This book took root on December 18, 1996, the day my mother died. After months of listening to the whir of the oxygen machine, a vacuum of silence filled her bedroom. Even though I had known she would die soon, when I stood looking at the threshold of life and death I felt as if one wrong move would send us off into an abyss of despair. The last several months had been one long fear of wrong moves: too much morphine or not enough, too much talking or not enough, too much water or not enough.

Suddenly all the palliatives seemed harshly out of place. Hands shaking, I cleared the bedside table of the vials of morphine, antinausea salves, and pink star-shaped sponges for removing sticky mucous from the tongue. The ultimacy of the moment engulfed me. How was I to ensure my mother’s passage through this perilous transition? Kitō Sensei had encouraged me to call her. The elderly Zen nun had helped my mother and me through the past nine years, applying her healing balm of compassion. It was the middle of the night in Japan, but I knew that, although she devotes long days to ministering to others, at 3:45 a.m. Kitō Sensei would be at her temple: there she nurtures the Bodhi tree seeds she brought back from India. The telephone in my hand was a lifeline. I knew intellectually about Sōtō Zen rituals that recognize the deceased as a Buddha, but it was Kitō Sensei, in her unheated worship hall ten thousand miles away, who guided me through those first terrifying, disorienting moments.

Trusting her to know what to do, I followed her instructions for the ritual of safely sending off the deceased on her journey of death.
Frantic to treat our new Buddha properly, I rushed to find the bronze plum blossom incense burner, sandalwood incense sticks, white candle, and plain carved wooden figure of Kannon, goddess of compassion, adding some white chrysanthemums I had been keeping on hand for this moment. Not more than ten minutes after my mother breathed her last, the bedside table was transformed into a mortuary altar. As I offered a stick of incense in her honor, I saw my mother’s face take on the peace that I have seen so often on images of Buddhas. Our relationship was transforming before my very eyes.

When I placed the incense in the burner, I became one with all who had done so before. In the moment that had threatened to be the loneliest in my life, I instead experienced a profound connection with all grievers, past and future. I was not alone. I was united with everyone who had lost a loved one. Kitō Sensei had guided us through this critical transition with a wisdom that transcended barriers of space, time, life, and death. At that moment, the healing power of ritual became a visceral reality.

I began my relationships with the twelve women whose experiences form the basis of this book by sharing this event in my life. In doing so, I opened my heart, creating a safe place for them to share their similarly intimate experiences. It is only in the context of close relationships of trust and mutual respect that healing can be qualitatively studied and understood. Therefore, to begin such a study requires an invitation to share in the suffering and vulnerability of others. Feigning an objective observer’s distance, especially in the Japanese relationally driven cultural context, would yield little about the highly personal and often painful dimensions of the subjects’ lives. By exposing my shortcomings and difficulties, I received not only valuable and helpful advice, but also a bounty of details essential to understanding the women’s views, experiences, and feelings. As we cultivated intimate relationships, we broke through Japanese socially scripted façades of tidiness and self-control and delved into the excruciating, infuriating, and terrifying realms where healing takes place.

**Researching Buddhist Women’s Healing Rituals**

This book explores the lives of mature and devoted Japanese Buddhist women and reveals how ritualized activities are a critical tool in a Sōtō
Zen mode of living. Studying their ritual lives also reveals a domestic aspect of Zen that is ripe with wisdom for responding to a host of everyday challenges, difficulties, and fears. Their paradigm of healing is rooted in the Zen Buddhist teachings of Dōgen; that paradigm also includes a wide range of practices that emerge from esoteric, Pure Land Buddhist, and from homemade sources. Strikingly, rituals not formally recognized—or even practiced—as healing rituals are a catalyst for powerful healing experiences among these women. We will see how Dōgen’s teachings are applied in their ritual lives, where ritualized activities actualize healing.

I was surprised that rituals not formally recognized as healing rituals figured so prominently in their repertoire. This led me to a theory about healing rituals in a Buddhist context. In a worldview where the interrelatedness of all things is the primary point of reference, healing means to be in harmony with this impermanent web of relationships that constitutes the dynamic universe. It is difficult, however, to comprehend—much less experience—something so expansive. Interrelatedness cannot be experienced deliberately. Rituals, however, can be a conduit to an intuitive experience of interrelatedness, based on the body, precisely because rituals can induce modes of being that transcend linear and rational logic and facilitate contact with the ineffable. Rituals can affect a person holistically by entering below the radar of cerebral cognition and bypassing dualistic perception. They permeate the body-mind. Language and cognitive processing, on the other hand, often fall short of or even obstruct the way to experiencing the grandeur of one’s ultimate context. Therefore, rituals that do not explicitly purport to be healing rituals can indirectly facilitate a key dimension of a Buddhist healing activity—a nondualistic experience of reality.

In order to gain access and insight into the realm of domestic Zen, I employed qualitative research methods rooted in ethical considerations. Practices I developed during field research in Japan resonate with principles found in feminist ethnography that encourage “ethnographic experimentation” and are “ethically responsible.” I first had to establish a balance of power between each of my twelve consociates and myself. It was imperative that I take the lead in establishing a deep relationship because at the beginning I had the structural power: I was the researcher with the Harvard Ph.D. in Buddhism. I was keenly aware, however, that my consociates had the real power to let me in or keep me at a distance. Without their cooperation, my understanding of domestic Zen would be superficial.

It was critical to establish relationships with women who live domestic Zen because Zen Buddhism embodies a paradox, in that its public image
is at odds with the experience of most of its practitioners. Although a shift is in progress, textually oriented scholars of Zen, as well as many leading Zen monks, have largely represented Zen as an iconoclastic, antiritualistic tradition. Yet ritual is at the center of the ordinary Japanese experience of Zen. Funerals and rites of supplication for health and prosperity are what draw families and individuals—especially women—to engage with Zen. My ethnographic research suggests that these rituals fill a need by offering frameworks for transformation and healing. Qualitative investigation and analysis contribute to our understanding of how rituals are used in establishing Zen Buddhist communities, transmitting the teachings, and responding to various dimensions of lay life. My research reveals that Zen Buddhist rituals offer ways to address the emotional and psychological needs of people as they respond to the inevitable challenges of human existence—love, loss, birth and death, and the longing to belong.

