

CHAPTER 1

Setting the Stage

Aitken and the Context of Zen in America

It began when an acquaintance remarked that my writings reminded him of Oriental poetry. I borrowed translations of Japanese and Chinese literature from the library, and met Basho and Po Chu-i.

—Robert Aitken, *Taking the Path of Zen*

Robert Baker Aitken is often referred to as the dean of American Zen, one of the first generation of American Zen teachers who trained in Japan and sought to establish a viable form of Zen practice for Americans. He is perhaps best known for his extensive writings, which include more than twelve books and numerous other publications. He and his wife Anne together founded Honolulu Diamond Sangha, which is now in its third generation of teachers and has grown to include a number of affiliated Zen centers throughout the United States and Oceania. I have come to regard HDS as one of several pivotal Buddhist organizations critical to the development of Zen in America and other Western countries. As the founder and director of HDS, Aitken sponsored several Japanese teachers of Zen to instruct his fledgling community. Some prominent teachers came to lead periodic *sesshin*, while other less prominent individuals served HDS for longer periods of time as resident advisors. Throughout the first two formative decades, Aitken likewise pursued his own Zen training in Japan with several teachers, including Nakagawa Sōen, Yasutani Hakuun, and Yamada Kōun. HDS thus served as a meeting ground for American practitioners, Japanese teachers, and a Japan-trained American teacher.

A teacher of Aitken's stature and the community that he founded are certainly worthy subjects for an extensive case study. This is not the objective of the present study, which focuses on Aitken's relationship with Distant Correspondents. For this purpose, a brief biographical account of Aitken's life and works will have to suffice to set the stage for the chapters that follow. The chapter will likewise situate HDS into the larger context of the growth of Zen communities in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century.

Robert Aitken and Honolulu Diamond Sangha

Several short biographical and autobiographical sketches of Aitken already exist, and the following section is based upon them along with additional materials derived from personal interviews, Aitken's other publications, and letters from the Aitken archive. Aitken composed the autobiographical essay "Willy-Nilly Zen" in November 1971, at the behest of Yamada Kōun after confirmation of his *kenshō* or first breakthrough experience. The essay appears as an appendix in *Taking the Path of Zen*.¹ It fits the pattern of an extended testimonial, or *kenshōki*, which Sanbōkyōdan teachers encouraged their students to write.² Aitken composed an additional autobiographical summary that appears on the University of Hawaii Special Collections page as part of the Robert Baker Aitken Papers.³ Finally, Helen Tworikov included a biographical essay of Aitken in her *Zen in America: Profiles of Five Teachers*.⁴

Robert Baker Aitken was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on June 19, 1917 to Gladys B. and Robert T. Aitken. His father, an ethnologist, moved the family to Honolulu in 1922, when he accepted a position at the Bishop Museum. Robin, as he was addressed in his youth, was then five years old. He grew up in Honolulu, interspersed with periods of time living with his grandparents in California, and acquired most of his primary and secondary education in Hawaii schools. As he told the story, his first encounter with Buddhism occurred when he was a boy exploring the city riding about on his bicycle. He would sometimes stop to admire the art at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, and found himself much taken by a statue of Guanyin dating from the Northern Song Dynasty (c. 1025), still prominently displayed at the museum today. He would sit and contemplate the statue, sensing the compassion and serenity of the bodhisattva without yet understanding its provenance.⁵

After graduating from high school, Aitken attended the University of Hawaii for two and a half years without much interest or success. After dropping out of college in 1940, he spent a year doing construction work on Midway Island, located at the far northwestern end of the Hawaiian archipelago, returning to Honolulu at the end of his contract. Despite the obvious signs of approaching war in the summer of 1941, he signed up for a second contract, this time for work on Guam. The Japanese captured the island almost immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 8, 1941, and Aitken was transported to Kobe, Japan, where he spent the remainder of the war as a civilian internee.

Due to their civilian status, Aitken and the other enemy foreign nationals held in Japan were not forced to engage in manual labor. Aitken has commented that many of the other men found it an emotionally debilitating experience to pass the long days of detention without gainful employment. Aitken, on the other hand, found ways to make the idle period serve his purposes. Since detainees had ready access to reading and study materials, Aitken devised his own regimen of productive activity. He spent his internment reading and studying language with more enthusiasm than he had previously shown in his formal education. In his letters home, he reported that he made significant progress with French, German, and Japanese, and that he read history, philosophy, and literature as widely as was possible.

Aitken did not seem to regret his years of confinement, viewing them as an opportunity to settle himself through reflection and study. In a letter dated December 8, 1944, addressed to his mother, he wrote,

I have not changed any attitude, merely developed one, and shed a few abstractions. This internment is a stepping-stone rather than a Slough of Despond. I have actually, honestly learned to study, and to read. I finished Spengler a few months ago and it strongly influenced me and steadied my ideas. I do look forward to reunion, aside from the real reasons, to talk to you all for the first time.

His letters maintain a cheerful tone throughout the war, assuring his family of his good health and emotional well-being. The former claims were certainly an exaggeration maintained for the sake of his mother, since he later reported that he suffered long bouts of asthma and respiratory illness during his confinement. The latter claims relating to his

positive emotional state appear to have been more accurate. He has continued to write and speak about his time in the internment camp as a period of personal growth that was critical for his development.

