

Ancient Stepping Stones

by Ellen Takemoto

This essay, "Ancient Stepping Stones" by Ms. Ellen Takemoto records her experience growing up in the vicinity of a Soto Zen Mission temple in Hawai'i. Ms. Takemoto is a social worker and ministerial aspirant in her tradition. We offer this essay because it reflects the spirit of many people in Hawai'i and provides some insight into the culture. While ethnic-associated Buddhism is showing signs of decline because of history and changes in the ethnic community, it is still living in the hearts of people and struggling to revive.

Wahiawa Ryusenji Soto Mission

There is a river near the Soto Mission of Hawaii on Nuuanu that was once filled with glittering rainbow fantails and fire red crayfish. The Nuuanu Wakei Gakuen students knew that they were *not* allowed to go beyond the back of the temple where a tall fence stood. The temptation of adventure was no boundary for me. I was never caught climbing over the fence leading to the magnificent waterfall and river where ancient stepping stones would safely keep me from falling into the ponds. My days alternated between the river and the temple grounds.

Like a pioneer on a mission, my nimble feet journeyed through the vast echoing corridors of the temple. Every mysterious door led to stuffy closets, which were the best places to play, under simple things such as tables or on mountains of stored cushions. Musty rooms became dark caves filled with treasures such as stage equipment used from performances of yesteryear; brought back to life by a child's world of imagination. My propensity for uninhibited risk-taking led to the study of fine-tuning window and wall climbing skills. One route that I charted led to climbing the various levels of the temple rooftop. There was only one way to start off, which was the most terrifying feat. Perfectly executed by my command, my little ninja friends darted across the temple office window like ghosts in broad daylight!

Down below, the *Zen* garden, *zazen* (meditation) room, *chanoyu* (tea ceremony) area and Social Hall, were also off limits. My shadow, nevertheless, became well acquainted with every crack and crevice of the temple. The landscaped bushes that were hollow on the inside served as quiet hideaways. I once started a little bon fire where I found some matches in the tea ceremony area. Behold, of all people, Rev. Shugen Komagata walked in. I fumbled under a tea preparation table, while watching the huge black shoes quite deliberately step over the firing blaze. Beads of sweat formed on my forehead, awaiting confrontation, however, he and the black shoes continued walking on. The flames went out, and so was my attempt to play with matches ever again!

These were typical days spent before Japanese school lessons started. My mischief was never far from Machida Sensei's Japanese school bell. With perked ears, my instant reaction was, "Oh no, was that first or second bell?!"

Japanese school class was held in the *zazen* room at one time. A large blackboard stationed in front of the Buddha separated the classroom from the altar. I promptly squeezed behind to greet the Buddha anyway, by bowing in *gassho* (with hands put together.)

Religious practices were followed on a "smaller scale" when creatures such as crayfish came to their end. I would conduct private funeral services. Somber children would squat in silence, huddled on the playground near the bodhi tree closest to Nuuanu Avenue. We would have an interfaith ceremony, where I would recite a memorized okyo (sutra) and a

friend would do a Christian blessing. It was wonderful to have a diverse group of friends attend Japanese school at a Buddhist temple.

Sunday school was held weekly for children after the temple service. My cousin Ann was my favorite teacher. I learned about the history and life of important Buddhist teachers through song and crafts. Her father, Edward Nakamura, would take me to adult *zazen* sessions with him. Although I could not relate to the older people, I still enjoyed being there.

The *zazen* room was also where Sunday school children went to practice *zazen*. The pillow for sitting on weighed a ton and seemed as large as a great mountain. Before anyone else could, I would anxiously reach up for the one pillow labeled in *hiragana* (Japanese alphabet writing): Komagata. Squirring children finally assumed full lotus position, hushed by a minister sliding across the room with a big long stick held up high. The now compliant children sat with backs straight facing the wall in neat rows. *Zazen* enchanted me. It was a bridge to the ancient ones of the past.

I can still see the Bishop Zenkyo Komagata overseeing busy activities with adults scurrying about, and would think that I was but a spirit that no one noticed. However, the Rev. Zenshu Komagata took notice by showing me magic tricks or by tossing me up so high that I could almost reach the sky.

In time, Rev. Zenshu's son, Shugen Komagata, a young minister, suddenly went away for several years. One morning, I was the first at judo practice and saw that he had returned with his big camera slung around his neck. He ran down a flight of stairs, "Do you remember me, Ellen?" I could not forget his enthusiastic sermons about his mischievous activities of growing up at the *otera* (temple) in Japan. How intriguing to have such similar childhood experiences but from different times and different parts of the world!