A focus on rituals brings to the fore the complex dynamics and concerns that shape what it means to be a Zen Buddhist woman in modern Japan and reveals how Zen ritualized activities help with healing. This dimension of Zen has not been pursued before due to the dominance of the philosophical, textual, and historical lenses through which scholars have examined the tradition. Moreover, the iconoclastic ideals and antiritual rhetoric generated from within the Zen Buddhist tradition itself have deflected scholars from exploring the roles of its healing rituals and practices. This work addresses a lacuna in Zen studies by employing a Buddhist-based ritual analysis to elucidate the techniques, meanings, and outcomes of ritualized activities.

Buddhist laywomen, often supported by nuns, respond to life’s challenges: birth, illness, death, and emotional turmoil. It is within the milieu of this network of female relationships that one can observe how rituals and healing activities are practiced and transmitted. This book captures the otherwise unrecognized contributions of these women to Japanese culture and society. For most of them, the only public record of their existence is their birth certificate and, for some, their marriage certificate.

As it is with life, so it is with field research: serendipity is often more important than a well-designed plan and method. Having written my first book on Zen nuns, I began with a solid relationship with the abbess of the Aichi Zen nunnery (Aichi Senmon nisōdō) in Nagoya. The abbess, Aoyama Shundō Rōshi, regularly conducts Zen activities for laywomen. In June 1998, she introduced my project and me at one of these events, and graciously requested that people extend their cooperation to me. By doing so, she indicated her support of the theme and of the project. I wanted the
women to approach me on their own rather than establishing my own criteria and choosing people who I thought would fit. It was clear from the beginning that the women who offered to help were exemplars: women who were serious about their religiosity, involved with Zen practice in some way, and willing to serve as long-term consociates. The relationships began with a budding trust encouraged by the abbess’ endorsement of me as a sympathetic scholar.

The twelve women who generously volunteered to allow me to scrutinize their lives are from a distinctive generation in Japanese history. Nine of the twelve women are World War II survivors, and three were born shortly after the war. Major transformations in Japanese society occurred during this period, including Japan’s rise to international stature. Women of this generation are the center of their homes. They are the ritual experts, the counselors for the family, and the healers. As they care for others, they attend to themselves with awareness that it is all part of one web of concern.

A range of profiles is reflected in the women who offered to be consociates in the project. Their ages at the beginning of the field study in 1998 were mid-forty to mid-seventy. The women come from a range of family situations: A few had been adopted, although their birth parents were alive. One woman had an intact three-generational family, but her father died in a car crash when she was a child. Others lost their mothers or siblings when they were young. The prototypical nuclear family of mom, dad, and two children is not represented among these families. Umemura-san says quite openly, “I come from a complicated family. I am one of five siblings, and we each have a different mother. My birth mother did not raise me. I have had a half-hearted life. My body is easily sick, and I have a quiet personality.”

Eight of the twelve are either married or widowed. All eight have raised children, theirs by birth or adoption. Three of those eight have spent the majority of their adulthood as mothers and housewives, and five have worked at a business while caring for their homes and families. Four of the twelve have never been married, given birth, or raised a child. Each of those four has financial independence through careers. Their housing, reflecting their economic resources, ranges from a one-room efficiency apartment in the center of a city to a traditional home on the edge of a river with a prominent gate, an outbuilding, large vegetable garden, and a finely manicured traditional Japanese garden.

Each of the women has a home altar (butsudan) in her home. All but one actively participates in public Buddhist rituals, mostly in affiliation with Aoyama Rōshi and Kitō Sensei, both of whom are Zen nuns in the
Nagoya community. Another significant point in common among my consociates is they all have educated themselves about Buddhist teachings by listening to lectures and Dharma talks, reading books, and taking academic classes. Therefore, their understanding of Buddhism is notably more developed than that of the average Japanese. All are exemplars of living Buddhist teachings, each stressing certain dimensions and manifesting a range of qualities valued in Buddhist teachings.

I was aware when I asked my consociates to remember things important to their healing activities that memory does not preserve “facts.” Rather, memory excels at creating meaning. I seek to understand the women’s healing paradigm and ritual lives, not explain “the truth” about them. My aim is to make sense of the rich ethnographic material and to communicate something meaningful to readers. I am especially concerned to synthesize the material into culturally and religiously contextualized frames. Hence, I developed theories and hermeneutical categories about the healing dimensions of their ritual lives to illuminate their contributions that until now have gone unnoticed by scholars or even those closest to them.

I listened for hundreds of hours to these twelve mature Japanese women speak about their lives, and found they used Buddhist rituals for diverse purposes. Some rituals help deal with intractable family dysfunction, whereas others keep loneliness at bay. Finally, some Zen practices help practitioners cope with a terminal illness. By documenting and analyzing these healing experiences and ritual practices, this work reveals a central aspect of the Zen tradition.

When I asked the women if exposing their painful and sad experiences was difficult for them, many said it was actually helpful, because few had listened to them before. This confirms the findings of clinicians that “Disclosure of traumatic or painful experiences had a more powerful benefit on health and healing than talking or writing about superficial events.” Throughout the research and writing of this book, I have been committed to respecting what they shared.

To see these women in a fuller context, I entered into conversation with the concerns, theories, and questions of several disciplines, the rich historical, textual, and philosophical traditions of Buddhist scholarship, and current ethnographic thinking about reflexivity and qualitative reasoning. My work bridges issues in ritual studies and healing; healing and the cultural, linguistic, and sociological aspects of Japan studies; religious studies and Buddhist studies; and women’s studies and Buddhist ritual healing. It demonstrates what Zen has to offer with the study of healing,
ritual, women, and methodology. It shows how a focus on ritual can amplify and expand Zen studies and how scholarship on Zen can more fully inform the discourse on ritual studies.

