

Sōtō Zen Buddhism in North America

Since the 1950s, the number of Zen Buddhist centers in North America for non-Asian Americans has increased from just a few to several hundred. Centered at first along the West and East Coasts, Zen Buddhism has spread to most states in the Union.¹ This primer summarizes the arrival and development of Soto Zen, the school of Buddhism represented at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC). It separates that arrival and development into four phrases for ease of summary: (1) the initial importation of Buddhism into North America, of which Soto Zen was only a small part; (2) the arrival of Japanese Soto Zen priests who established Soto Zen centers for (primarily) educated, white Americans; (3) the eventual leadership (for the most part) of those centers by those same white Americans; and (4) thoughts on the future of Soto Zen in North America. As these phases indicate, the primer focuses on non-Asian convert Buddhists rather than on ethnic/immigrant Buddhist groups in accord with the membership of MZMC. As the primer will show, when Zen entered North America, it did what it has always done when it moved from one culture or country to another: it creatively adapted, transformed, and blended into North American culture.

Repackaging Buddhism for the West

The introduction and development of Buddhism in North America is a complicated and intriguing phase that is only briefly summarized here.² Although the 1893 meeting of the World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago is often cited as the date of the first contact between Buddhism and North America, Asian Buddhist immigrants were already present (mainly along the West Coast) in North America by the late 18th and early 19th century. Orientalist themes were present, too, in the writings of American transcendentalists like Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862), Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1892), and Walt Whitman (1819-1892), the latter of whom was called "an American Buddha."³

At the World's Parliament of Religion in Chicago, Soyen Shaku (1860-1919), a Rinzai Zen Master from Japan, presented a repackaged form of Zen (now called Zen Modernism) whose roots were in Meiji (1868-1912) period Japan.⁴ This form of modern Zen emphasized meditation, and the de-ritualized, scientific, and rational origins of their religion, a reformulation that had little to do with traditional Zen temple practices in Japan. Shaku may also have been the first Zen Buddhist master to teach non-Asian Americans in the United States when he stayed in San Francisco in 1905 for about nine months. Three years later Shaku sent D. T. Suzuki (1870-1966), Shigetsu Sasaki (known as Sokei-an, 1882-1945), and Gotō Zuigan (1879-1965) to North America to promote Rinzai Zen Buddhism.⁵ As is well known to those who became interested in Zen in the 1950s and 1960s, D. T. Suzuki along with Alan Watts (1915-1973) became significant figures in the emerging North American Zen presence. Suzuki strongly influenced a whole generation, including the Beat generation in the 1940s and 1950s, among whom were the highly influential Beat poets Gary Snyder (1930-), Jack Kerouac (1922-1969), Allen Ginsburg (1926-1997), Philip Whalen (1923-2002), and Kenneth Rexroth (1905-1962).⁶

During this phase, Buddhist temples for immigrant Chinese and Japanese were being established as well, mainly along the West coast. Chinese immigrants, who arrived in increasingly large numbers in the first half of the 19th century, built their first temple in San Francisco in Chinatown in 1853. By 1875 Chinatown was home to eight temples and by the end of the century there were hundreds of Chinese Buddhist temples and shrines on the West Coast. One imagines that at least some Zen (Chan) masters were present in these temples. Japanese immigrants began arriving in North America in large numbers somewhat later in the late 1880s. A temple of the Jodo Shinshu (True Pure Land Buddhism) lineage was established for Japanese immigrants on the island of Hawaii in 1889, and other Japanese Buddhist temples of that lineage were soon established in Sacramento (1898), Fresno (1900), Seattle (1901), Oakland (1901), San Jose (1902), Portland (1903), and Stockton (1906). This lineage, which was later called the Buddhist Churches of America, remains the largest Buddhist organization serving Japanese Americans today. In 1927 the Soto Zen Mission of Los Angeles, Zenshuji, was established as the headquarters of the North American Soto Zen Buddhist order.⁷ Sokoji, another Soto Zen temple, was established in San Francisco in 1934 for the Japanese American community there. Other Japanese Zen Buddhist priests in North America during this phase who made the United States home include Sōyū Matsuoka (1912-1997; Soto, Chicago/California), Nyogen Senzaki (1871-1958; Rinzai, California), and Sokei-an (1882-1945; Rinzai, New York). In contrast to the immigrant-focused centers mentioned above, each of these priests had white American students, including Robert Aitken (Noygen Senzaki) and Alan Watts (Sokei-an).⁸ Ruth Fuller Sasaki (1883-1967), the wife of Sokei-an, was likely the first Westerner to be fully ordained a Rinzaï Zen priest in Japan in 1958. Her book, *Zen Dust* (and in a later abbreviated version, *The Zen Koan*), written with Isshū Miura, was the first detailed study in English of koan introspection.⁹

