EGALITARIAN PHILOSOPHIES IN
SEXIST INSTITUTIONS:
The Life of Satomi-san, Shinto Miko and Zen Buddhist Nun

Sallie B. King

Introduction

Satomi Myōdō was a contemporary (1896–1978) Japanese woman who spent a lifetime searching for spiritual purity and peace. In the course of her religious wanderings, Satomi-san spent years training in and practicing two of Japan’s primary religious paths, Shinto and Zen Buddhism. In the context of Shinto she trained to become a miko, a type of shamaness, and mastered those arts sufficiently to work independently. When this failed to satisfy her and she converted to Zen, she struggled for years to attain enlightenment. At the end of the autobiography which recounts these and related events, Satomi-san announces her attainment of kenshō, a first level of enlightenment, which gives her the peace and fulfillment for which she had longed all her life.

This first person account of the life of a deeply religious Japanese woman is highly instructive for students of women in Asian religions. Written in a warm and personal style, the autobiography draws one into the life, straightforwardly chronicling spiritual, emotional and sexual details that women of Satomi-san’s generation did not ordinarily share. We are provided, moreover, with entry into experiential levels of not one but two major Japanese religious traditions from the perspective of a sincere and committed woman. Satomi-san makes her way in both of these traditions, eventually attaining advanced levels of competence in both, but only after being knocked down and picking herself up again and again.

In this article, I shall concentrate on the tension between sexism and egalitarianism in the Shinto miko and Zen Buddhist traditions, placing this tension in the general context of Japanese culture and religion and examining it as manifested in the life of Satomi-san. In particular, I shall focus on the relationship between philosophy and institution as vehicles for egalitarianism.

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and sexism in these two traditions. First, I shall briefly consider how the issue arises and some of its implications.

Articles which discuss, for example, the nondualistic philosophy of Mahāyāna Buddhism may leave readers with the impression that women must or should fare well under a system molded by such a philosophy. However, both the knowledge that women generally are second-class citizens within Buddhism and the invisibility or nonexistence of notable women throughout most of Buddhism's historical and geographical span must surely make us hesitate before reaching any such happy conclusion. What is the impact of these impressive, nondualistic and apparently egalitarian philosophies on the lives of women in Asia? Clearly it is not adequate simply to describe the philosophy and assume that the implications of that philosophy will be lived in the arena of history.

I will demonstrate that Mahāyāna Buddhism and Shinto both have egalitarian, non sexist, optimistic philosophies concerning human nature and spiritual potential. Both, nevertheless, are embedded in obviously sexist institutions. Is the philosophy, then, of negligible importance? Are the institutions with which women have had to contend the only reality, the philosophies "just words" with no power to shape or change the social order? If so, the implications for feminist thinking would be profound.

Much feminist thought assumes that patriarchal institutions are based upon patriarchal ideologies. Thus the analysis and rebuttal of patriarchal ideologies and their replacement with non sexist, nonhierarchical, perhaps nondualist ideologies has been a widespread goal of feminist studies. However, if an egalitarian, nondualistic philosophy like that of Mahāyāna Buddhism can coexist for almost two thousand years with sexist and hierarchical institutions, what can we conclude about the real, historical importance of that philosophy as a molder of social reality? Are feminists misguided in the belief that ideologies are the ultimate target, and that changes in institutional rules and structures by themselves will never suffice to bring into being a society in which women can realize their full potential? Is it wrong to believe that ideology is powerful? While I very much doubt it, the case of Mahāyāna Buddhism (and, to a lesser extent, Shinto) poses a profound challenge and a puzzle. It is disturbing to realize that a tradition can profess the "right" kind of ideas (from a feminist perspective) and still maintain sexist institutions. Of course, the question of ideology and institutions does not need to be answered in an either/or fashion; complex historical circumstances lie behind the particulars of the Buddhist case and on one level explain it. Nevertheless, one needs to ask what role ideology plays and can play in the midst of complex contending historical factors.

I will not resolve this puzzle here. On the contrary, one of my main purposes is to draw attention to it, to raise the question of the tension (or is it a contradiction?) between egalitarian philosophies and sexist institutions in East Asia. I will also look, however, at evidence that will shed some light on
the impact an egalitarian philosophy can have on the life of a historical woman, despite the sexist institutions that bear that philosophy.

**Satomi-san and the Miko Path**

Satomi-san’s autobiography was written in 1956 when she was sixty, as a “kenshō story,” i.e., the story of her search for and eventual attainment of Zen Buddhist enlightenment. Such accounts were requested of all who attained kenshō in the Zen group to which Satomi-san belonged. But whereas most other kenshō stories are brief and more narrowly focused on the kenshō and events immediately preceding it, Satomi-san took this opportunity to write her life story, an appropriate act insofar as her entire life since youth had been a search for spiritual purity, enlightenment and peace.

Satomi-san traces the beginnings of her religious life to problems she faced as a female with respect to her society and its expectations. She attended a girls’ school, the motto of which was “Good Wives and Wise Mothers,” a standard motto for girls’ schools at the time. Satomi-san relates that once a week the principal of her school gathered all the girls together to lecture them. As she tells it,

> It was always bound to be scrupulous and exhaustive instruction for the benefit of the future wives and wise mothers. At the conclusion of the talk there was invariably added a word of advice: be careful with members of the opposite sex. According to this advice, the male of the species is nothing but a fearful wild beast with gnashing fangs that will swoop down upon the young girl it fancies. How could a girl concerned with her future prospects sacrifice herself to this beast? Don’t be careless! Don’t go near them! Don’t look them in the face!—These were his stern words. He would then give some concrete examples.1

Satomi-san felt these speeches were “degrading” and self-contradictory. She felt indignant towards the principal and his speeches, yet they also had an effect on her—though not the intended one. She began to hate men: “A fierce resentment blazed up in me towards ‘them’—those who insatiably ate the pure virgins” (pp. 4–5). She thus determined to make one of “them” her victim and shatter him. In accordance with her plan, she selected a victim and seduced him. Just when she was ready to deliver the fatal blow, however, she discovered she was pregnant. In her mind, marriage was out of the question and abortion was impermissible at the time; Satomi-san had no option but to return home to her family and await the fruit of her deeds.