The focus on women informs gender studies cross culturally. Moreover, this study illustrates how a tradition famous for strictly disciplined monasticism and nondualistic philosophy can simultaneously offer lay people meaningful symbolic and ritual resources for negotiating contemporary problems. As a result, this study expands the purview of what it means to be a Zen Buddhist woman in contemporary Japan.\textsuperscript{14}

The only studies on women’s experience in Zen ritual are from my own previous research into a few rituals in Zen monastic life. Hence, ethnographically driven methods were required for me to access the type and depth of material I sought. It was of fundamental importance in my ethnography to engage in enactive learning, or participant-observation, of each ritual the women engaged in, including several major public rituals, sundry modest temple rituals, and numerous private rituals. I joined with the women in performing their rituals, except those rituals that had been performed at earlier times in their lives, or when circumstances made it impossible or inappropriate for me to participate. For these few rituals, I often was able to participate in a similar ritual on my own.

My research methods are attuned to the intersubjective dynamic between researcher and consociates, and, therefore, operate in the second-person.\textsuperscript{15} I use the second person to refer to the space and dynamics between people. It is the “we” of relational interaction. The second-person approach is especially fitting for qualitative research that aims to understand people’s healing experiences. A second-person orientation focuses on the relationship of the people involved in the research. All people are treated as wholes, not divided into “objective observer” and “subjective informant.” Like optometry, which depends on the patient’s subjective judgment of which is clearer—“one . . . or (click) two”—to get reliable results, the only way to learn about the women’s inner experiences and thoughts about their ritual lives and healing experiences is through their expressions.\textsuperscript{16} Yet, unlike optometry, which essentially works with one-word responses, reliable results on the topic of healing requires hours, even years of interaction to cultivate not only the expressions of emotions and aspirations, but also the context in which they are experienced.\textsuperscript{17}

There is no fixed word for “I” in the Japanese language. The nuanced complexities of navigating selves as fundamentally relational beings is evident in the fact that there are fifteen ways to say “I” in contemporary
Bringing Zen Home

Japanese, each one designating an aspect of the self depending on what one wants present to another person. You can indicate gender, stress social status, negotiate levels of formality, note age, or convey a combination of any of these. Delineations of subjectivity and objectivity are not helpful in this sociolinguistic context, which makes a second-person mode of research especially helpful.

My decisions about how to render my consociates’ words into English and how to frame and interpret them means that the reader does not have direct access to a first-person perspective. The material is shaped by my assessments of how to translate across not only linguistic, but also cultural traditions. It reflects my imagination and anticipation about who potential readers might be and what I think they want to know. The results, then, are neither first-person accounts nor third-person “objective” description and analysis. Rather, what results is an intersubjective discussion based on a triangulated relationship of consociates, scholars, and readers.

A second-person mode of research is supported by findings in mirror-neurons. Although more research is developing in this field of cognitive-affective neuroscience, current research indicates that when people see each other act, the neural activity of one person activates similar neural fields in the other person’s brain. These findings underscore that embodied engagement of rituals is a reliable method for learning and gaining understanding of the dynamics of ritualized behavior. Reliability is established through the empathic experience of being with the women for long periods spanning a dozen years.

I agree with Diane Bell’s ethnographic approach that the researcher bring an awareness of herself “as an instrument of observation.” Reflexivity is necessary in obtaining reliable field materials and doing ethically responsible research. Ethically, “one must bring oneself to that dialogue, values and all—for that is what one is asking of one’s respondent.”

What I bring to my research includes several years of living and studying in Japan, as well as the formative experience of having been raised by a Japanese woman in North America. The post–World War II Detroit context in which she, a native of Yokohama, Japan, raised my sisters and me presented specific concerns. She carried the responsibility of a civilization on her shoulders. Not only was she foreign to her American family, she needed to be vindicated in the eyes of her new neighbors. Ten years after a Shinto marriage to an Anglo-American man, she moved away from all things familiar. She was determined to teach her children how to be polite and behave well in this new environment. Although hardly anyone in
Detroit at the time knew the difference, in her mind “polite” translated into inculcating Meiji-era (1868–1912) values that were already waning in Japan. Such an upbringing, though not without its confusions and frustrations, proved invaluable in navigating the subtleties and nuances of conversation with elderly Japanese women. One of my consociates even gave me direct affirmation. On two separate occasions, Yamamoto-san said, “I feel like I am speaking to a Japanese person who understands the feelings, too.” I have no doubt that I would not be writing this book were it not for the specific elements of my historical and cultural circumstance.

I conducted interviews, engaged in embodied learning, translated across distinct linguistic and cultural foundations, and drew on the available textual materials such as ritual manuals, scriptures, prayers, and pilgrimage songs. Textual sources sometimes provided the content of the rituals, whereas qualitative field materials helped to explain what the rituals mean to people who experience them. Theoretical materials on ritual and healing were drawn from both Japanese and Western literature. I deliberately did not turn to these secondary sources, however, until after I had completed the primary field research, because I did not want to apply frameworks of analysis that developed in a different context before I knew the paradigms and concerns of my consociates. After understanding the internal dynamics of the original materials, I am better able to assess which theories will illuminate the material and which might highlight important differences with the current literature. This approach echoes Jean Piaget’s concepts on cognition: accommodation and assimilation.

I did not need to worry, however, about designing a way to maintain a power balance and deepen trust through continuing to show my vulnerabilities to the women who volunteered to show me theirs, a concern of qualitative field researchers that derives from commitment to gain reliable information. They came to know me more personally than I could have crafted by research design, through methods I certainly did not think to include in my Fulbright grant proposal. After being hospitalized with pneumonia, I successively went through tonsillitis, acute conjunctivitis, and dizziness accompanied by tinnitus that laid me flat on my back for nearly two weeks—all while solo parenting a two-year-old. Thanks to these conditions during the one-year intensive field research phase, my research developed in ways that were ultimately more interesting than they might otherwise have been.

During our interactions, these women showed me how they try to maintain health through careful attention to the intimate relationship of
body-mind and heart. They told me of the close link between physical and spiritual health. More than anything else, though, they shared the treatments, rituals, and practices they perform in the home.\(^{28}\) This was the real treasure.