Foundational Japanese Soto Zen Priests

Fueled by the Vietnam War, social unrest, and the beats, the 1960s witnessed a growing interest in Zen in North America (the 1960's "Zen Boom"). The Soto Zen priests Shunryu Suzuki and Taisan Maezumi were especially influential in the spread of Zen at the time to white convert Americans, though Maezumi taught a hybrid form of Soto Zen (Sanbo Kyodon). Both Suzuki and Maezumi attracted large numbers of practitioners, most of whom were educated, white Americans.

Shunryu Suzuki (1904-1971) was sent to San Francisco in 1959 at the age of 55 to serve as a priest for the Japanese congregation at Sokoji, at the time the only Soto Zen center in San Francisco. Given the growing interest in Zen in the 1960s he soon attracted an ever-growing number of white American students, which led to the formation of the San Francisco Zen Center, a convert-oriented center separate from immigrant-centered Sokoji. With the growth of the San Francisco Zen Center, the Center bought the Green Gulch Farm practice center just north of San Francisco and the Tassajara Hot Springs in Los Padres National Forest. The hot springs were renamed the Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the first Buddhist monastery in the Western world. Like other Japanese Zen teachers in the United States mentioned above, Suzuki believed his American students were much more interested in Dogen's "just sitting" Zen than in the "funeral Zen" practiced in Japanese Zen temples and in immigrant Zen centers in North America. Shunryu

Suzuki remains a beloved Zen teacher who laid the foundation for the spread of Soto Zen in its non-hybrid form in North America.¹⁰

Jikai Dainin Katagiri (1928-1990) was sent to Los Angeles to serve at the Zenshuji Soto Zen Mission in 1963, and in 1965 to the Sokoji Soto Zen Mission, which at the time also served as the location of the San Francisco Zen Center, in San Francisco to assist Shunryu Suzuki.¹¹ When the San Francisco Zen Center moved to its new location in 1969, Suzuki moved also and Katagiri followed to act as his assistant, which he remained until Suzuki's death in 1971. Wanting to have his own center, Katagiri started a zendo in his house in Monterey, California. At the urging of a small group of practitioners in Minnesota, he relocated to Minneapolis in 1972, where he was instrumental in founding the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (Ganshoji) in 1973. His move was inspired in part by the sparseness of Zen teachers at the time between the East and West coasts. Katagiri also founded Hokyoji Zen Practice Community (Catching the Moon Zen Mountain Center) in the hilly country of southeastern Minnesota. Katagiri sent many of his Western students to train at Zuio-ji in Japan, where Narasaki Ikko Roshi was abbot. In 1984, in the wake of the Zentatsu Richard Baker controversy, he returned to the San Francisco Zen Center to serve as interim abbot. He returned to the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center in 1985, where he spent the remainder of his life until his death of cancer at the age of 62 in 1990. Katagiri left behind twelve Dharma heirs, many of who opened their own centers and have their own Dharma heirs.¹²