While in the internment camp, Aitken was introduced to Zen teachings through his reading. One of the Japanese guards, aware of Aitken's interest in Japanese literature, loaned him a copy of R.H. Blyth's newly published *Zen in English Literature and Oriental Classics*. Aitken describes reading it as transformative for him.

I must have read that book ten times, finishing it and starting it again. I would have experiences at various places in the book. . . . Everything was transformed for me by those experiences, and to this day I am motivated by that book. All my writing springs from its style and intention. All my work comes from the profound vow that was made for me on reading it: that I would devote my life to Zen Buddhism, no matter what the difficulty.⁶

Not long after, Aitken had the opportunity to meet and study with Blyth himself when the Japanese consolidated all of the civilian internee camps in the Kobe area. During the fourteen months they were interned together, Aitken studied Japanese language, poetry, and Zen literature with Blyth as his mentor.

At the end of the war, badly malnourished from his period of confinement, Aitken was repatriated and returned to Honolulu. He reapplied to the University of Hawaii, and this time relished his studies, completing a degree in English literature in 1947. The same year, he married his first wife Mary Laune, and the couple moved to Berkeley, where Aitken began graduate work in Japanese studies at the University of California. During a visit to Los Angeles over a winter break, Aitken sought out the acquaintance of the Zen teacher Senzaki Nyogen.⁷ Senzaki became his first Zen teacher, and Aitken began to practice *zazen* under his guidance. As a result, Aitken shifted his studies to UCLA, and he and his wife moved to Pasadena to be nearer Senzaki.

Mary Aitken grew unhappy in Southern California, and the Aitkens moved yet again, returning to Honolulu in 1949. Aitken returned to the University of Hawaii and there completed his master's degree in Japanese Studies in 1950. His first book, *A Zen Wave*, is based on his graduate thesis. After graduation, Aitken received a fellowship to study both *haiku* and Zen in Japan. This time he traveled alone, leaving Mary and their

newborn son Thomas in Honolulu. In Japan, he experienced his first introduction to Zen monastic practice, including the intensive periods of meditation known as *sesshin*.

Aitken attended his first *sesshin* at Engakuji in Kamakura under the direction of the abbot Asahina Beppō Sōgen. Uncomfortable with the ritual bowing required of him and the austere practice conditions, he left Engakuji and sought out Nakagawa Sōen,⁸ a friend of his teacher Sensaki, who spoke good English and was himself a creative poet and student of Japanese literature. With Sōen's introduction, Aitken entered Ryūtakuji, a Rinzai Zen temple in Mishima, Shizuoka prefecture, where he spent seven months practicing with the abbot Yamamoto Genpō.

Aitken was among the first Westerners to enter a Japanese monastery in the postwar period, and the Zen teachers he encountered made little effort to accommodate him. He continued to experience problems with the sparse diet and the long hours of *zazen* using the traditional *zafu*, and his chronic respiratory problems recurred. In California, Sensaki had greatly altered the practice to suit his American students. They generally sat *zazen* using Western-style chairs, for example, and they did not prostrate themselves before Buddhist images. Aitken found his health once again compromised and he returned to Honolulu in 1952 without having made great progress in his meditation.

Aitken describes the next five years as a Dark Night. His marriage with Mary had been severely strained by his absence, and they divorced two years after his return from Japan. In 1953, he returned to Southern California to practice once again with Sensaki. Stress from the divorce and separation from his son combined with the lingering effects of physical strain from his years in Japan eventually led to hospitalization for respiratory problems, followed by many dreary months of slow recuperation. In 1956, life began to improve. Aitken secured a teaching position at Happy Valley School in Ojai, where he met Anne Hopkins. The couple married in February 1957 and at the end of the school year traveled to Japan for their honeymoon. During this trip, Aitken met and sat his first *sesshin* with Yasutani Hakuun, the founder of Sanbōkyōdan.

Up until this time, Aitken had been practicing with Zen teachers within Rinzai lineages. The Sanbōkyōdan lineage is distinct from both Rinzai and Sōtō Zen and represents a hybrid form of Zen practice that adopts elements from both Rinzai and Sōtō. Its founder Yasutani Hakuun (1885–1973) was ordained within the Sōtō tradition and practiced with and received Dharma transmission from Harada Daiun Sogaku

(1871–1961), likewise an ordained Sōtō priest, who made use of kōan. The use of kōan as a focus for meditation is more often associated with Rinzai Zen, while Sōtō practitioners generally prefer *shikan taza*. Like Harada, Yasutani felt that monastic Zen had become ossified in Japan, and Yasutani chose to concentrate his teaching efforts on lay practitioners.

In 1954, Yasutani established Sanbōkyōdan as an independent lay school of Zen, based on Harada's style of teaching. Although Yasutani accepted ordained students, he did not function within the Sōtō monastic system and the majority of Sanbōkyōdan members have always been laypeople. Not only did Yasutani develop his form of meditation practice specifically for laypeople, most of the teachers within the lineage after him are not ordained. Unlike most Zen teachers in Japan, Yasutani welcomed Western students, and the Aitkens were among the first to practice with him. After learning the basics of *zazen*, Sanbōkyōdan students typically undertake kōan practice, beginning with the Mu kōan. Since this is the norm in most Rinzai lineages, the practice would have been familiar in general terms to Aitken. One minor observable difference is that Sanbōkyōdan practitioners sit facing the wall, in typical Sōtō fashion, while Rinzai practitioners usually face inward, toward their fellow meditators. It should be noted that since its founding, Sanbōkyōdan holds a relatively marginal status within the world of Japanese Zen, especially compared to the larger Zen denominations,⁹ and it remains considerably smaller than Rinzai, Sōtō, or Ōbaku. As shall be seen, it plays a much more dominant role in the spread of Zen to America.