Without my asking, each woman independently helped me realize that their knowledge about the healing powers in rituals lies more in their bodies and habits than in their self-conscious, effable thoughts. Awareness that the knowledge I sought was centered in their bodily actions evolved into a notable dimension of the methodology. I realized that I had to learn “how” they do things, not just ask “what” they do and “why.” So in addition to each woman investing no fewer than a dozen hours of formal recorded interview time (some even exceeded twenty hours), total interaction time with most women far exceeded one hundred hours per person. The activities with which we occupied the time include those as natural as tending a garden and eating organic vegetables, going to museum exhibitions, or taking walks to view autumn foliage and spring flowers. This time spent being a participant-observer in their religious and self-defined healing activities gave me the most insight into their practices. In allowing our meetings to take on a broad format, they collectively found ways to express their personalities and to communicate holistic information about their healing experiences. In fact, direct verbal questions and answers did not yield the most important information. Rather, human relationships are at the center of this project, for it is in wrestling with being human that healing is sought. Thus, their narratives are the core of the field materials. These stories, whether painful, inspiring, sobering, or humorous, illuminate their paradigm of healing.

I had to learn how these women viewed and experienced themselves. Considerations of how research methodology relates to distinctive cultural formations of self are central to my aim.\(^{29}\) I have already noted that there are fifteen ways to say “I” in Japanese, depending on the relationship of those interacting. The context for this vocabulary revolves around the Japanese relational construction of self-identity.\(^{30}\) In Japanese culture, public face (tatemae) and private face (honne) are clearly delineated, especially among the generation of women I was interviewing.\(^{31}\) In this cultural context, people are adept at sincerely expressing their public face, making it difficult to discern how much their public and private faces might differ. Moreover, it would be considered improper for you to express your private face to someone with whom you have only a public relationship. Although I tried to make clear to the women that they were consociates in
this study, at first they perceived our relationship as one of interviewer and interviewee, which falls into the “public” category.

Exposing my personal vulnerabilities was the key to creating a safe place for them to reveal their private face, giving me access to subtle, complex, and sometimes fraught details of their situations. I consider this self-reflexive method a way to make the critical reasoning process transparent. It is messy, but life is not always tidy. Even though I know I cannot convey the full reality of these women’s lives and experiences—and all I do convey is filtered through the multiple lenses of my training, background, linguistic and cultural differences, and different concepts of knowledge—my aim is to capture a reliable portion of the fabric of reality. In a real way, then, the messier the material, the more confident I am as a scholar that I am getting closer to the “truth.”

The criteria for qualitative research—rigor, breadth, and depth—are met through a variety of methods and sources. The interviews and interaction with my consociates form the primary empirical material for the project. These are amplified by my embodied engagement with their ritual activities, private writings and artwork, and reference to relevant historical, thematic, and theoretical writings. I also have generated new theories and hermeneutical categories to explicate my findings.

Theorizing Healing in Religio-Cultural Context

The root of the word “heal” is “to make whole.” I use the word “healing” as a heuristic device to convey what these women understand and have experienced about making their lives whole. As a heuristic tool, healing brings into focus what they value, think of themselves, aim for, and do. To understand their views, it is important to examine the root assumptions that constitute the mature Japanese Zen Buddhist women’s worldview. After all, “What makes ideas ‘real’ are the system of knowledge, the formations of culture, and the relations of power in which these concepts are located.” I have devised a “worldview compass” to help orient us to their way of understanding and experiencing the world (see chart below). “North” designates the fundamental framework or primary reference point. Some examples of primary reference points are gods, goddesses, emptiness, reason, and harmony. “East” points to the concept of self. Concepts of self are quite varied, including notions of a distinct body and mind, eternal soul or souls, no soul, and the capacity for rebirth, resurrection, or burning in an eternal or provisional hell realm.
“South” designates the fundamental aims in life. Salvation from original sin, liberation from cycles of suffering, awakening from delusion, social harmony, and harmony with nature are examples of aims found within a handful of religious traditions (Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, and Taoist, respectively). “West” directs attention to how to go about reaching those aims.37

North, the primary reference point, orients a person, society, or tradition. It is similar to how sailors use the North Star: it helps people know where they are and can help guide them to where they are going. Every culture, religion, society, period, and individual is oriented to the world in some fashion. Most are not conscious of what underlies their sense of being. Often it is easier to see this orientation in comparison to another orientation. For example, if you grow up seeing yourself as an interrelated event in an ever-changing cosmos, you might not be able to articulate that until you meet someone who is oriented to an omnipotent and transcendent god. Other primary reference points people navigate by include scientific exploration, fiscal strength, political power, humanity, and ecological sustainability.

For these women, the Buddhist framework of emptiness is the primary reference point. Emptiness puts focus on the interrelatedness of all events
and things in the universe. Events and things are empty of independent existence. For example, flowers are dependent on nutrients in the earth and rain from the sky. The rain comes from the water that has been cycling the planet for millions and millions of years. Tracing the nutrients in the soil back as far as possible, you would end up at the “Big Bang.” When the Buddhist point of reference is set to emptiness, the universe is a vast flux of events and elements in an interdependent causality of relationships. This point of reference expects change and encourages you to see yourself as a part of something big. The women in this study filter this basic Buddhist orientation through a Japanese context that stresses concrete details of daily life in the here and now. Recognizing how even little things contribute to your life is a driving force in human relations, resulting in a culture of obvious and subtle expressions of gratitude. In the vast web of events, even difficulties are seen as somehow contributing to a more meaningful life.

East on the compass represents the concept of self. The relational concept of self that characterizes these women is continuous with the Buddhist framework of interrelatedness. The self is ever, always, and only understood in the context of relationships. As in other Confucian-influenced cultures, a person’s family name in Japan precedes a person’s given name because the family is the primary identity. Within a family, one is mostly known and called by the appellation of who one is in relation to other family members: grandmother, father, older sister, younger brother. In general society, a person explains who they are in terms of their largest organizing unit. For example, “Toyota’s (car company) Koyama Toshiko.” Notice, there is no “I.” The first person singular is neither grammatically nor socially required. In Japanese, an identity apart from relationships is difficult to establish.