Bon dance was the happiest event of the year for me. It seemed to be the best cultural party that drew crowds of people from all over the island. I thought it was the happiest party that gave ancestors a chance to dance with us to nostalgic folk music. Throughout the night, I would tune in to the *fue* (side blown bamboo flute) and *taiko* (Japanese drum) performers on the *yagura* (stage where live music was played), and dreamt that I might be able to do this one day.

Soto Mission bustled with delicate shades of kimono clad people who floated about like angels during tea ceremony. The sense of mindfulness of the interaction among the old and young adults presented an example of deep spiritual tradition. I, however, focused on one thing, the candy for sipping tea with. The compassion of Kimura Sensei was what imprinted the heart of *chanoyu* in me. Mrs. Zenshu Komagata was another great influence, who taught me the finer points and aesthetic qualities of *ikebana* (flower arrangement.) I shall never forget the faithful patience of my teachers who inspired me, and still think of them to this day.

Judo became a way of life starting from a size 00 *gi* (extra, extra small uniform). Although it is a martial art, I saw it as *zazen* training in movement, and appreciated the essence of *judo*, which is translated from *kanji* (Chinese characters) meaning "The Gentle Way." Sakabe Sensei who was 8th *dan* (eighth degree) trained me in the old school, a style of strict discipline that really originated from his days in the Japanese Imperial Navy. It was hard to do the hundreds of basic falling exercises that seemed to go on for hours on end. I continued practicing *judo* through my adulthood after having attained first-degree black belt at 18 years of age. Black and blue and *tankobu* (bruise) of different shapes and color variation often did not have time to heal; a sign bearing the desire to take judo to a higher level. Refining *waza* (technique) took years until I eventually realized that there is a beauty

in the spirit of *judo* by concentrating on development of not only the body, but more importantly, the mind.

My love and ever-presence at the *otera* was spent with a favorite mentor, Rev. Domyo Fujiki, who was also a strong and very gifted *judo* sensei. I followed him everywhere like an *opihii*, and he was my rock. One day we sat on the old flatbed wheelbarrow behind the *otera* where he disclosed the news about returning to his *otera* in Japan. It seemed like a million miles from here! I tried to be brave and asked if he would come back but to my dismay, he whispered, "No" and watched him walk away without any more words.

The lively Soto Mission office seemed to be the hub of endless activities. I remember Faye Watanabe along with cousins Bernice and Karen Nakamura and others who towered over me discussing the serious business of things like writing newsletters and such. Among the several Japan ministers was a young sensei, Rev. Tetsuhiko Tanaka, who took care of me like a big brother. We had endless talks about the ideologies and essence of *zen* teachings before he, too, returned to his *otera* in Japan. Eventually each sensei moved on with their lives. Muroga Sensei, who quietly spoke to me with her gentle smile, took ill and passed away at 72 years of age. Reverend Ichinose was a solid figure whom I could always rely on, and could never imagine her leaving Hawaii, since she was a Hawaii-born minister. I used to beg her over and over to tell me the story of her debilitating childhood illness and how Rev. Shinkaku Hunt helped her during her darkest times. Her life came to an abrupt and tragic end when a burglar attacked her in the temple. She became a hero to me.

I became part of the young Komagata family who lived behind the *otera* in a little cottage. Rev. Komagata taught me to be quick to serve others even if it was to fetch someone a simple cup of water. He tried to keep me sharp by posing moral questions from his ever-thinking mind, and took me with him to do with whatever the ministers did. His wife, Faye, placed an emphasis on education to the highest level. She was a disciplinarian at heart, who always did things by example. I often slept over at the Komagatas after their first child Daishu was born. Night sounds at the *otera* were peaceful with the moonlight shining through the window blinds, knowing that I would soon wake up early to the sound of the temple bell that called ministers together. I loved standing in line among the ministers inside the *otera* then proceeding to the *nookotsudoo* (columbarium), a place where ancestors and departed loved ones awaited their morning blessing. Eventually, Faye and Rev. Komagata were relocated off island. They moved on with new responsibilities at Kona Daifukuji with their two children Daishu and Shuji.

Soto Mission of Hawaii was a home for my spirit and the pleasure of the child in me. It was where the inevitable realities of growth, and where the pangs of loss became part of changes that occur naturally in the shifting realities of the world. Wonderful opportunities offered a solid foundation steeped in tradition and culture, which molded and shaped my formative years. I wanted to talk with Dogen Zenji, Ikkyu, or the famous Daruma. When the *otera* was especially quiet, I would climb up from the back door of the main altar to peer up, and gaze into the side where Dogen-sama sits where he looked so life-like, and felt he could talk to me.

One hundred years from now, I hope a child might stumble upon this story and be able to identify with these experiences. It has been over thirty years now, and the fantail and my ancient stepping stones are no longer, however, the temple bell continues to ring on and on.