After their honeymoon, Anne and Robert Aitken returned to California and taught one more year at Happy Valley School. In 1958, they relocated to Honolulu so that Aitken could be closer to his son Tom. Together he and Anne opened a secondhand bookstore in Chinatown that specialized in Asian religions and Hawaiiana. They began to keep a list of the names and addresses of all their customers with an interest in Buddhism, and they later used this list as the basis for establishing a small meditation group that would meet in their home, starting in October 1959.

At the beginning, Robert and Anne acted as “first among equals,” or in Aitken's own words, “elder sister and brother” for HDS, hosting meditation sessions in their living room twice each week. Beginning in 1960, they arranged for the first in a series of Zen teachers from Japan to visit HDS. Over the years, less prominent individuals served as resident advisors and generally stayed for extended periods of time, while more promi-

ment teachers such as Nakagawa Sōen and Yasutani Hakuun typically came to lead a single *sesshin*, usually while in transit between Japan and the U.S. mainland.

The first long-term resident advisor for HDS was Eidō Shimano, known to the Aitkens and other members of the HDS community as Tai San. Robert and Anne first met Tai San in Japan while staying at Ryū-takuji on their honeymoon. At that time, he made a positive impression on them, and they promised to assist him in fulfilling his desire to teach in the United States. Later, when Sōen Rōshi agreed to allow Eidō to move to Honolulu to serve as resident advisor for the fledgling HDS community, Robert and Anne served as legal sponsors for his visa. Eidō remained at HDS for four years, from 1960 to 1964, living with the Aitkens at Koko An.

Aitken has written very little in his published works about the disastrous results caused by Eidō Shimano during his tenure as resident advisor. Aitken wrote more openly to friends about events, and the archive letters contain numerous references to the time period. In later years, Aitken became more willing to speak out publically about the damaging effects that Eidō's inappropriate sexual behavior had on the HDS community, especially the two female members who were abused, and his own feelings of complicity in remaining silent. Vladimir Keremidschieff and Stuart Lachs discussed the events related to the Eidō debacle at some length in an online article,¹⁰ and a large collection of material from the Aitken archive is posted online as part of the Shimano Archive.¹¹

In 1964, two female members of HDS were hospitalized for psychiatric care as a result of sexual abuse. Aitken eventually learned of Eidō's alleged misconduct from hospital staff. With two of his *sangha* members hospitalized, Aitken began volunteering at the mental health facility, and Eidō sometimes accompanied him. Eventually a staff member at the hospital requested that Aitken stop bringing Eidō, since he was implicated in the women's reports of abuse. Aghast at what he heard, Aitken sought confirmation of the allegation from the psychiatrists treating the women and requested a written statement that he could take with him to Japan.

Aitken's visit to Japan proved unsuccessful in resolving the problem, and it permanently damaged his relationship with his teacher Sōen Rōshi. Neither Sōen nor Yasutani, who around this time assumed teaching responsibility for both Eidō and Aitken, took the allegations seriously. They regarded such sexual misconduct as "rascal" behavior that would

naturally diminish once Eidō was married and settled down. Aitken flew back to Honolulu, frustrated by their apparent lack of concern and uncertain how to proceed.

On his return, Aitken found Eidō poised to leave for New York, angered that Aitken had spoken with his superiors in Japan without first confronting him with the allegations. In letters to friends and colleagues, Aitken described the events that followed at HDS as “a great collapse”¹² that split the small *sangha*. At the time, most members were unaware of Eidō’s misconduct, and some of them blamed Aitken for driving away their teacher. Aitken felt obliged to remain silent for many years both for the sake of the women involved as well as to preserve the strained relations with his teachers in Japan. At the time, Aitken accepted the blame for causing Eidō to depart and struggled to heal the fracture in his community. He continued to feel the weight of his visa sponsorship for Eidō, and made efforts to sever that relationship as quickly as possible.¹³

Much more could be said about Aitken’s relations with Eidō throughout the rest of his career, more than is appropriate for this project. Suffice it to say that Eidō’s conduct while in residence at Koko An influenced Aitken’s work in many ways, as did his disappointment in his Japanese teachers’ lack of adequate response. Evidence of this will become apparent in his dealings with Distant Correspondents. The events and the desire to set things right remained critical to Aitken until the end of his life. At the advice of publishers, he never wrote openly about what had transpired, but he did not maintain his initial silence.¹⁴ By the early 1970s, Aitken openly discussed events with his senior students at HDS, so that it was common knowledge at Maui Zendo and Koko An.¹⁵ During the early 1980s, he began boycotting teachers’ meetings and public events at which he would feel obliged to pretend that he regarded Eidō as a colleague and encouraged colleagues to do the same. Toward the end of his life, he allowed for the release of the portion of his archive related to Eidō that had previously been sealed from the public.