Another prominent Japanese Soto Zen priest who came to America during this period was Kobun Chino (1838-2002). He arrived in America in 1967 to serve as an assistant to Shunryu Suzuki. After serving as an assistant priest at Tassajara until 1970, he was instrumental in forming other centers, such as the Haiku Zen Center in Los Altos, the Santa Cruz Zen Center, and Hokoji Zen Center near Taos, New Mexico. Kobun Chino Roshi left six dharma heirs who guide communities in Switzerland, California, and New Mexico.¹³

Zen masters of other schools were present in North America during this phase as well. **Prominent Japanese Rinzai masters** included: Kyozan Joshu Sasaki (1907-2014), who founded the Mount Baldy Zen Center and its branches after coming to Los Angeles from Japan in 1962; Eido Tai Shimano (1932-2018), who founded Dai Bosatsu Zendo Kongo-ji, a training center in New York state; and Omori Sogen (1904-1994), who founded Daihonzan Chozen-ji, the first headquarters temple established outside Japan, in Honolulu. **Prominent teachers in Sanbo Kyodan Zen** (a blend of Soto and Rinzai) include: Philip Kapleau (1912-2004), who founded the Rochester Zen Center in Rochester, New York, in 1966; Robert Aitken (1917-2010), who founded the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii in 1959; and Taizan Maezumi (1931-1995), who founded the Los Angeles Zen Center in 1967 and the White Plum Asanga in the mid-1970s. **Chinese Chan masters** include: Hsun Hua (1918-1995), the first Chinese Buddhist to teach Western students in America, who founded Gold Mountain Monastery in San Francisco in 1970 and the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas retreat center in Talmage, California in 1976; and Sheng-yen (1931-2009), who founded the Chan Meditation Society in Queens, New York, in 1980. **Prominent Korean Seon (Zen) masters** include: Seung Sahn (1927-2004), who founded the Providence Zen Center in Providence, Rhode Island and the Kwan Um School of Zen, which now has more than 100 Zen centers on six continents; and Samu Sunim (1941-), who founded Toronto's Zen Buddhist Temple in 1971. **The most prominent Vietnamese Thien (Zen) master** to influence North America is Thich Nhat Hanh (1926-), whose monastic students live and practice at three centers in the United States (Deer Park Monastery in Escondido, California; Blue Cliff Monastery in Pine

Bush, New York; and Magnolia Grove Monastery in Batesville, Mississippi).¹⁴ The population of Asian teachers and immigrants in general increased dramatically in America with the 1965 amendment to the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952. As phrased by Charles Prebish, “In the decade of the 1960s, Buddhism was to experience the largest, fastest, and most dynamic growth spurt in its short history on the American scene.”¹⁵

Soto Zen Center’s American Successors, But Now as Head Teacher

Following the death of Shunryu Suzuki and Katagiri Roshi, one of their white American students became the head of their centers, Richard Baker at the San Francisco Zen Center and eventually Karen Sununu at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center. This third phase of the story of Soto Zen in North America concentrates on the problems and initiatives that emerged during this phase, but now cast more widely for Zen in North America in general. Because of space limitations, the problems and initiatives are presented in the form of brief points (so pay attention to the footnotes for references to further readings). They are intended as starting points for discussion in classes or for priest training.¹⁶

Problems in North American Zen

- A series of sexual and/or fiscal scandals occurred in many centers across North America.¹⁷
- An issue related to the scandals is the assumption that an enlightened Zen master could not (and would not) engage in scandalous behavior. This issue has resulted in rethinking what an “enlightened Zen master” might actually mean. Whether a teacher is enlightened or not, it is agreed that it is of crucial importance that he or she follow the precepts or norms for acceptable behavior that are central to all Buddhist practice.¹⁸
- Since the emergence of convert white American Zen Buddhism, Soto Zen has remained separated into two populations, convert white American and immigrant Asian, each with quite different practices. Many find this disjunction troubling, given the embrace of compassion and oneness in Zen doctrine.¹⁹
- An increasing concern in Zen in North America is its lack of racial diversity, whether Asian, Latino, or African American.
- Related to the above are subtle prejudices in convert Zen communities that manifest white privilege and power.²⁰
- The commercialization of “Zen” as a global marketing tool.²¹
- Overly head-in-the-clouds representations of Zen practice and its results in social media.²²