Moreover, the self is understood as an integrated body-mind-heart unit. It is part of a Buddhist cosmology that Dōgen brilliantly articulated. He made a paradigm shift when he translated a phrase rendered in the Chinese version of the Nirvana Sutra from “All sentient beings have Buddha nature” to “All existents are Buddha nature.” Dōgen made a subtle grammatical move by interpreting the Chinese verb “to have” as part of a noun, “existents.” Moreover, by removing an explicit verb the whole phrase becomes an activity. The implications of this grammatical shift continue to reverberate. Some could interpret this move as the logical conclusion of a nondualistic philosophy. Others might note its resonance with the seamless worldview of indigenous Japan. Whatever the case, this is one of Dōgen’s most important teachings, and it is particularly pertinent to the
activities of his female followers. Women are Buddha nature, just as men are, and, for that matter, just as rocks and rags are.

South is the direction on the worldview compass that indicates aim. Aim is what measures meaning and significance. It is what makes living and working hard worthwhile. A person can be driven by many aims. Here, we are highlighting healing. In the largest sense, healing in a Buddhist context is “a metaphor for growth, with the Buddha named as Supreme Physician and the Buddhist teachings termed the King of Medicines.” Some discussion of my consociates’ healing paradigm follows below, but more of the specifics will unfold over the course of the book as I explain the theories I developed to make sense of my field research and discoveries.

My understanding of healing as an aim began with learning their vocabulary and its significance. Until I began doing field research, I had thought about the project in academic English. My initial conversations with consociates revealed that my original concepts did not resonate with them. The ideas did not translate well into conversational Japanese. In order to understand how they experience the world, I had to allow them to define the terms.

The vocabulary they used to discuss healing revealed in part their understanding of it. It is notable that the word they all used to refer to “healing” was a different grammatical form of the word I had initially tried out. My use of the equivalent of the gerund form of “heal” (iyashi—“Have you ever experienced a healing?”) elicited only blank stares. On the other hand, using what I call the “gratitude tense” (iyasaremashita) yielded enthusiastic nods of understanding. I was struck that they could comprehend being “a humble and grateful recipient of healing” but not someone who “experienced a healing.” The difference between these two ways of talking about healing is fundamental and has far-reaching implications. There is no English equivalent to the verb tense I have labeled the gratitude tense. It is my term for the verb conjugation that eloquently expresses gratitude for having been humbly given the gift of being caused by the universe to be healed. It is technically a passive tense, but it is not used in a dualistic sense that something happens to one by virtue of an outside force. They use it to express the nondualistic worldview of interrelatedness. It is not that they have nothing to do with what happens—it is more that there are countless factors in play. It is a way of articulating that no person can act by herself, because there are no isolated entities. All is interrelated. Iyashi, or the gerund form of the verb “to heal,” implies that healing is a discrete phenomenon. It stands alone and
Iyasaremashita, however, sets healing in a context-specific relationship. For these women the relationship is with the universe. Although they understand the universe to be a vast network of interrelated phenomena, in their daily lives most of these women do not think of the universe in terms of its grand expanse. Rather, they experience the universe in more direct and intimate ways: in the dew at dawn, ducklings swimming in their mother’s wake, and laundry drying in the sun. It is something that one receives, humbly and gratefully. The source from which healing comes is not explicitly stated in the term itself, but in its deepest meaning that the source of healing is the universe, and is not their “small” self. As their stories of iyasareteiru experience unfolded, it became clear that the Buddhist nuns and laity who are the focus of this study saw healing as a way of life. It is a paradigm that includes a specific orientation to the events of life, primarily gratitude.

Using the gratitude tense fosters healing because it fosters awareness of the interrelatedness of all things. It helps these women see that illness is not the enemy. It helps them relate to difficulty in a positive way that does not generate more suffering. It helps them cultivate or maintain the perspective that they are not alone. For these women, then, all of life, including the way life is viewed and experienced, is an activity of healing.

Health in a Japanese context is not just about individual biomedical assessments. It also takes into account the quality of your relationships with the living and even the deceased. For these women, healing has physical, social, and emotional aspects. If one of these aspects is out of balance, all become strained. The women realize the power they have to affect a situation depends on how they interpret it. A narrow and negative approach usually results in a worsening of social relationships, caustic emotional states, and even adverse physiological conditions. An expansive and positive approach can lead to more harmonious relations, relaxed emotions, and a stronger constitution.

By understanding healing in the context of relationships with people who are integrated mind-body beings, these women see physical manifestations as expressions of hopes, fears, challenges, and commitments. They do not see sickness as a failing, however, especially not the failing of an individual. Unpleasant physical conditions primarily indicate that something is out of balance, whether relationships between people or the environment. In this context, somatization is an acknowledged mode of expressing distress or dissatisfaction. That this is a more general Japanese cultural understanding is evident in the common expression, “Their exhaustion came out” (tsukaregadeta) on hearing that someone who has been working with intense
commitment becomes sick. I added the pronoun “their” to render the phrase into grammatical English, but in Japanese, no pronoun is required. The Japanese language allows for implicit understanding of a subject. This seems to come out of an awareness and value placed on recognizing that people and things do not act alone. When sick, it is acceptable to rest. Otherwise, in Japanese society you are expected to perform. Danforth observes how “somaticization is particularly common in societies where mental illness is heavily stigmatized, where it is improper to discuss personal or family difficulties with outsiders, and where no form of psychotherapy is available.” This describes Japanese society in general.

With few social or medical resources for dealing with problems of the heart-mind (kokoro), these women show us how they weave healing into their daily lives. For these women, the heart-mind can decide how to respond to events. They know they can make social, physical, and emotional matters worse and suffer more, or they can respond with a large and stable emotional frame that makes human relations and attitudes toward physical conditions better. In other words, they can choose to heal. Assessing how much is in continuity with past practices is beyond the scope of this study, but it is safe to presume that these women draw on a foundation of a long line of women who have tried to be responsible and strong in the face of complicated human interactions, physical challenges, and heart-wrenching situations. In sum, for them healing is not about finding a cure nor is it about direct cause-and-effect relationship. Rather, it is a worldview or way of living and facing challenges of the nonbifurcated body-mind in the context of intricate human relations and natural forces.