In time, the child’s father did marry Satomi-san and she bore two children while they lived and worked on her parents’ small farm. This

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1. References in this article to the autobiography will be to the original Japanese version: Satomi Myōdō, “Kyōdō no Tabi,” in Kyōdō no Tabi, pp. 3–4, published by Sambōkyōdan in its journal, Kyōshō. All future page references to this text will be given parenthetically in the body of the article.
solution, however, was not ultimately satisfactory. Satomi-san relates that she did not feel like a wife to her husband and husband-wife love never developed. She wanted to avoid divorce, though, “for the sake of the children” (p. 13). Nevertheless, Satomi-san’s father and her husband did not get along and one evening after an argument between the two of them, her husband left home, never to return again.

At this point, Satomi-san’s mental condition began to deteriorate. She heard voices and saw visions, one of which she understood to be a divine command from a Kami (a Japanese god) to go out and put an end to the evil of the world. Determined to carry out this order, but with no particular idea how to go about it, Satomi-san left her village and travelled to Tokyo, carrying with her the younger of her two daughters and leaving the elder in her parents’ care. In Tokyo she worked odd jobs and attended university classes in religious studies, leaving the child alone in the apartment while she was at school. (Living away from her family, there were no child-care options available to her.) One day she was seen by one of her husband’s aunts, who cried out against this way of life. The two families, including Satomi-san’s estranged husband, met in Satomi-san’s Tokyo apartment to talk over this unsatisfactory situation. The meeting ended abruptly with a traumatic scene:

Suddenly, my husband’s mother cried, “What kind of a demon is this mother?” She stood up and snatched the baby from my lap. I clung to it, all confused. My husband jumped up and knocked me down. “It’s no use with such a beast!” The three (mother, aunt and husband) stormed out of the room, clutching the baby tightly (pp. 19–20).

Satomi-san was prevailed upon by her father and her landlady to let the baby go. She agreed with extreme grief. This incident destroyed the final shreds of her mental stability, and Satomi-san suffered a complete nervous breakdown, experiencing intense paranoia and hallucinations resulting in her institutionalization in a mental hospital. There she was “cured,” and returned to a “normal” state of mind, and finally released into her father’s care.

Though Satomi-san was yet to discover the path of the miko, the events of her life already display the typical features of those who become miko. The Japanese word miko indicates that this is a female-dominated tradition: the ko of miko means female. Historically and at present, a male shaman occasionally may appear in Japan, but such persons are rare and are regarded as aberrant and of lesser stature. The shamanic tradition is a female tradition.

There are basically two types of miko in Japan: the shrine miko and the shamanic miko. While both types are female, the shrine miko belongs to institutional Shinto. She serves in a subordinate position as assistant to a (usually) male priest, performing such secondary tasks as dancing and singing for the pleasure of the Kami, assisting in various rituals and ceremonies and cleaning the shrine precincts. The shamanic miko essentially belongs to the “little,” i.e., noninstitutionalized and popular, tradition of Japanese religiosity and is thus largely free of institutionalized Shinto with its male
domination. Her main function consists in entering into trance states for the purpose of communicating with beings of the "other world": kami, spirits and the deceased. While in a state of trance, the miko is possessed by a kami or spirit who speaks through her mouth to those assembled. Thus the miko performs a service function for her community. Through her, spiritual beings will answer questions, give advice or predict the future; families may be temporarily reunited with deceased relatives; spirits may reveal their identity; and exorcism of possessing spirits may be made possible.

There is evidence that in ancient times a single individual combined the official status of the shrine miko with the powers of the shamanic miko. In late prehistoric Japan, before the importation of Chinese culture, shamanic miko were sometimes powerful women who served at the highest level of the state. Queen Himiko or Pimiko ruled over thirty Japanese states from 180 to 240 C.E. How many other shamanic queens there were in ancient Japan is a matter of debate. It seems probable, on the basis of the scanty evidence, that there were many shamanistic, female rulers in ancient Japan.

There were, moreover, quite a few instances of kings and emperors with shamanistic consorts or female relatives. The best known example is found in the Kojiki. According to this account, the Emperor Chūai and the Empress Jingū, together with their Chief Minister, gathered to question the kami about a planned attack on Kumaso. With the Emperor serving as musician and the Chief Minister as questioner, the Empress became possessed and through her the kami advised an attack on an unknown land to the west, rather than the Kumaso attack. The Emperor denounced the kami and was immediately struck dead. The kami’s advice was taken and found to be reliable. Jingū, incidentally, ruled as Regent after the death of her husband. This is a dramatic example of the kind of shamanic power formerly considered necessary to Japanese rulers. Such power was regularly held either by the female ruler herself, or in the case of male rulers, in the person of a consort, sister, niece, or other female relative.

The importation of Chinese culture revolutionized Japanese culture and society and was probably responsible for the radical decline in status which the miko experienced. The male supremacy and rationalism of Chinese Confucianism made inevitable a decline in the fortunes of shamanesses. Female rulers became completely unacceptable. Shamanic powers, involving loss of rational control, could no longer play a necessary role in the wielding of secular power. With the advent of Chinese culture, empresses were prohibited and the miko disappeared from government service. Three types of profession absorbed the miko: the shrine miko maintained an institutional position of respect (though in the religious, not the secular realm) but

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at the cost of her shamanic power; some miko adapted their skills in song, dance and theater to become professional entertainers—singers, balladeers, etc.—though they too lost their shamanic powers in the transition; finally, some shamanic miko maintained their shamanic powers but at the cost of their public status. This last group of women has continued to hand down its traditions orally and thrives to this day, though in far fewer numbers than in the past, and largely in the more remote, less modern and Westernized areas of Japan.