Emerging Trends in North American Zen

- A number of American Zen priests in training who traveled to Japan for extensive training have returned to North America to become the head of Zen centers. Whether this continues to be an emerging trend remains to be seen.
- The growing influence of socially engaged Buddhism.²³
- The growing importance of environmentally engaged Buddhism.²⁴

- The appearance of influential new Buddhist magazines, such as *Tricycle*, *Buddhadharma: The Practitioner's Quarterly*, *The Buddhist Review*, and *Lion's Roar*.
- More diffuse Zen center affiliations by individuals (a Soto Zen center this Sunday, a Shambhala center next Sunday), a product in part of the increasing number and diversity of types of Buddhist centers in large cities.
- An increasing lay-centered (vs monastic) life-style in the great majority of Zen centers (while the Japanese founders had training in a monastic center, few white American Zen priests have had a similar experience).
- The increasing availability of accurate books and secondary literature about Zen and Buddhism more generally
- The increasing growth of academic Buddhist Studies programs and opportunities for graduate-level study of Buddhism.²⁵
- The useful and rapid development of the internet to promote Buddhist teachings and centers.²⁶
- The increased globalization of Zen and Buddhism more generally.²⁷
- The emergence and legitimation of “queer” (LGBTQ) Buddhism.²⁸
- The increased role of women and gender equality in general in Zen centers.²⁹
- A greater diversity of ways to be a Soto Zen priest in North America.³⁰
- A greater hybridity in what is taught in Soto Zen centers (for instance, zazen and koan study together).³¹
- A greater diversity in ways of being a “Buddhist.”³²
- A greater degree of democratization and more equitable patterns of authority in centers.
- A growing secularization of Zen.³³
- The use of Western psychological tools as a complement to traditional practice.

Looking Toward the Future

What can we expect to occur in Soto Zen communities in the future? Will Zen communities retain the membership and forms of teaching they have now or will there be significant changes as Soto Zen continues to accommodate to North American culture and its ethnic diversity? This final phase of the primer raises a variety of possibilities. Students are urged to consider other possibilities as well.³⁴

- Will alternatives to Japanese-derived Zen, such as Korean or Vietnamese Zen, eventually become more popular through time and overshadow Japanese-derived Soto Zen? Will other kinds of Buddhism, such as Vipassana in the Theravada tradition, become more popular than either variety of Zen?
- Will the cross fertilization that we already see occurring in Zen with other Buddhist traditions and schools continue to gain momentum in the future? The thought here is hybrid forms of Soto Zen, such as Sanbo Kyodan.
- Will the membership of Soto Zen centers change in the future? In the 1960s and 70s the average age of centers' members was in the 20s. Today it is in the late 30s and 40s, if not much older. What will the membership of Soto Zen centers be like in the future (thinking here of Tweed's “night-stand Buddhists and other creatures”)?³⁵