On my worldview compass, West indicates how to accomplish the aim, given the particular primary reference point and the operative concept of self. Ten types of activities animate the “how to” dimension of my consociates’ worldview. They are experiencing interrelatedness, embodying a nondualistic self (body-mind as one), engaging in rituals, nurturing self, enjoying life, creating beauty, cultivating gratitude, accepting reality as it is, expanding perspective, and embodying compassion.

The teachings of Dōgen undergird the assumptions at work in the women’s activities. In a departure from most formulations of the relationship between practice and enlightenment, Dōgen taught, “practice is enlightenment” (shushō ittō). In other words, you are enlightened when you practice. For Dōgen, enlightenment is an activity (verb), and not a state (noun). When you meditate while sitting (zazen), you just sit. You do not sit in order to be enlightened. Understanding “practice is enlightenment”
Mapping the Terrain

is the key to understanding ritualized activities as acts of healing. In a Sōtō worldview, healing, too, is a verb, not a state. Healing is an activity, a way of living. Therefore, engaging in ritualized activities is actualization of healing. In broader terms, one could even say ritualized healing activities or practices are Buddha activities, a way to actualize Buddha-nature. Worded another way, they are compassionate activities. When you act compassionately, it is affirmation that you are healed. Moreover, one who sees you whole—sees that you are Buddha-nature—is a healer.

Theorizing Ritual in Religio-Cultural Context

Ritual as a heuristic device focuses on meaningful body-mind activity. Ritual is a field that opens a window on embodied religiosity in motion. Rituals are rich arenas for exploring, as Bloch articulates, the “non-linear organization of everyday cognition.” Engaging in rituals can be an effective way to move people and accomplish complicated things, such as healing in the face of a terminal diagnosis. Rituals enlist images, metaphors, symbols, specific bodily motions and gestures, and smells and sounds; enact philosophical ideals; and employ implements that are encoded with meaning and power. For these women, ritual is not a process: it is a manifestation or actualization of aims.

To understand the ritual lives of these Japanese women, it is important to understand ritual in Japanese religiosity. Ritual is a key prism through which to view Japanese religiosity, because the category “religion” is foreign and relatively new to Japanese culture. Along with “experience (in general)” (keiken) and “(personal) physical experience” (taiken), the word “religion” (shūkyō) entered Japan during the Meiji Period (1868–1912). Ritual is an agile and dynamic heuristic device that enables us to see the nonbifurcated body-mind as it navigates the Japanese Buddhist worldview. The view afforded by ritual is less cluttered and distorted than the view afforded by trying to see directly through the lens of religion.

Nevertheless, ritualized activity viewed through the category of religion can be illuminating. The literature in ritual studies that has burgeoned over the past dozen years offers tremendous insights into the critical role ritual serves in religious traditions. Specifically in the highly ritualized Japanese culture, ritual studies are key to understanding how religion functions. When asked, contemporary Japanese people typically comment that they are not religious, yet they can be observed performing numerous religious
rituals. Participating in rituals throughout your life and behaving in the appropriate ritualized manner is part of what constitutes Japanese identity. Indeed, the ritualized body of the Zen arts, such as the tea ceremony and calligraphy, has had a profound and pervasive impact on Japanese culture. Ritualizing your body in certain ways, such as using your body in the different types of bowing, is part of what makes a person a respectable person. This study will explicitly address this central aspect of Japanese culture, highlighting the healing contributions of particular religious rituals.

The impulse to ritualize daily behavior derives in part from Confucian influence. The Japanese cultural habit of equating proper action with moral force resonates with the Confucian-based paradigm that focuses on the importance of ritual propriety. Herein, daily actions are understood to occur in a context of ultimate importance: human society. Zen practice, especially in Japan, applied the Confucian influence to methods of face washing, towel folding, and all-manner of daily activities. Respect is embedded in each gesture, so the performer embodies respect when performing the act. Although in the Zen monastery exacting standards are the norm, women are often the ones to set the ritual and aesthetic standards of a home.

In part due to Confucian influence, ritual practices have a long and rich history in Zen. Stressing the functional dimension of Zen ritual practices, Hasebe Kōichi goes so far as to assert, “there can be no Chan [Zen] without ritual.” According to Kuromaru Kanji, “the true expression of the precepts could be realized only through the rituals of Zen monastic life.” Rinzai Zen scholar and monastic G. Victor Sogen Hori asserts, “The concrete practices that form the path to that spiritual insight consist of ritually performed acts.” Practice equals ritualized activity designed to manifest Buddha nature. Such a positive view of ritual in Zen is not uncontested, however. Lin-chi (d. 866 CE), according to Bernard Faure, “denounced rites for their empty formalism.” With Zen moving into yet another cultural context, D. T. Suzuki framed Zen to his North American Anglo audience as a tradition that “eschews . . . all ritual.” Although having divergent views, another prominent Buddhist scholar of the time, Hu Shih, also saw Zen as antiritualistic.

Specifically in the context of Japan, the works of Zen scholars Faure, William Bodiford, and Ishikawa Rikizan have made significant inroads into this multifaceted topic from hermeneutical and historical perspectives. Fujii Masao has documented ritual in the broad context of Japanese religious life. Two edited volumes also help fill out the picture of ritual history and activities in Zen: Bernard Faure’s *Chan in Ritual Context*, and Heine and
Wright’s *Zen Ritual*. From an anthropological perspective, Ohnuki-Tierney has given an overview of the types of rituals sought by Japanese who are ill. LaFleur’s study on Buddhist memorial services for unborn fetuses explores the ethical aspects of this rite, as does Hardacre’s treatment of the marketing dimension of fetal rites. My project builds on their work and joins the stream of other works that are coming out in related areas.