Satomi-san’s life is a good representation of the typical life history of the miko. In her adolescence she demonstrated intelligence and a willingness to think for herself, rather than passively accepting what she was taught. She was remarkably independent-minded and willful. Though she attended a school whose purpose was to mold her into the standard female role of the time, she rejected this path with its inherent contradictions and degradation of the female and dreamed instead of a completely independent and creative life as a writer. She married unwillingly and ultimately proved to be a very poor wife and mother. Her life then became a series of personal tragedies. Before her hold on sanity completely left her, however, she lived in a transitional state in which she experienced nonnormal visions, auditions, revelations and a divine command.

Such a personality and series of events is the norm for a miko, who typically possesses a strong, independent personality and lives in conflict with the expectations of her society. Usually the miko, in one way or another, will not follow the path of a “good wife.” Either she will not marry at all, or she marries but refuses to play the submissive role expected of her and thus experiences conflict with her husband or his family, or she marries but experiences tragedy in the death or serious illness of her family members. A miko I met in Japan a few years ago told me that one day, while she was holding her baby in her lap and her elder daughter was cavorting and cartwheeling about the room, she saw the girl’s feet about to come down on the baby. In order to shield the baby, she ducked her own head down and received the blow herself. She was struck in the eyes and became blind. Following this incident, she became a miko. She relates that the kami who subsequently possessed her told her that her blindness was a punishment for getting married, which she never should have done.

The mental and emotional instability of the woman on the way to becoming a miko fits the pattern followed by shamans and shamanesses all over the world. The syndrome is manifested in such symptoms as prophetic dreams, the speaking of strange tongues, visions, auditions and general mental confusion, all of which represent the preliminary breakdown of the ordinary state of consciousness to make possible access to another state. In traditional societies, the initiate would be removed from ordinary society and taught the control and development of these phenomena by an elder shaman or shamaness. Satomi-san, as a modern, was confined in a mental hospital and “cured,” i.e., returned to a normal state of consciousness. However, the
underlying unhappiness and conflicts which caused her mental breakdown remained in place, to be addressed by her in the future.

After spending several years as an actress, Satomi-san one day happened to see a sign advertising a lecture on the Shinto concept of *makoto*, “sincerity,” one of the basic values of Japanese culture, and one which touched Satomi-san at a crucial turning point in her life. Upon hearing the lecture she was so impressed that she immediately and impulsively became the disciple of the Shinto teacher who gave the lecture. She thus unintentionally began her training as a *miko* within the Shinto tradition.

Under the tutelage of her Shinto teacher, Satomi-san engaged in a number of Japanese folk religious practices, the most important of which have to do with purification. The most highly favored form of purification, and one which Satomi-san practiced, is *misogi,* “cold water ablutions.” *Misogi* may be performed using any source of water—waterfall, river, ocean, or bucket. Satomi-san relates that in the middle of winter she left a bucket of water outside overnight to freeze. Just before dawn, she went out, cracked the ice that had formed on the surface, and poured the bucket of water over her naked body. She then sat outside, still naked, and meditated. She did this every morning until spring.

As a result of this (as she admitted) reckless practice, she suffered internal hemorrhage and came close to death. She also found, however, that “communication with the spirit world opened up” (p. 62) and she became capable of functioning as a *miko.* Both under the direction of her teacher and independently in her hometown she was possessed at will by *kami* and the spirits of the deceased. She served as an oracle, as the mouthpiece of the spirits, predicting the future, answering questions about missing items and helping the dead to communicate with the living. She was also able to serve as the medium in exorcisms. She began to lecture on spiritual matters, to, as she put it, “serve as a one person social service agency,” (p. 77) and attempted to revive the fortunes of her impoverished hometown by erecting a “sacred site” for pilgrimage and festivals there. Her services as a *miko* were in demand and to all appearances she should have been happy with her status, both materially and spiritually.

*From Shinto to Zen*

In fact, however, Satomi-san was deeply dissatisfied. She finally had to admit to herself that this was not what she had been looking for. She cut herself off from her associates as a *miko* and began her spiritual quest once more. Searching among the various religious options available to her, she

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4 The need for purification is a very old concept in Japanese religion. Anciently, it was believed that evil and suffering were caused by physical pollution, thus cleansing became a ritual for the eradication of all forms of ill. In more recent times, it was recognized that evil and suffering could also have psychological or spiritual causes, but these could also be addressed through physical cleansing.
finally wandered into the practice of Zen. She practiced Zen on her own and under the guidance of several teachers, sometimes studying Buddhist philosophy, at other times assiduously practicing zazen, Zen meditation. As with everything else she did, she experienced dramatic ups and downs with this practice: at times she gave her life completely to it, and at other times, she became so discouraged that she dropped all religious discipline and sank into apathy. Her meditation experiences were accepted by some teachers, rejected by others; she took nun's vows, only to be refused admission to a convent. Finally, under the guidance of Yasutani Rōshi in Tokyo, she experienced kenshō and found peace. Here the autobiography ends.

In speaking with her friends and relatives, I learned that Satomi-san continued with her practice of Zen. She remained a live-in disciple with Yasutani Rōshi and under his guidance successfully completed the entire series of kōan (anecdotes or questions which form the subject of meditation in Zen). Most of the rest of her life she spent as an assistant to Yasutani Rōshi, attending to all the nonteaching chores that keep a Zen temple running: cooking, leading the chanting, encouraging other practitioners, etc. When the Rōshi traveled, she was one of a few people who accompanied him. She never became a Rōshi, or teacher, herself, however. Finally, when she was almost eighty years old, she returned home to Hokkaido where she died in 1978.