The second resident advisor, Sekida Katsuki, proved to be a more stable influence for the HDS community. He remained with HDS from 1965 until approximately 1971, making the move to Maui to assist Robert and Anne in establishing Maui Zendo. Aitken spoke well of Sekida as a teacher. In a letter dated May 31, 1968 to a Distant Correspondent, for example, he wrote, “[Sekida] is an excellent teacher, and I have learned much more from him than I have from any Rōshi, in fact from all of them put together.” In addition to Sekida’s guidance, HDS

welcomed prominent teachers from Japan to lead *sesshin* both at Koko An in Honolulu and in the newly established Maui Zendo. From 1961 until 1969, Yasutani Hakuun came regularly to Hawaii to lead *sesshin*, and other teachers including Nakagawa Sōen came on occasion. Aitken thus had resources to support and maintain his own practice in Hawaii throughout these difficult years. In addition to his regular practice in Hawaii, Aitken likewise pursued Zen training in Japan, where he and Anne annually took an extended visit starting in 1961. During most of these visits, Aitken worked with Yasutani.

Throughout the first decade of HDS's history, Aitken earned his living working for the University of Hawaii, while acting as director for the fledgling HDS community in his spare time. In 1969, he retired from the university and relocated to Maui, where he and Anne established Maui Zendo. From that time on, HDS maintained two sites, Koko An in Honolulu and Maui Zendo in Haiku, Maui. Koko An continued to serve a core group of members who lived in the neighboring community as well as a few residents who traveled to Hawaii either for *sesshin* or an extended practice visit. Maui Zendo served as a residential program, with anywhere from twelve to twenty practitioners in residence.

At about the same time that he retired, Aitken began to make progress in his practice, and he started working his way through the Sanbōkyōdan kōan curriculum. In 1971, he and Anne accepted Yamada Kōun as their new teacher, and Aitken went on to complete the kōan curriculum in fairly rapid order under Yamada's guidance. In 1974, Aitken received permission to teach independently from Yamada Kōun, who by then had assumed the leadership of Sanbōkyōdan as Yasutani's successor. Within Sanbōkyōdan, this meant that Aitken had attained the status of Junshike or Associate Zen Master and was qualified to accept students, offer *dokusan*, authorize *kenshō*, and start students on the kōan curriculum.¹⁶ Aitken readily admitted that he was not initially comfortable with his new authority, and that he turned to his friend and Dharma brother Maezumi Taizan for guidance in his new role as teacher.¹⁷

With a resident teacher of its own, HDS no longer needed to rely upon teachers from Japan, and the community was able to stabilize under Aitken's leadership. Not surprisingly, Aitken's early doubts gave way to growing confidence as he gained in experience.¹⁸ For the next twenty years, HDS continued to serve as an official branch center for Sanbōkyōdan. In addition to traveling between the Koko An and Maui Zendo communities to lead *sesshin*, Aitken soon began to travel regularly to lead

sesshin for smaller Zen communities on the West coast of the United States as well as in Australia and New Zealand, thus establishing what would become the extended network of HDS affiliated centers.

In 1983, Aitken and Anne decided to return permanently to Oahu and concentrate their efforts on the Koko An community. Their departure eventually led to the Maui Zendo being closed and sold in 1986.¹⁹ On Oahu, the HDS community began to make plans and raise funds to build a larger facility that would accommodate the needs of both a residential program, designed for practitioners “who are born to be monks or nuns,”²⁰ and the growing local membership. In 1987, they broke ground for the new temple, located in the lush Palolo Valley of Honolulu. The new temple, called Palolo Zen Center, opened its doors in 1989.

In 1985, Aitken received full designation as Yamada’s Dharma heir. In Sanbōkyōdan parlance, he became a Shōshike (Authentic Zen Master), the first and only such designation that Yamada conferred on a non-Japanese teacher. Aitken thereby formally became the head teacher for HDS, qualified to independently designate his own Dharma heirs within the Sanbōkyōdan lineage. Aitken’s status as a full Dharma heir came under challenge after Yamada’s death in 1989. The new Sanbōkyōdan leadership began to restrict the independence of all non-Japanese teachers that had been appointed by Yamada.²¹ This and other issues led to a parting of the ways for HDS and Sanbōkyōdan.

HDS remained affiliated with Sanbōkyōdan until 1995, when it formally split and became an independent American Zen lineage. Aitken has called this split an “amicable divorce,” but he sometimes wrote confidentially to friends about his reservations about the involvement of Sanbōkyōdan leaders in Japanese big business and their general “lack of connection with society.” While concerns about the leadership restricting his status as an independent Dharma heir certainly precipitated the break, Aitken’s underlying concerns about the relationship between Zen teachings and social activism likewise informed his decision.

In June 1994, Anne Aitken was taken ill with flu-like symptoms and eventually hospitalized. She died a few days later on June 13, with Aitken, her stepson Tom, and a few close friends at her bedside. Aitken and Anne had enjoyed a long, happy, and loving marriage, and they worked together as partners from the beginning in nurturing the development of HDS. When dealing with new members and other strangers, Anne’s social skills balanced his awkwardness. In addition to her strong emotional support, Aitken relied upon her for a wide variety of other forms of day-to-day col-

laboration, especially as HDS grew, his publishing career blossomed, and his calendar grew ever fuller. She sorted and prioritized his mail, acted as a buffer when publishing deadlines loomed, and provided him with a trusted sounding board. He felt her loss keenly.