Northup aptly observes how Japanese women empower themselves by interpreting the things they do in an important way. They have ritualized their daily activities and have endowed them with meaning: “Cooking, cleaning, parenting, bathing, dressing, managing, sewing, networking, creating, teaching—the endless host of women’s unglorified daily activities are being mined by women seeking a distinctive spiritual expression.” Moreover, Sered found for women more broadly that, “given the this-worldly orientation of women’s religions, spiritual and earthly benefits tend to be intertwined.” Indeed, she observes, “ritual solutions for the problems of suffering in this world are the foci of most women’s religions.”

Sleuthing was required to find out what a “ritual” is in the context of contemporary Japanese Zen Buddhist women. There is no evidence that Dōgen thought in terms of the category “ritual.” Neither do the women who served as consociates for this study, because the English term “ritual” finds no easy translation into Japanese. There are general terms that include the Confucian term *li* (in Japanese pronounced “gi,” as in “geese”), such as *reigi* (etiquette) and *girei* (formal ritual). *Gishiki* (ceremony) and its generic suffix, *shiki*, are added to a wide range of activities to indicate specific ceremonies, as in *seijinshiki* (coming of age), *sotsugyōshiki* (graduation), *kekkonshiki* (wedding), and *sōshiki* (funeral). There is even a term for a Buddhist service (*hōyō*). Notably, there is no abstract category with the overarching sense that accompanies the current usage of the English word “ritual.” In fact, I had difficulty communicating with my consociates that I was interested in understanding their use of “ritual.” Even those with advanced academic training were not clear what I meant. It is therefore unavoidable that I project a Western academic category onto the material if I am to communicate to a Western audience familiar with the Western category of ritual. In *Ritual Perspectives and Dimensions*, Catherine Bell cautions about the dynamics of this phenomenon: “While such developments may foster easier communication and shared values, they may do so by means of political subordination and substantive diminution of the diversity of human experience.” I make every attempt to understand my consociates in their larger cultural, historical, and personal context.
I have not found a thoroughly satisfactory way to communicate the activities highlighted in this study in English without using the term “ritual.” I am cognizant, however, that as Bell states, “Western scholarship is very powerful. Its explanatory power rests not only on tools of abstraction that make some things into concepts and other things into data but also on many social activities, simultaneously economic and political, that construct a plausibility system of global proportions. Hence, it is quite possible that categories of ritual and nonritual will influence people who would define their activities differently.” My delineation of the category “ritual” does not accurately or fully capture how the women understand themselves and their actions, nor does it communicate the understanding I have of the topic in colloquial (nonacademic) Japanese. In Japanese, we talked in amorphous ways that communicated volumes. We used phrases such as “events like this” (kōiuyōna koto). Even after thousands of hours over years conversing with dozens of Japanese nuns and laywomen, no clearer terminology emerged. There is no abstract framework within which delineating certain activities as ritual made sense. In their seamless worldview, many everyday activities are invested with a sense of importance, such as where to take off shoes and how to place them once they are off. This confirmed to me that the concept “ritual” does not quite explain their experience or represent their worldview. Despite its limitations, I have chosen for the sake of communicating with an English-speaking readership to enlist the term “ritual,” because I agree with Bell, who argues, “[t]he form and scope of interpretation differ, and that should not be lightly dismissed, but it cannot be amiss to see in all of these instances practices that illuminate our shared humanity.” The study of ritual will continue to complicate matters as increased cross-cultural and interdisciplinary investigations proceed. For now, it raises interesting questions that bring into focus some important points and exploratory speculation.

My first speculation is that back in the thirteenth century Dōgen might have thought of sahō in a manner similar to what I think of as “ritualized activities.” My translation of sahō is “method of actualizing.” I take my translation and interpretation cues from Dōgen’s teachings, especially shushō ittō, “practice and enlightenment are one,” and the articulations of it found in his “Genjō Kōan” fascicle of the Shōbōgenzō. The root assumptions are (1) there is no dichotomy between subject and object, (2) there is a holistic understanding of body-mind, and (3) there is only the present moment. Contemporary Zen monastic women demonstrate with their actions that they agree with Dōgen’s concern to manifest certain qualities, including clean
floors, a nourished body-mind, and footwear kept in respectful order. To manifest these specific qualities requires exacting care, as anyone who has tried to eat properly from a lacquered set of *oryōki* bowls in a Japanese Zen meditation hall can relate. To extend this line of analysis to the rituals under consideration in this study, a fruitful question might be, What are the rituals actualizing?

Japanese lay and monastic women employ Dōgen’s practices and teachings to guide, empower, and heal themselves. The ethnographic field materials reveal that many Sōtō Zen women are steeped in Dōgen’s distinctive teaching on Buddha nature. The avenues these women created to work toward their goals within an imperfect institutional structure reveal the influence of Dōgen’s teachings. Dōgen’s teaching that we are all Buddha nature is not directly invoked during the rituals women perform, but the rituals bear out that teaching. Moreover, the rituals are in no way dependent on male permission, authority, or recognition. The rituals begin with assuming everyone is Buddha nature and proceed from there. In this way, they empower women to actualize their Buddha nature and heal them from delusions that trigger despair and loneliness.

For many women, ritualizing has become the “primary mode of claiming power to invent, control, and interpret the symbolic resources of their traditions and cultures.” Characteristics of ritual Northup found in women’s ritual practices in the West resonate with those I found in Japan. They include spontaneity and informality, ecumenicity, and nonreliance on texts. Martinez found women in Japan who were concerned with doing rituals were “subsuming potentially dangerous power, harnessing it to the need to care for the health and well-being of their family and household ancestors.” The women I worked with are similar, although only two of the twelve would characterize their power as “potentially dangerous.” All are determined in their use of power, and all are dedicated to wielding it in ways that help heal themselves and others.