The life of Satomi-san provides a good opportunity to examine the religious options available to Japanese women in the Shinto miko and Zen Buddhist traditions. Of particular interest is the question of the relationship between theory and reality or philosophy and institution in these two traditions with respect to the possibilities open to women. What do these traditions have to say about women and their spiritual potential? Is there a discrepancy between their philosophical statements on women and their institutional practices?

**Shinto and Zen Philosophy**

Though Zen and Shinto are very different traditions, they have remarkably similar philosophical positions with regard to the issue of human spiritual potential in general, and that of women in particular. Shinto conceives of the divine in terms of the category of kami, loosely translated as Japanese "gods." Kami, however, is not so much a god, but rather the quality of the sacred. Anything which evokes in people an intense emotional response, whether of awe, delight, fascination, wonder, fear, or other feeling, may be regarded as a kami. The category of kami includes animals; natural objects such as rocks, mountains, waterfalls, islands, trees, etc.; the celestial kami, such as Amaterasu, the "sun goddess"; and outstanding human beings, such as the Japanese emperors, war heroes, founders of the New Religions, etc. The kami thus manifest the immanence of the sacred in the world and, in
particular, in human beings. A person with outstanding qualities or achievements may be regarded as *kami*.

The ordinary person, in the Shinto view, also has direct access to this quality of *kami* by means of the virtue of *makoto*, or sincerity. The concept of *makoto* connotes honesty, genuineness, spiritual purity, and the completion or perfection of the individual. One who is *makoto* or sincere is true to her or his total life situation: one is true to oneself by knowing one’s true nature which is in a condition of absolute spiritual purity and by expressing that spiritual purity in all of one’s actions. One is true to the *kami*, similarly, by living in the condition of spiritual purity which is identical to theirs. One is true to one’s neighbors by doing what is right for them, again on the basis of one’s spiritual purity. The concept of *makoto* thus expresses a sense of a continuum of spiritual purity which embraces both the *kami* and human beings. All beings—myself, other persons, and the *kami*—are harmonized at the level of spiritual purity. Moreover, the power of *makoto* to transform the self and the world is virtually unlimited. As Satomi-san put it, “I believed without a doubt that *makoto* could raise the dead” (p.10).

What links *makoto* in *kami* and human beings is *kokoro*. *Kokoro* is the seat of human emotion, intellect, and spirit; it is the human heart-mind, conceived by the Japanese as a single thing. A *kokoro* which is *makoto* unites human and *kami*. The following two poems, the first by Sugawara no Michizane, the second by the Emperor Meiji, express this unity. “If your heart [kokoro] is on the path of sincerity [makoto], the *kami* will protect you, even if you don’t pray.” 5 "The sincerity [makoto] of the human heart [kokoro] penetrates to the invisible *kami* heart itself." 6 The link between a sincere heart-mind and *kami* is direct since they are essentially one of a kind; there is no need of something extraneous, such as prayer, to establish a link. A Japanese proverb expresses this same idea using the term *shōjiki*, “honesty,” a close synonym of *makoto*. The proverb reads, “Kami lives in the heads of the honest.” 7

Shinto teaches that this pure and sincere human heart-mind was the birthright of the Japanese people at the time of their creation. 8 However,

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5 Sugawara no Michizane (845–903) was a famous scholar and politician who, as a result of palace intrigues, was unjustly banished to the provinces, where he died. After his death, his angry spirit was believed to have taken revenge on the emperor and court officials. In order to appease him he was enshrined as a *kami* at the Kitano Jinja in Kyoto. The poem is cited in Ono Sokyo, “Makoto,” in Shinto Jiten, ed. Yasuzu and Umeda (Osaka: Honshoten, 1938), p. 560ff.
6 Ibid., p. 561. The Emperor himself was, of course, regarded as a living *kami*.
8 This may or may not be equivalent to saying that the birthright of all humanity is a sincere heart-mind. Certainly, there have been times in Japanese history when this idea has been applied to the Japanese people in an exclusive and racially supremacist way. Here I will take it as if it applies to humanity in general.
with the passage of time, this originally pure heart-mind became tainted with pollution or corruption. Humanity became estranged from the kami and its behavior distorted and impure. Nonetheless, the originally pure and sincere heart-mind is still concealed deep within. The goal of religious practice in Shinto is to return to one’s original nature, a sincere and absolutely pure heart-mind which is identical with the kami nature. By becoming a sincere person, one discovers, as Satomi-san says, “I am kami; just as kami is in itself, so am I” (p. 59).

The Shinto position on human nature is thus extremely optimistic; not only is human nature basically good, it is essentially divine. We are kami potentially, if not in fact, and it is within our power to realize this potential. Moreover, there is no question but that this conception applies equally to women and to men. Nowhere in the tradition is it said that makoto pertains more to men than to women, or that the kami nature is more readily realized in men. On a philosophical level, Shinto is essentially egalitarian or “sex blind.”

Other factors in Shinto reinforce this egalitarian ideology. Though the Japanese kami are by no means conceived in an orderly pantheon, if there is a supreme kami, she is surely Amaterasu, the “sun goddess” and original ancestor of the Imperial clan. Again, the ascetic practices found in Shinto do not represent an attempt to free an immaterial soul from the entrapment of an inferior body but rather to purify the self as an indivisible psychophysical whole from the pollution that has infected it. We have seen, moreover, that kami is very much an immanent quality, found in nature and animals as well as in human beings and celestial gods. Thus it is not possible in Shinto to divide the world into absolute categories of sacred and profane, soul and body, heaven and earth, and to identify females with the inferior member of each pair. Philosophically, then, the potential for women in Shinto seems promising.