- Will the nature of Western Zen teachers day-to-day activities change in the future? Today most must work outside their centers to sustain themselves. For many, this means a marginal existence. Will that change and, if so, how?
- Will Zen monasteries become more common in time following the Japanese tradition or will semi-monasteries like Tassajara, Green Gulch, and the Zen Mountain Monastery remain the most successful type of monastic organization?
- At present the focus of most centers is on individual practice and realization. Will Soto centers move to a community structure in which members' children can be raised as in most Christian churches, that is, will the focus shift in the future from individual realization to practice as a community as in traditional Japanese Zen temple Buddhism?
- Although inter-faith dialogue between Zen and other religions has increased during the last few decades, will hybrid relations with non-Buddhist religions continue to evolve in the future? A contemporary example is the Unitarian Universalist Buddhist Fellowship within the Unitarian Universalist Church (think James Ford, a Unitarian Universalist minister and a Zen master).
- If the pastoral mentoring of members by center priests continues to be a primary function of some Zen centers, especially in regard to personal problems, will priests be required to attain training and credentials fitting this kind of non-practice mentoring in the future (most Christian priests and ministers receive training in pastoral mentoring during their years in a seminary).
- Since there is at present no strong central leadership in convert Soto Zen in North America, there remains no agreed upon consensus of the direction convert Soto Zen should be moving or of what should be going on in its centers. Is this a strength or a weakness (for there are dangers in an autocratic central administration)? Will the Soto Zen Buddhist Association or Soto Zen Teachers Association evolve in this direction?
- Should there be an increased emphasis and training in ending *dukkha* in our lives? Is a focus on "just sitting" adequate in this regard, that is, should there be a greater emphasis on morality, as in traditional Buddhism, as well as a valuing of Western approaches to helping people with their suffering?
- Besides just sitting for personal development, should Soto Zen centers develop an increased focus on social transformation as well? Can we "just sit" while social and environmental disarray continue?
- To what extent should traditional Japanese-style formal ritual be retained in Soto Zen centers and, if so, why?
- Although gender equity is a mark of most convert Soto Zen centers, the statues on altars remain male. Do we need a Tara Buddha alongside traditional male statues on altars?
- Will Zen practitioners be able to promote Zen in their families to a greater extent than at present? At present many members of Zen centers are the only one in their family to be a Buddhist. How can the balance be changed?
- Will Zen and Buddhism more generally become a major religion of the future in North America? With the droves of Americans leaving Christian churches that may be a possibility. The likelihood will depend on how Zen and other Buddhist centers manage their future. Will "just sitting" attract those droves of people? So how can that possibility be brought about or should that possibility not be a goal at all?

As is commonly expressed in Soto Zen teachings, there is no place to go, for everything we seek is right here already. We just need to wake up to what is happening right now. So Soto Zen in North America will necessarily be an American Zen, for this is where we are at this moment (and the same was true for practitioners in ancient China and in Japan). It is generally felt among Zen teachers that we stand at a critical time in the development of our centers. The above questions and many others need serious discussion by Soto Zen practitioners.

Notes:

1. For the names and locations of Zen centers in North America, see the Sweeping Zen's Web site Global Zen Center Directory. According to this directory, there were 217 Zen centers in North America in 2018, with all but one in the United States (207) or Canada (9). Of course, there are many other Zen centers in this area that for various reasons are not recorded in this directory (think Dharma Field Zen Center in Minneapolis, MN).
2. For relatively short overviews of the introduction of Zen Buddhism in North America, see Bivens (2007) and Prebish (2012). Also see Batchelor (2011), Baumann (2011), Coleman (1991), Fields (1992), Ford (2006) Goldberg (2006), Hori (1998), McMahan (2002, 2008), Mitchell (2016), Mitchell and Quli (2015), Numrich (2008), Prebish (1999), Prebish and Tanaka (1998), Prebish and Bauman (2002), Robinson et al (2005), Seager (2012), Snodgrass (2003), Sutin (2006), Tweed (2005), and Tworkov (1994). For the fascination of Americans with Japanese culture after World War II, see Mettler (2018).
3. Fields (1992:64-65), Snodgrass (2003), Tweed (2005). The transcendentalists' information about Buddhism was derived for the most part from European textual sources.
4. McMahan (2002, 2008), Jaffe (2004), Mohr (2010), Thompson (2005), Quli (2009). Also see the "Soto Zen in Japan" primer in this series.
5. Abe (1986), Watts (1996, 1999).
6. Halper (1991), Haynes (2005), Snyder (2012), Kerouac (2008).
7. Today Zenshuji is the North American headquarters for Asian-American Soto Zen under the guidance of Sotoshu shumicho (the headquarters of Soto Zen in Japan). For information about Zenshuji, see SotoZen-Net and click on North America. Also see Yoo (1999).
8. For Matsuoka, see Ford (2006:80-81), Williams and Queen (1999:118), Prebish (1999:13); for Nyogen Senzaki, see Chayat (2008) and Besserman and Steger (2011); for Sokei-an, see Hotz (2003) and Anderson and Schwartz (2018). For these and other Zen masters in America during this phase, see Ford (2006), Murphy (2013), Rawlinson (1998), McDaniel (2015a).
9. Anderson and Schwartz (2018).
10. Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's publications include *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1970), *Branching Streams Flow into Darkness* (Weitsman and Wenger 1999), and *Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen* (ed. by Edward Espe Brown 2002). David Chadwick published a biography of Suzuki's life, *Crooked Cucumber: The Life and Teaching of Shunryu Suzuki*, in 1999. For Suzuki's extensive American/European lineage, see the "Shunryu Suzuki lineage" on the Sweeping Zen web site.
11. On Katagiri's life and teachings, see Martin (2012), Port (2008), Goldberg (1994, 2005), and Storlie (1996). For his book publications, see Katagiri (1988, 1998, 2007, 2017).
12. For a list of Katagiri's dharma heirs, see the Katagiri Project on the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center web site.
13. Ford (2006:136-138).
14. For profiles of some of these teachers, see Ford (2006), McDaniel (2015a, 2015b), Heine and Wright (2010), Low (2010), Murphy (2013), Wright (2010), and Tworkov 1994).
15. Prebish (2012:311).
16. For an informative but informal survey of practice in a variety of Zen centers, see MacRae (2000-2001). For more recent activities among immigrant Asian centers, see the Soto Zen Journal *Dharma Eye* on SotoZen.net; the journal's first issue appeared in 1997. The points listed in this part of the primer are not intended to be inclusive, so think of other examples.

17. For examples, see Bell (2002), Bivins (2007), Downing (2002), Goldberg (2005), Hamacher (2012), Kaza (2004), Lachs (2002), Oppenheimer (2013), Wright (2010), Prebish (2013).
18. Bivins (2007), Lachs (1994, 1999, 2002, 2006, 2011), Wright (2010), Prebish (2013).
19. Nattier (1998), Numrich (2003), Prebish (1993).
20. Prebish (2013), Hickey (2015), Adams et al (2000), Cheah (2011). For the presence of extensive social discrimination in Soto Zen in Japan, see Bodiford (1996).
21. Irizarry (2015).
22. Whalen-Bridge and Storhoff (2014), Mitchell (2014). Also see Normand (2010), Whalen-Bridge and Stohoff (2011).
23. King (2005), Queen (2012), Queen et al (2003), King (2012), Rothberg (2006).
24. Ives (2013), Kaza and Kraft (2000), Tucker and Williams (1998), Payne (2010).
25. Numrich (2008), Tweed (2011),
26. Grieve and Veidinger (2015). See the Sweeping Zen and Buddhnet.net web sites. Cybersanghas and the broadening of sangha membership in general to include people living in rural areas.
27. Irizarry (2015), Campbell (2012). Also see Baumann (2001).
28. Corless (1998, 2000), Gleig (2012), Leyland (1998).
29. Klein (1995), Schireson (2010), Boucher (1993), Wilson (2012).
30. Richmond (2005).
31. Sharf (1995), Rawlinson (2001).
32. Tweed (2002), Watts (1996).
33. Higgins (2012), Batchelor (2012).
34. For thoughts on the future of Zen in North America, see Ford (1997), Loy ((2013), ...
35. Hori 1994), Nattier (1998), Tweed (2002),

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