Aitken retired as head teacher of HDS in 1996, having designated Nelson Foster as his sole candidate to succeed him as the teacher for HDS two or three years earlier. The sangha then made the final decision to appoint Foster as their teacher in a process that Aitken called sangha transmission. In 1997, Aitken moved to the Kaimu district on the Big Island to be closer to his son Tom, building a lovely house perched atop a recent lava flow, overlooking the sea. At about that time, Aitken was diagnosed with Hodgkin's lymphoma and underwent both chemotherapy and radiation treatments that led to a full remission. Throughout his years in Kaimu, Aitken continued to lead a small community of students who met weekly for meditation and to guide a few of his longtime students in their practice. He directed most of his other students and all newcomers to work with Nelson Foster or another of his Dharma heirs.

In 2004, Aitken returned to live on Oahu. After a brief stint in an assisted living facility, he returned home to the teacher's quarters at the Palolo Zen Center, where members of the HDS community participated in his care until his death. In the last few years, in addition to his regular practice of answering mail, now mostly in the form of email, from Distant Correspondents, he undertook a new venture, writing a blog to extend his outreach to a new audience of Zen sympathizers. Until just before his death, he continued to write and to participate in *sangha* events whenever his health and strength allowed. He died on August 5, 2010 at age 93. The HDS community is now led by Michael Kieran, Nelson Foster's Dharma heir.

HDS has affiliate Zen centers throughout the western region of the United States and overseas in Australia, New Zealand, and Germany. Aitken has recognized the following Dharma heirs:

- **Nelson Foster (1988)**, at the Ring of Bone Zendo in Nevada City, California
- **John Tarrant (1988)**, at Pacific Zen Institute in Santa Rosa, California and Desert Lotus Zen Sangha in Phoenix, Arizona
- **Patrick Hawk (1988)**, at Zen Desert Sangha in Tucson, Arizona
- **Augusto Alcalde (1988)**, at Shobo An Zendo in Cordoba, Argentina

- **Rolf Drosden (1996)**, at Wolken-und-Mond-Sangha in Leverkusen, Germany
- **Pia Gyger (1996)**, named Affiliate Master, no longer teaching with HDS
- **Subhana Barzagli (with John Tarrant, 1996)**, at Sydney Zen Center in Sydney, Australia
- **Ross Bolleter (with John Tarrant, 1997)**, at Zen Group of Western Australia in Perth, Australia
- **Jack Duffy (1997)**, at Three Treasures Sangha in Seattle, Washington
- **Joseph Bobrow (1997)**, at Deep Streams Zen Institute in San Francisco, California

Aitken's recognition as a Zen teacher spread widely with the success of his publishing career. Two of his early books had the greatest impact both on his reputation as a writer and teacher and on the readers who would become his Distant Correspondents. His second major book, *Taking the Path of Zen*, appeared in 1982, and quickly became popular among Zen students and sympathizers alike. Two years later, *The Mind of Clover* established his reputation as a Zen teacher deeply concerned with ethics, as a proponent for everyday engagement with the world as a Buddhist, and an advocate for social justice. Aitken subsequently published numerous other books, which further extended his influence and standing as one of the leading American Zen teachers. He likewise traveled widely, visiting other Zen communities, speaking publicly at bookstores and universities, and participating in social justice activities. Nevertheless, *Taking the Path of Zen* and *The Mind of Clover* proved to be most influential for the Distant Correspondents and deserve some attention here.

Taking the Path of Zen was designed as "a manual that may be used, chapter by chapter, as a program of instruction over the first few weeks of Zen training" as well as a reference for more advanced practitioners (p. xi). Aitken based the book on the orientation talks that he gave at HDS, starting in 1972. As Aitken explains, students typically receive little instruction in the mechanics of *zazen* in traditional Japanese Zen monasteries; they are expected to learn by observation, imitation, and trial and error. Traditional manuals for *zazen* have existed for centuries in China and Japan,²² but not a structured process of orientation such as one finds at most Western Zen centers.²³ The idea for student orientation sessions did not originate in the United States. Harada Daiun broke with Japanese tradition when he insti-

tuted a series of introductory talks for his students, and Yasutani Hakuun continued the practice within the Sanbōkyōdan lineage, from which Aitken gained the inspiration for his orientation talks (p. xi).

By way of defining Zen and the goals of its practice, the first chapter of *Taking the Path of Zen* presents a brief account of the historical Buddha's practice of meditation and awakening. Aitken holds out the Buddha's experience as the model for the new student to emulate. "The Zen path is devoted to clearing away these obstructions and seeing into true nature. This can be your path. . . . It also involves application of such realization in the daily life of family, job, and community service" (p. 6). One sees, even here in this brief definitional section of Zen practice and attainment, Aitken's emphasis on living the tradition outside the meditation hall.

The second chapter introduces the basic mechanics of sitting in meditation and breath counting for the beginner. Aitken not only describes the posture for arms, legs, torso, and eyes, he explains the purpose for each element of the preferred positions. He maintains the traditional recommendation that meditating in the full lotus posture is ideal, as well as providing stretching exercises to make that physical goal more attainable, but warns the beginner to proceed with caution. One sees here his flexibility, as he introduces alternative postures and the basic recommendation to not push the body too far.

Throughout the book, Aitken provides pragmatic advice for setting intermediate goals that reduce a sense of failure as one makes progress along the path.

All of us fear failure, to one degree or another, and prefer not to try something that seems too difficult. This device of adjusting your goal to your present capacity is one by which you can avoid unnecessary frustration at the outset of your practice. However, it is important to understand that Zen training is also a matter of coping with failure. Everyone fails at first, just as Shakyamuni Buddha did. (pp. 27–28)

Aitken offers many words of encouragement that the practitioner accept him or herself, observing that self-hatred undermines the process. "[I]f you reject yourself, you are rejecting the agent of realization" (p. 9).