The Zen philosophy of human nature and spiritual potential is similar in many respects to Shinto ideas, especially in its optimism and egalitarianism. According to Mahāyāna Buddhism in general, and Zen in particular, “all sentient beings possess the Buddha nature.” This formula explicitly answers the question whether all persons (and gods, hell beings, animals, etc.) can realize the goal of Buddhism—the attainment of enlightenment. The answer is yes. The core of this concept is its universality. Beyond this, the concept of Buddha nature is understood on two levels. First, we are all potential Buddhas; we all have the capacity for perfect wisdom and compassion; we all should practice Buddhism (mindfulness, meditation, moral discipline) in order to realize this potential. Second, and simultaneously, we are all already Buddhas, right here and now as we are this moment. Our Buddha nature of perfect wisdom and compassion is our true or original nature. It is, however, covered up and concealed by adventitious defilements such as hate, anger, greed, delusion, egotism, etc., which are accidental or nonnecessary. The
practice of Buddhism helps us to realize who and what we really are as opposed to what we think we are; alternatively, our Buddhist practice is a manifestation here and now of Buddha nature. To realize and live a life expressive of our true Buddha nature is the goal of Zen.

The goal of both Zen and Shinto, then, is the realization of a pure, inner nature. Thus in both the goal is immanent—we are what we seek, in some sense potentially and in some sense actually. Moreover, Zen, like Shinto, lacks a dualistic cosmology. In fact, the main thrust of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy is to destroy the viability of dualistic thinking. In Mahāyāna Buddhism, including Zen, nirvāṇa (liberation, enlightenment) is samsāra (bondage, delusion). There is no dualistic opposition between sacred and profane; there is one world.

The concept of Buddha nature avoids dualism by virtue of the fact that it is not a thing, self, soul, or essence which a person possesses. It is not an immaterial something of any kind whatsoever. There is no mind-body or mind-soul dualism in Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Persons are seen as psychophysical unities which construct themselves moment by moment by their actions (including thoughts, emotions, bodily movements, intentions, etc.). The Buddha nature is a manner of being, an endless series of wise and compassionate acts. These acts constitute the entirety of the enlightened person, mentally, physically and spiritually. Thus Zen master Hakuin’s “Chant in Praise of Zazen” affirms “this very body is the body of Buddha.”

In Buddhism, as in Shinto, there are no dualistic poles to which male and female may be assigned. Thus, with its antidualistic philosophy and its explicitly universal position on the inherent perfection of human nature and spirituality, Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy, and Zen in particular, would seem to view women as men’s complete spiritual equals and to see human nature—both male and female—in a highly optimistic light. On the basis of philosophical investigation alone then, the promise of Zen for women would seem very encouraging.

From Philosophy to Institutions

While both Shinto and Zen present a positive philosophical image of women, both fall short of their promise when we arrive in the institutional realm. We have already seen something of Shinto institutions in the discussion of the miko. In institutional Shinto, the female shrine miko plays a very subordinate role to the priest. Her functions are limited largely to decorative, housekeeping and assisting activities. Miko who want to practice shamanism do not have a place in institutional Shinto. A miko without a formal relationship to a Shinto institution gains freedom from male domination and the opportunity to support herself by setting up an independent

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shamaness-client relationship with members of the community. However, she loses visibility and the respectability derived from association with a Shinto institution.

Until very recent times there were no female Shinto priests. For most of recorded history, female "impurity" resulting from menstruation and childbirth prevented women's daily association with the absolute purity of the kami, and this made priesthood impossible. Laywomen were also unable to approach the kami, or shrines housing the kami, when in a condition of pollution. There is some evidence, though, that in very early times, menstruation and childbirth may have been seen as either polluting or sacred, or both. An old Japanese saying says, "When a woman is menstruating she is purified, becoming the wife of the kami."  

Women were admitted to the Shinto priesthood in 1945 when the Japanese accepted many radical changes and reforms throughout the society. The number of female priests has grown steadily since; in 1981 there were eleven hundred female priests, five percent of all Shinto priests. Many of these women are part of husband-wife teams or have taken over their husband's job upon his death. Thus the opening of the priesthood to women should be noted together with the elimination of the Shamanic miko from institutional Shinto.

Buddhism manifests the same pattern of male leadership and control, though with a different rationale, a different institutional basis and different implications for the women involved. The single largest factor conditioning the status of women in Buddhism is its monasticism. From its inception, the Buddhist order of nuns has been subjected to a number of rules from which monks are free. In particular, the "eight weighty rules" ensure that nuns remain institutionally and in all practical ways in an inferior position to monks. Nuns are forbidden to reprove monks, may not teach monks and, as a class, are junior to monks as a class—a nun with fifty years in the religious life is junior to a monk of one day. The residence of nuns must be supervised by monks and monks must share in the ordinance as well as the setting of penances for nuns. While these special rules were not intended to, and did not in fact, initially inhibit nuns' spiritual practice, in the long run the economic, social and even spiritual consequences of these rules have been immense. Since monks must control nuns in several important ways, while nuns cannot supervise monks, the absence of women from positions of leadership in Buddhism is inevitable. Since monks may teach nuns but not

11 Ibid, p. 16.
vice versa, the education of nuns is inferior to that of monks, as is their public visibility. With less visibility, the nuns' standing and economic support from the public is impaired. In short, throughout the Buddhist world, Buddhist monasticism institutionalizes the inferiority of nuns as a group to monks as a group.

