is allowed and what is not; now we can do as we like. Hearing this, Mahakassapa (Skt.: Mahakasyapa) assembled five hundred monks to preserve the Buddha's teachings. Rinzai condemned – and in no uncertain terms! – what he called blind idiots, old shavepates, wild fox-spirits who can't tell right from wrong. After all,

Rinzai Zen only comes to life when one is dependent on nothing, within or without – deceived by no one, deceiving no one. Let us take this opportunity today to truly “know [our own] shame” so that the present quagmire can be cleaned up and the Way made clear.

Then, with the 1,200th memorial fifty years from now, a real and vital Zen will have taken root in the West. Let us open our eyes to what has happened. We cannot afford to hide our heads in the sand. Humbly aware of our own shortcomings, let us dedicate our lives to planting genuine Zen in the modern world and work together to ensure that it takes root. Thank you.

ABBREVIATIONS:

JZW = Jeff Shore, “Japanese Zen & the West: Beginnings” in *FAS Society Journal*, summer 1992, pp. 46-82.

日本禪 = 「日本の禪と欧米の出会い、歴史的研究」『花園大学文学部紀要』第24号 (March, 1992) pp. 43-85.

NOTES

¹ Quoted in George Schurhammer, *Francis Xavier: His Life, His Times* (Rome: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1982) Volume IV, pp. 68-69. Also see JZW pp. 50-51; 日本禪 pp. 48-49.

² See Engelbert Kaempfer, *History of Japan* (New York: AMS Press, 1971) Volume 2, pp. 57-58, 150, Volume 3, p. 219. Also see JZW p. 56; 日本禪 pp. 54-56.

³ Koichi Nozaki, "Hirai Kinza and Unitarianism" *Japanese Religions*, 34 (2), p. 162. Also see Walter R. Houghton, Editor, *Neely's History of The Parliament of Religions at the World's Columbian Exposition* (Chicago: F. Tennyson Neely: 1894) p. 802; "Buddhism" by James Burke in *The Semi-Weekly Staten Islander*, December 30, 1893; *The New Californian*, Volume 3, No. 10 & 11 (April & May 1894), p. 300.

⁴ Sadly, at least according to D. T. Suzuki, who served as interpreter:

Mrs. Russell was the only one doing *sanzen* because she wouldn't allow the others to do it. She thought she was receiving some secret revelations from the Zen master, and if everyone could do *sanzen* her privileged position would be lost. It seems that not allowing those under her to do *sanzen* was a plotting way of making her presence felt. She may have been the first Caucasian to do *sanzen*, but it really was nothing to speak of. She had money, brains, some faith, and was involved in religious activities, but she invited a Zen master from the Orient for her own prestige... Because of such things the master's missionary efforts in America bore little fruit.

[Quoted in 『秋月龍珉著作集』 (東京:三一書房, 1978) Vol. 6, pp. 162-163. Cf. JZW p. 61; 日本禪 p. 61.]

⁵ *The Mahayanist*, (August, 1915) p. 1. Quoted in JZW p. 63; 日本禪 pp. 64-65.

⁶ Murshid Samuel L. Lewis, *Incense from Roshis* (Eugene OR: Sufi Ruhaniat International, 1978) p. 3.

⁷ Beatrice Erskine Lane Suzuki, *Impressions of Mahayana Buddhism* (Kyoto: Eastern Buddhist Society, 1940) p. 174. Cf. JZW pp. 65-66; 日本禪 pp. 67-68.

⁸ *Zen Notes*, Volume 1, No. 3 (March 1954), p. 3. Also see Ruth Fuller Sasaki, Editor, *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), and Isabel Stirling, *Zen Pioneer: The Life and Works of Ruth Fuller Sasaki* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2006).

⁹ Senzaki Nyogen poem 「思いのまゝ」 published October 6, 1934 in 『教学新聞』 No. 710. Translation by W. S. Yokoyama.

¹⁰ See Jeff Shore, "Koan Zen from the Inside" 『花園大学文学部紀要』 第28号 (March, 1993) p. 16. Also available online: <https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/koan-zen-from-the-inside.pdf>

¹¹ See, for example:

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2013/11/14/the-shocking-scandal-at-the-heart-of-american-zen.html>;

<https://newrepublic.com/article/115613/zen-buddhist-sex-controversies-america-excerpt>;

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/12/world/asia/zen-buddhists-roiled-by-accusations-against-teacher.html>;

[http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Zen Has No Morals.pdf](http://www.thezensite.com/ZenEssays/CriticalZen/Zen%20Has%20No%20Morals.pdf)

¹² For further analysis and suggestions:

<http://obconnect.forumotion.net/t652-latest-development-in-the-ongoing-shimano-situation>