While the book is quite slender and could easily be read in a few sittings, Aitken clearly meant for it to be read and applied more gradually.

Each chapter introduces a new pattern for meditation, particularly variant patterns for breath counting, to be applied in one's daily meditation over a period of time, perhaps a week for each new pattern. In this way the book mirrors the series of orientation lectures that used to be required by Sanbōkyōdan for new members. Indeed, for some time *Taking the Path of Zen* was required reading for people planning to come to Maui or Honolulu to attend a *sesshin* at HDS.

While *Taking the Path of Zen* clearly lends itself to serve as a how-to guide for the solo practitioner, Aitken wrote it with the assumption that in the normal course of events, the student would join a community, meet a teacher, and begin attending *sesshin*. He prepares the beginner for all of this, describing normal procedures at HDS and noting that other centers may handle matters somewhat differently. He concludes the book with a chapter on the Mu kōan that reads like a *teishō* (Zen talk) that would be given by the teacher on the first evening of *sesshin*. At HDS the opening *teishō* is always related to Mu, since most students participating will be working on it. Aitken's overall agenda in *Taking the Path of Zen* is very much in keeping with his overall purpose in personally responding to the Distant Correspondents; he invites his reader to begin or persevere in the practice of *zazen* and seeks to guide her or him toward as full participation in Zen practice as possible. His letters are peppered with the same basic advice that appears within its pages, often using identical language.

In *The Mind of Clover*, Aitken continues in his role as Zen teacher to "clarify [the Buddhist precepts] for Western students of Buddhism as a way to help make Buddhism a daily practice" (p. 3). He presents his understanding of the Ten Grave Precepts, which he translates as Not Killing, Not Stealing, Not Misusing Sex, Not Lying, Not Giving or Taking Drugs, Not Discussing Faults of Others, Not Praising Yourself While Abusing Others, Not Sparing the Dharma Assets, Not Indulging in Anger, and Not Defaming the Three Treasures, taking them up one per chapter. Aitken originally composed the chapters as lectures and essays for his students at HDS, and the format retains the flavor of a teacher instructing and exhorting his own *sangha*. Aitken makes it clear that the practice of Zen for the individual necessarily entails the application of realization gained on one's cushions to life outside the *zendo* (meditation hall). He likewise expresses his strong preference that the *sangha* act as a community in organizing acts of community service and social activism.

While Aitken admitted that it is not traditional for Zen teachers to focus on the precepts as the subject of Zen talks (*teishō*) and commen-

taries, he firmly believed it was his responsibility as a Zen teacher to do so (p. 5). He suggested that reticence in publically teaching and discussing the precepts arose from fears that the teaching “could be misunderstood to mean that one has license to do anything, so long as one does it forgetfully” (p. 5). Indeed, Westerners often associate Zen with antinomian attitudes and behavior, and it is not uncommon to hear just such sentiments expressed by Zen practitioners. Aitken often met with resistance from his students because of his emphasis on ethics. Anticipating resistance from those readers who would immediately reject external norms as foreign to the Zen tradition, he suggested that the precepts would best be understood not as “commandments engraved in stone,” but as archetypes that inspire a Buddhist life, “skillful means” for Zen practitioners “to use in guiding our engagement in the world” (p. 15).

For Aitken, Zen ethics begin on one’s cushion and extend ever outward to encompass one’s dealings within the *sangha*, with one’s family and friends, and within the community and the natural world. He rejected a perfectionism that recommends waiting for self-realization before beginning the practice of compassion, since there is no end to the process. He likewise rejected the notion that politics is inimical to the religious life. “Politics in our day of nuclear overkill is a matter of ignoring the First Grave Precept [of Not Killing] or acting upon it” (p. 20). Many of his readers found inspiration in his attitude that social activism should be grounded in religious practice and that Zen practice naturally entails this kind of engagement in the world. This was one of Aitken’s distinguishing features as a Zen teacher, and it had a significant impact on what sort of Buddhist—adherent, sympathizer, or solo practitioner—was attracted to him as a potential teacher.

Overview of Buddhism in America from 1970 to 2000

Many authors have already written the story of the transmission of Zen to the United States from various perspectives²⁴ and it is not my intention to repeat their efforts here. Rather, I will offer some observations about the establishment and growth of Zen centers throughout the country during the twentieth century, especially the final three decades, a pattern that provides concrete evidence for the rapid growth in American interest in learning about and practicing Zen. This institutional aspect of the story, rather than a discussion of individual teachers who contributed to the

same process, directly impacts the experiences of the Distant Correspondents, since many of them found themselves outside the easy reach of a center or meditation group, despite indisputable evidence of institutional growth.

First, it should be noted that Zen as we know it today in the United States represents the combined influences of teachers and styles of practice originating in China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, although the strongest influence derives from Japanese Zen. In addition, the transmission of Zen to the United States has likewise been the joint effort of Asian teachers who visited or settled in the United States and Americans who visited or lived in Asia for extended periods of time to acquire training. The pattern is quite familiar to scholars of Japanese religion, since similarly combined efforts of exchange between Chinese and Japanese Buddhist monks led to the establishment of Zen in Japan in the twelfth to fourteenth centuries.