In Japanese Zen, two facts are striking: there are virtually no prominent women, and the condition of the Zen nun in Japan has been sorry indeed. In Sōtō Zen, the largest Zen sect in Japan, nuns, until the very recent past, were not allowed to function as priests, could not live in temples, and could not hold independent retreats or attend retreats held by monks. They were not permitted to initiate young nuns, nor were they allowed to receive or transmit the unbroken lineage from teacher to pupil. They were not permitted to perform funeral services, which deprived them of a major source of income. They were not allowed to attend Zen schools, which were reserved for the monks. Many nuns were illiterate and completely uneducated in both secular and religious matters. In 1913 the Sōtō sect spent 600 yen per nun and 180,000 yen per priest.

In the Meiji era, the first schools for nuns were established, though their level was far inferior to the monks' schools. Conditions for nuns continued to improve after World War II. The 1946 Sōtō Constitution granted nuns the following:

1. Equality in the qualifications of teachers and integration of names and titles of monks and nuns.
2. Admitted the existence of certain female Zen masters who had been neglected for a long time. The constitution made it compulsory to record their names in the nuns' career list.
3. Allowed nuns to hold Zen meditation by themselves.
4. Gave voting rights to nuns who were qualified teachers.
5. Allowed nuns to become orthodox pupils in Zen priest transmission lines.

Institutional reform progressed as follows. In 1948 nuns won the right to be elected to the Sōtō sect Assembly. In 1951 they gained the right to perform the initiation ceremony and to transmit Zen teachings. In 1970 nuns were permitted to become priests of middle level temples and to hold meditation retreats by themselves. Educational reforms progressed in similar fashion. In 1949 nuns were permitted to enter Komazawa University (a Sōtō university) as formal students; they were also allowed to receive the training for mission-

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aries and for preaching. In 1950 four monasteries for advanced nun teachers were begun. In 1968 full educational equality was attained with the opening of a special monastery to train nuns as missionaries at the highest level.

Perhaps it does not need to be stated that with educational and institutional conditions like those that existed before these recent reforms, it is scarcely possible that any outstanding nuns could appear. Laypersons, male and female, did not play leadership roles in Japanese Zen. That left the monks.

This is the institutional reality with which Japanese women contended. Is it possible to look at the attitudes of male Zen masters on the subject of women practicing Zen? Two quite opposite testimonies follow which demonstrate the range of attitudes found in Zen. Dogen Zenji, the preeminent Zen master, philosopher, and founder of the Soto Zen sect, argued most forcibly in his famous Shobogenzo that women are in all ways men's mundane and spiritual equals.

A nun who embodies and transmits the shobogenzo ought to receive homage... What is more worthy about a male? Emptiness is emptiness; the four elements are the four elements; the five skandhas are the five skandhas. It is the same with the female; and actualizing the Dharma is actualizing the Dharma in any case. Simply you should revere and honor one who actualizes the Dharma in either case, and do not consider the matter of being male or female. This is the principle of the most profound Buddha Way.

A person who practices the Buddha Dharma and gives expression to the Buddha Dharma, even if it's a seven year old girl, is none other than the teacher of the four-fold Buddhist sangha, and is the compassionate mother of all beings... Your service and veneration to her should be equal to what you would show all Buddhas and Tathagata. This is exactly the ancient rule of the Buddha Way. If you do not know this, you do not embody the single transmission, and you should be pitied.15

There is no doubt that in Dogen's mind Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy teaches sex equality, and this should be recognized in the Buddhist community. Moreover, he put these beliefs into practice while teaching in a temple just outside Kyoto. He opened his community to men and women, in fact to anyone and everyone who wanted to receive his teachings. Later in his life, however, he moved to a remote mountain area where he established the monastic community Eiheiji, where access to him and to his teachings were largely restricted to the male monastic community. His motives were probably political as well as the institutional religious concern with furthering his teaching lineage, and we may be safe in presuming that his intention was not to exclude anyone. Nevertheless, this is a good example of a case in which Buddhist celibate monasticism functioned in practice to prevent women's

access to one of the greatest Zen teachers in history. The present point, though, is his attitude, which can in no way be faulted.

The opposite end of the spectrum in male Zen masters’ attitudes is represented by the famous contemporary Rinzai master and popularizer of Zen in the West, D. T. Suzuki. In his essay, “On the Essence of Zen,” Suzuki writes the following:

In terms of sex, Zen is male. In age, it is adult. Socially, it is aristocratic. It is something that one chooses. For this reason, I fear that women’s Zen [the practice of Zen by women] destroys the lovely traits and qualities of women and creates a rather strange kind of person. 16

This remark speaks volumes without the need of further comment by me. It does, however, open up the subject of the gender-specific “spirit” of Zen. Many people feel that Zen has a rather “macho” spirit, due to several factors: its close historical association with the samurai (“warrior”) rulers of Japan when Zen was first imported from China; its role in the development of the martial arts; its association with such arts as archery and kendo; the use of the kyoju or “encouragement stick” made of wood with which Zen meditators may be struck during meditation as an aid to their practice; the use of shouts, blows, and all sorts of fierce attacks on the ego as teaching or testing techniques; the characteristic ferocious posture with which many Zen masters are portrayed (paradigmatically, Bodhidharma).

On the other hand, it may well be argued that while all this is characteristic of some Zen, it is not characteristic of all Zen. In addition to the martial arts, Zen is also associated with flower arranging, gardening, tea ceremony, poetry, painting, in fact all the fine arts. Instruction in a Zen temple in the art of flower arrangement has been a necessary “accomplishment” for vast numbers of young women in Japan. These gentle and refined arts could hardly exist in their present form without Zen. Moreover, there can be a significant difference in mood between Rinzai and Sōtō Zen: while the Rinzai practitioner may be encouraged to stalk enlightenment with a koan and wrestle with it in a life and death struggle, the less goal-oriented Sōtō tradition tends to recommend quiet observation and deep penetration of the present moment as its characteristic form of practice. In sum, there is no denying a certain macho spirit in Zen, but it is wrong to identify this spirit with Zen in any simple way. There are differences between the two major sects, differences produced by varying historical circumstances, and probably most importantly, differences stemming from the wildly varying characters of the individual Zen masters. In addition, cultural circumstances can be

highly significant in effecting shifts on this issue. The present feminist movement and raising of women's consciousness in the West is creating demands and challenges to which some Western Zen teachers are responding quite readily and creatively. In fact, a number of Western Zen teachers are themselves very much part of this force prompting change.

The general situation for women in Japanese religions, then, is complex and conflicting. The philosophical positions of both Shinto and Zen on the subject of men's and women's nature and spiritual character are most positive. Zen and Shinto institutions, however, for most of their long history, have contradicted this optimistic and egalitarian philosophy with structures and regulations that severely restricted or altogether eliminated possibilities for women. What is the result of such contradictions? Satomi-san's story illustrates their impact on the life of a serious and indefatigable woman who sought the goals promised in the traditions of Shinto and Zen.

**Philosophy, Institutions, and Women's Lives**

It might be expected that if the institutions of a tradition are patriarchal, the impact of that tradition on the life of a woman will be negative, regardless of its philosophy. A certain "realist" position would hold that the institution is "reality," the philosophy relatively unimportant. In fact, however, the life of Satomi-san clearly shows the positive impact an egalitarian philosophy can have on a woman's life, even when that philosophy is embedded in a sexist institution.

The most important positive factors in Satomi-san's religious practice were (1) her own drive, determination and faith in herself and (2) the encouragement and instruction of significant others, both within and without religious institutions. The positive philosophies of Shinto and Zen played a role in both these factors.

Examples of Satomi-san's personal drive abound throughout the memoir. She experiences setback after setback but always picks herself up again and carries on. What makes her do this? Certainly the answer lies partly in her individual character; Satomi-san portrays herself grappling determinedly, from the beginning of her life, with sexist schools, single motherhood and individual ambition. But the philosophies that helped shape her life also should be credited. While she was severely critical of her own character, the optimistic philosophies of Shinto and Zen encouraged her efforts, giving her faith that she could improve herself dramatically. For example, in the first chapter of the autobiography she relates how she felt when she returned home to her parents, pregnant and unmarried, her grand dreams shattered.

Looking like a barrel whose hoops were about to burst, and in a condition of utter despair, I was incapable even of dying. I could do nothing but idly acerue more shame. I felt wretched, miserable, ashen—as if I were traveling alone at night through an endless wilderness, wearily dragging one foot after the other (p. 7).
At this juncture, with the critical intervention of her father, she suddenly discovered the reality of makoto and from then on she began to live in terms of this empowering vision. Instantly, a whole new world opened to her.

Struck by the unearthly exquisiteness of this world [of makoto], I broke into tears and lifted up my face, weeping, in ecstasy. I saw right through myself and completely emptied my bag of emotional problems.

As I looked back at the mass of immorality I had been, I saw what a gloomy and anxious state of being it was. I couldn’t help pitying people who hadn’t yet awakened to sincerity. Thus I immediately resolved, “From now on I will dive right into the midst of those people, maintaining sincerity to the end. I’ll even die for their sake!”... I believed without a doubt that sincerity could raise the dead. I danced with joy! (p. 10)

Impelled by the inspiration of makoto she leapt from a condition of utter despondency in which she was incapable even of lifting a finger on her own behalf to a state of limitless enthusiasm and zeal in which she was prepared to take on the world.

Years later, following terrible personal trials and a period of religious searching, Satomi-san happened upon a lecture on the subject of makoto. Her original inspiration returned to her, and she immediately asked the speaker to accept her as a disciple. After several years as his student she once again despaired—this time over what she believed was her lack of spiritual progress. The following dialogue ensued:

"Sensei! I guess I have no potential at all, but... Sensei! A tile can never become gold, can it?” I was crying bitterly.

"A tile can’t become gold, but if you polish it, it becomes a magnificent jewel.”

In my despair, I questioned again, "But even if it becomes a jewel, a tile-jewel is no good for anything.”

"That’s not so. If a tile becomes a jewel, it’s a treasure that belongs to the whole world” (p.55).

Here the Sensei makes a highly unorthodox use of a well-known Zen anecdote. Drawing on the tathāgatagarbha (a close synonym of Buddha nature) literary tradition in which the tathāgatagarbha is metaphorically called a jewel hidden within the individual, the Sensei encouraged Satomi-san by assuring her that if she continued her efforts she would surely discover the jewel (the Buddha nature) hidden within her and thus gain access to that reality which is capable of transforming not only her, but the entire world. While his faith in her was surely based partially on her behavior under his tutelage, it is revealing that he conceptualized and expressed this faith in terms of the standard tathāgatagarbha imagery and the assurance of the Buddha nature teaching that this jewel is present in all. The Buddha
nature/tathāgatagarbha philosophy thus seems to have shaped a positive response to Satomi-san’s efforts in one of her most important teachers.

There was another Buddhist teacher in Satomi-san’s life, though one entirely outside of the Buddhist establishment. He taught students individually in his home. This man, Shibata Sensei, was devoted to his students and, as Satomi-san put it, “Sensei had taken a true interest in me—an old lady ignored by everyone—and despite his chronic illness with asthma, had lectured for long hours almost every day for my sake, until the day before he died” (p. 100). Why? Clearly he was a kind man, and as Satomi-san wrote, she was “inspired by Sensei’s sincerity (mukoto)” (p. 99). But it is also revealing that this man promised Satomi-san and her friend, “I can’t die before making you into Buddhas” (p. 100). Again, the Buddha nature teaching assures this man that Satomi-san (and everyone else) will certainly reach her goal. He thus teaches impartially and with great dedication everyone who seeks him out. In a variation on the same theme he says, “If you hear the teaching, you will understand it. Over five thousand volumes of scripture simply expound, in various ways, the contents of your own mind” (p. 101). And, “You must get to the point where it’s like you are listening to yourself give a Dharma talk, or your listening is no good” (p. 106). All this is quite orthodox Buddhist thought. It implies to this teacher that he should help and encourage Satomi-san.