Japanese Buddhist missionaries from the Sōtō denomination of Zen established the first permanent and lasting Zen institutions in the United States and its territories early in the twentieth century. The Reverend Hōsen Isobe, representing the Sōtō mission, established Betsuin Shōbōji in Honolulu in 1913, Zenshūji in Los Angeles in 1922, and Sōkōji in San Francisco in 1934. The Japanese priests subsequently assigned to these temples served the religious needs of the local Japanese and Japanese American communities living in Hawaii and California, and simultaneously began outreach programs to introduce Buddhism to other Americans. The critical role played by these so-called ethnic temples is sometimes lost in the telling of Zen history in America, since primary focus typically falls on institutions established to serve the non-Japanese, largely Euro-American community.

The data provided in table 4 were derived primarily from Morreale's *The Complete Guide to Buddhist America*, which includes self-reported information from Buddhist centers throughout the United States. Centers were invited to provide various kinds of information, including affiliation and an establishment date, both of which are used here when provided. It should be noted that the listing includes only those groups that voluntarily participated. No attempt was made to account for groups that failed to respond, nor to account for groups that passed out of existence before the guide was published in 1998. In addition, very few of the so-called ethnic Buddhist temples, those that serve first-generation Asian immigrants and their Asian American descendants, provided profiles, and are therefore largely invisible despite the rapid growth of ethnic temples reported else-

Table 4. Establishment of Zen Institutions in the United States

<i>Years</i>	<i>New Sites</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Cumulative Totals</i>
1910–1949	6	3%	6
1950–1959	4	2%	10
1960–1964	4	2%	14
1965–1969	8	4%	22
1970–1974	31	14%	53
1975–1979	22	10%	75
1980–1984	28	13%	103
1985–1989	40	18%	143
1990–1994	51	24%	194
1995–1997	23	11%	217

where for the same time period.²⁵ The data necessarily remains incomplete as a resource to accurately track the growth of Buddhist groups. Nevertheless, it offers a rudimentary indication of growth patterns for the appropriate decades. Where possible, I supplemented the relevant information regarding ethnic temples such as Zenshūji and Sōkōji, which played a significant role in the early development of Zen in America.

Before 1960, the vast majority of Zen institutions established in the United States were ethnic Japanese and Chinese Zen temples, mostly located in Hawaii and California. All but one of the early Zen sites included in table 4 were founded by Japanese teachers; six of the ten were founded by Japanese missionaries specifically seeking a non-Japanese audience for their teachings. Honolulu Diamond Sangha, founded by Robert and Anne Aitken, represents the sole exception to this pattern, although HDS likewise relied upon guidance from Japanese teachers when they were available.

As the data in table 4 demonstrates, the final three decades of the twentieth century saw rapid growth in the number of Zen centers throughout the United States. This pattern of growth closely mirrors the numbers of letters composed by Distant Correspondents over the same time period, as seen in table 1. Throughout the period, Sōtō Zen continued to dominate the scene, representing nearly one third of all the centers that provided information about their affiliation (see table 5). Included among the thirty-six centers with an affiliation to Sanbōkyōdan, sometimes known as the Harada-Yasutani lineage, are centers that specifically

Table 5. Zen Institutions by Affiliation

<i>Affiliation</i>	<i>No. Sites</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Sōtō	94	29%
Korean	39	12%
Rinzai	36	11%
Sanbōkyōdan*	36	11%
HDS	13	4%
Vietnamese	11	3%
Mindfulness	94	29%
TOTALS	323	100%

*Includes various lineages, such as White Plum, HDS, and Rochester Zen Center.

listed Sanbōkyōdan as their affiliation as well as centers that indicated an affiliation with HDS, White Plum, and the Rochester Zen Center. This lineage group represents a relatively large presence in the United States, equal in numbers to Rinzai-affiliated groups. This is especially noteworthy given the marginal status of Sanbōkyōdan in Japan.²⁶

The growth pattern of Zen centers in table 4 would appear even more dramatic if it were possible to include the ninety-four Mindfulness groups that base their practice on the teachings of the Vietnamese Zen teacher Thich Nhat Hanh. Unfortunately, very few of these groups independently provided information for the guidebook, and therefore establishment dates are known for only a handful. Mindfulness centers in the United States are part of a larger international network; the majority of the centers included in the guide are listed as affiliated with the Community of Mindful Living, headquartered in Berkeley, California, established in 1983.

Throughout the final twenty years of the twentieth century, the growing number of American-born Dharma heirs designated as qualified Zen teachers helped to fuel the growth of Zen centers throughout the country. Although the majority of the centers are still located in the Pacific region, especially California, the guide lists Zen centers located in forty-five states and the District of Columbia. Over these same decades, leadership at leading Zen centers shifted from the initial group of American-born teachers to second- and third-generation Dharma heirs. By all reports, the membership at Zen centers has aged over the same time period, and it is not yet clear whether or not sufficient numbers of younger Americans will

become attracted to Zen practice to preserve the existing network of Zen centers through the twenty-first century.

Common Zen Terminology

Terminology used in discussing Zen within an American context can appear confusing for individuals unfamiliar with the tradition's historical roots in East Asia and the current diversity of practicing Zen communities in the United States and other Western countries. As a relatively new religious tradition in the West, the Zen community continues to employ a host of terms derived from either the Japanese or Chinese sources of the tradition, and to a lesser extent terminology derived from Korean and Vietnamese forms of practice. In some cases, terms have been translated into English, but without any standardization between one community and another, or between authors. For this reason, I have included the following section to introduce some of the terminology associated with Zen that is employed throughout the rest of the book. The intention here is to introduce the terminology as it is commonly employed by American Zen practitioners, rather than to provide exhaustive word studies of usage in classical Zen literature. Readers familiar with Zen history and practice can easily skip this section.

The first term that requires clarification is Zen itself. The word Zen represents the Japanese pronunciation for a Chinese character, pronounced *Chan* in Mandarin Chinese. The word means meditation or concentration, and was originally adopted in Chinese as the standard translation in Buddhist texts for the Pāli term *jhyāna*, rendered *channa* in Chinese. The term Chan eventually was adopted as the name for a school of Buddhism that emerged in China sometime during the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE). Chan eventually spread throughout East Asia to Korea (where the same Chinese character is pronounced *Son*), Japan (where it is pronounced *Zen*) and to culturally related areas such as Vietnam (where it is pronounced *Thien*).

As noted earlier, American Zen includes a broad spectrum of influences from teachers and communities from Japan, China, Korea, and Vietnam. While some religious communities and practitioners continue to employ the Chinese, Korean, or Vietnamese pronunciation of the name, most communities and individuals in the English-speaking world

have adopted the Japanese pronunciation. The use of a common nomenclature clarifies the relationship that these various communities share as claimants to be modern descendents of the Chan lineages that originally emerged in China. In addition, the term Zen enjoys widespread familiarity and cultural collateral among English speakers.

The term *sangha*, commonly used today to refer to Buddhist communities from all denominations of Buddhism, derives from Sanskrit.²⁷ Among many Western Buddhist communities, the term is understood to refer to the traditional “four-fold community” established by the historical Buddha that includes male and female monastic practitioners as well as male and female lay practitioners. For this reason, the term is sometimes used as a general term for all Buddhists, regardless of denominational affiliation or style of practice. In other contexts, however, the term is used to refer to smaller practicing communities, including Zen centers and Zen meditation groups. It should be noted that ordained Buddhist clergy from the Japanese American Buddhist communities more often employ the term to refer exclusively to ordained Buddhists, the monastic community, or religious professionals, as opposed to lay practitioners.

Zen communities use a variety of terms to address their clergy and teachers. At Japanese American temples, ordained clergy are typically addressed as reverend. In non-ethnic settings, the most commonly used title is the Japanese word *rōshi*, which can be translated as “venerable teacher.” Robert Aitken and other recognized Zen teachers are commonly addressed as *Rōshi*, although some Zen teachers prefer other, less formal, forms of address. At HDS, for example, when a member refers to “the *Rōshi*,” they invariably mean Aitken, rather than the current head teacher, Michael Kieran, who to my knowledge does not (yet) wish to be addressed in that fashion. In direct address, HDS members generally call Kieran “Michael,” and refer to him indirectly as “my teacher” or “our teacher.” In other communities, practitioners may call their teacher “sensei,” the most general term for teacher in Japanese.

Terminology for various forms of Zen practice is perhaps more standardized, with many of the Japanese terms appearing in English dictionaries. Most Zen communities, for example, use *zazen* and its English translation “seated meditation” interchangeably. Two basic styles of *zazen* practice, *kōan* and *shikan taza* (“just sitting”), are associated respectively with Rinzai and Sōtō communities. *Kōan*, which refers to stories (also known as encounter dialogues) usually derived from classical Zen literature, are commonly used by Zen practitioners from Rinzai and Sanbōkyō-

dan lineages as a focal point for meditation. Rinzai and Sanbōkyōdan lineages likewise each use their own standardized curriculum of kōan cases as the basis for training new teachers. *Shikan taza*, which can be variously translated, typifies practice within Sōtō communities.

Most Zen centers in the United States that have a teacher in residence offer retreats, periods of intensive meditation practice typically called *sesshin*. At most Western Zen centers, *sesshin* vary in length from three to seven days. Participants may include a combination of local members, distant members (discussed in chapter 7), and unaffiliated visitors who apply to attend the *sesshin*. During *sesshin*, participants have daily opportunities to meet privately with the resident teacher; these private interviews are called *dokusan* or *sanzen*. Some Zen centers have also introduced longer periods of intensive training, usually lasting three months, sometimes called *ango*, that are patterned after the traditional Buddhist monastic “rainy season retreat.” Some centers limit full participation in these longer periods of practice to residential members, while others allow for local members to participate as their work and family obligations allow.

Finally, many Zen communities have developed a form of initiation ritual, known as *jukai*, in which members accept or receive the precepts from their teacher. These rituals vary significantly in meaning and form from community to community, and cannot be generalized here. In monastic forms of East Asian Buddhism, the term *jukai* usually refers to ordination ceremonies in which monks or nuns receive the initial Ten Precepts and join the monastic community. There also exists a long history in Chinese and Japanese Buddhism for lay precept ceremonies, in which lay practitioners affirm their commitment to Buddhism by accepting or receiving the Five Precepts of a lay Buddhist: Not to kill; not to steal; not to engage in sexual misconduct; not to lie; and not to drink liquor. In some communities, the *jukai* ceremony is referred to as a form of lay ordination. In HDS, the terminology of “confirmation” would perhaps be more accurate, although I have never heard it used by members, since individuals generally do not request to participate in the ritual at the beginning of their practice, but only after they have practiced for a significant period of time.