In an interesting remark made towards the beginning of her practice of Buddhism, Satomi-san says that in order to practice meditation she moved away from home, “severing all karmic bonds” (p. 87) and moved into a hut by a shrine she had had built. With the reference to severing all karmic bonds, Satomi-san draws an explicit comparison between herself and Śākyamuni Buddha, whose leaving home is a paradigmatic event in his biography. Moreover, Satomi-san practiced takuhatsu, “religious mendicancy,” and when a friend challenged her for being a parasite on society and suggested sarcastically that she would earn more if she took up the lion dance instead, she replied, “If Śākyamuni-sama had performed the lion dance, I would be a lion dancer, or anything else for that matter! But I’ve never heard of Śākyamuni-sama doing a lion dance, so thanks very much for the idea, but no thanks!” (p. 114). In both of these instances Satomi-san demonstrated her complete readiness to compare herself with the Buddha. This is not hubris; the Buddha’s life is taught within the tradition as a model for practitioners to follow. Satomi-san follows mainstream Buddhist teachings by understanding her actions as imitations of the Buddha’s actions. It follows that in doing what a Buddha does, she demonstrates the nondifference between the Buddha and herself, or in other words, her Buddha nature. It is particularly revealing that she expresses her self-understanding as (in effect) “I am like the Buddha in this.”

Satomi-san’s first experiential breakthrough in the Buddhist context
came after years of meditation practice. She presents this experience as follows:

... Just then, I myself unmistakably became Amenominakanushi no Ōkami.17 ... In the next moment, the room shrank, and the universe was transformed into its essence and appeared at my feet. "Ahh! The beginning of the universe—right now! ... Ah, there is no beginning!"

The next moment, the whole world became a deep blue, glowing and rippling, magnificent whole. "Ahh! I gave birth to Buddha and Christ! The unborn, first parent. ... That's me! I gave birth to me! I was what I am before my parents were born!"

These strange, intuitive worlds unfolded instantaneously one after another, as if boldly resolving great issues in huge strokes and with dazzling speed (p. 92).

Here Satomi-san directly experienced her identity, or "true nature" as identical to that of Amenominakanushi no Ōkami, a supreme creator god in Restoration Shinto, and as the mother of Buddha and Christ. The identification with the Ōkami is an experiential fulfillment of Shinto teachings on the identity of human nature (once sufficiently purified) with kami nature. The experience of herself as mother of Buddha (and Christ, an addition possible for a modern Japanese) is a fascinating living-out of Buddhist prajñāpāramitā and tathāgatagarbha philosophy. The prajñāpāramitā, or "perfection of wisdom," is at the core of Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. Prajñāpāramitā is a synonym for enlightenment. The feminine ending of this word in Sanskrit created a situation in which it was possible for Buddhists to conceive of the prajñāpāramitā as the mother of all Buddhas. Moreover, it/she is iconographically portrayed in female form. The tathāgatagarbha, moreover, just happens to mean (in one of its meanings) "womb of Buddhas" (garbha means womb and a tathāgata is a Buddha). These concepts and images came to fruition when Satomi-san experienced herself as the mother of Buddha.

This passage is the most direct evidence in the text of the encouraging role played in Satomi-san's life by Shinto and Buddhist philosophies. It shows that the egalitarian philosophies of these traditions (and in some cases, philosophies expressed in female imagery) can have a positive impact upon the life of a woman practitioner, despite the sexist institutions in which they are embedded. Satomi-san, following Japanese tradition, expressed her sense of the meaning of her experience in the following poems:

Dew drops, even dust—
Nothing is unclean.
The own-nature is pure, the own-nature is pure.

17 In Hirata Atsutane's (1776–1843) Restoration Shinto, this kami is elevated from a quite obscure position to become the creator god of the entire universe, all powerful, all knowing and eternal. This concept never really caught on in Japan.
Kami and Buddha—
I’ve searched for you everywhere.
But you are here, you are here! (p. 93)

She experienced the teachings as applying to her; she is kami and Buddha, she is pure.

After years of practice and many ups and downs, the final turning point for Satomi-san was the teaching she was given by Yasutani Rōshi, a prominent Sōtō Zen master. He accepted her as a live-in disciple and gave her extensive, personal guidance. With this help, she finally attained kenshō, a preliminary enlightenment. The autobiography ends here. Though Satomi-san stayed on with Yasutani Rōshi and completed her training in the series of kōan he used with his students, she did not go on to become a teacher herself. Whether the reason lies in institutional sexism or her lack of qualifications, I am in no position to say. I am told that she preferred to encourage people to study with Yasutani Rōshi and it is certainly true that her autobiography is full of gratitude to him.

In retrospect, what made the difference in this woman’s life? It must surely have been her own determined efforts and the help of significant others. Yet those aspects of Shinto and Buddhist philosophy which teach that all human beings possess a pure or a perfect true nature were also partially responsible for these efforts and the aid that Satomi-san received. These egalitarian philosophies were capable of having such an impact on her life, moreover, despite the sexist institutions in which they were embedded. While the example of Satomi-san’s life by no means resolves the complexity of the conflict between sexist and egalitarian tendencies in these traditions—nor does it negate the frustration of living and practicing within a religious context which is self-contradictory—it does indicate that the power of philosophy to affect the course of a human life is not to be overlooked, even when that philosophy is embedded in an institution that sets up obstacles for the practitioner. On the other hand, the evidence from East Asia also demonstrates that philosophy by itself lacks the power to mold an institution in its image.