Through my field research (primarily in Nagoya), I discovered Zen rituals ranging from colorful to monochromatic, from intense silence to loud drumming accompanied by esoteric chanting. By formalizing how to eat, sleep, sit, and walk to ceremonial rituals of devotion, mourning, supplication, and gratitude, rituals are integral to the tradition. In addition, many Zen Buddhist women in Japan seem to effortlessly weave together diverse elements in their practice. Indeed, exploring the rituals practiced by Sōtō Zen laywomen today exposes a broad spectrum of activities and ceremonies, including functional, daily, annual, private, public, expensive,
inexpensive, esoteric, and even homemade. Their selection illustrates the array of rituals available to Zen Buddhist women seeking affirmation and healing. They include those that are aimed at significant moments in the life cycle, women’s issues, and family issues, as well as moments of transition. Highlighting different seasons of the year and phases of life, their ritual practices range from chanting to the goddess Kannon while soothing a feverish child to ensuring that sundry spirits not go hungry, from copying scriptures with prayers for family harmony to sleeping on a pillow covered with a cloth believed to be efficacious in curing cancer.

The range and significance of these practices are even more intriguing when considered in light of the fact that they are not outlined or advocated in scripture. Absent ritual texts, ethnographic investigation is essential in expanding our understanding of the contours of Zen experience in the ritual lives of Buddhist laywomen. Their religiosity reveals a mixture of serendipity, historical happenstance, familial and marital relations, and personal choice. In the following chapters, I provide a description of such previously undocumented rituals, analyze common Zen rituals that have yet to be examined in terms of their healing implications, provide new insights about contemporary Japanese culture and the ways Japanese women experience religion, and discuss what modern Japanese Zen Buddhists actually do.

Our conversations started with my asking questions like, “What sutras do you chant?” or “Do you do something at your home altar on a regular basis?” and “What do you do there?” Their answers yielded information not covered in the abstract concept of ritual: recommendations for what elixirs are good for colds, why it is important to have something beautiful on view like a flower arrangement or an object of art, and what it means to keep an adult child’s elementary school drawings in a home altar. In addition to close observation of their ritual life, placing their ritual experiences in the context of the vicissitudes of their lives illuminated a number of important dynamics. They would not be meaningful, fully appreciated, or perhaps even noticed without the vantage point of the lifespan. From a long-term perspective of their lives, the changes that the rituals helped to foster became visible. For example, it is now apparent how the mortuary rituals that figure centrally in Japanese Zen Buddhism are a manifestation of the wisdom that grieving is a never-ending activity. Healing from grief does not mean that grief will stop. On the contrary, healing involves expecting and preparing for the changing seasons of grief—or, in other words, living with grief in a life-affirming manner.
It is well documented that in Sōtō Zen funerals the deceased person is recognized as a Buddha. My contribution is to add the experience of the living, those who recognize their deceased beloved as a personal Buddha. Chapter 3 discusses this experience at length. The home altar where the dead are recognized as Buddhas is the heart of Japanese Buddhist homes. It raises the question, What power do the funerary rituals have in helping someone be a Buddha? In Sōtō Zen, becoming a Buddha is not a concern, even when a person is alive. The key word is “becoming.” Dōgen teaches, “All existents are Buddha nature.” Hence, there is no need to become something you already are. So, Sōtō Zen Buddhists do not have to do philosophical gymnastics at the point of death to recognize someone as a Buddha, as would be the case in other streams of Buddhism. Buddhist rituals often have been cast as secondary to meditation practice, even superfluous on the path to enlightenment. The death rituals examined in this ethnographic study reveal that the rituals that help people dissolve attachments and experience interrelatedness are key ingredients to the cessation of suffering.

Understanding the dead as personal Buddhas adds to the categories for interpreting Buddha-hood. Viewing Buddha-hood through the hermeneutical category of the personal Buddha enables us to see how memorial rituals facilitate dissolving delusion of self and other as separate entities. It helps loosen the grip of fear the prospect of death can have. It also helps a person accept the present reality more fully. In turn, memorial rituals can help generate gratitude and generosity, qualities requisite for an enlightened being.

A long-term vantage point also brings into focus the tremendous flexibility and creativity women bring to their ritual practices. Although all of the women have home altars, the rituals they perform and the meaning and significance it has for them varies widely. In addition to home rituals, some always do certain rituals at a temple, and one almost never does. Some go to one temple for one ritual and another temple for another ritual. Some only go to one temple. What is meaningful and helpful for one woman is not so with another, or it is not meaningful in the same way. Different people bring different concerns, yet it is because of the group gathering that all find it a meaningful ritual. Moreover, what works in one phase of life does not necessarily work in another. As a person ages, she seeks new rituals to help with the changing concerns, needs, and situations. The diversity of ritual practices counted even just among these twelve women is striking. Another dimension of these women that comes to the fore when studying their ritual practices is the seamless way they
Circumstances in the early 1600s resulted in the expulsion of Christianity from Japan. In an effort to enforce this regulation, the government required all families to register at a neighborhood Buddhist temple. Hence, many families—the unit of decision making on such matters—became formal followers of the sect of Buddhism of their neighborhood temple. To have such large-scale declaration of affiliation to a particular Buddhist sect, however, was an unprecedented event in Japanese Buddhist history. Nonetheless, since then, many families have stayed with that sect, primarily because the memorial rituals for ancestors keeps them connected to the temple of affiliation at the death of a family member. It is difficult to relocate ancestors. Therefore, despite having lived in the city all their lives, many family members return each summer to their ancestor’s temple in the countryside for Obon, the nationally recognized memorial ritual.

As a result of the Tokugawa Period (1603–1867) sociohistorical circumstances that required families to have a Buddhist temple affiliation, most Japanese are familiar with Buddhist rituals. However, it is not uncommon for someone to explore other traditions and teachings, because Buddhist teachings are inherently open to multiple approaches to learning and practicing love and compassion. It is not surprising, then, to hear that Kawasaki-san was Christian for a while. She concluded that Buddhist and Christian love are the same. She does the appropriate rituals when she is supposed to with no sense of dissonance. The underlying assumption in experiencing no dissonance likely derives from the lack of an indigenous concept of absolute truth. This seems to carry over into the common practice of mixing Buddhist sect practices, too. Listen as Kawasaki-san tells of her exploration.

I like Dostoevsky and I thought Christianity was so great. I was interested in Western literature. I needed to know Christianity to understand. Until I was about twenty or twenty-two, I went to church. My family thought I was odd. I was really taken by Christianity. I was baptized. Then I learned I was a Buddhist family. I think the teachings may have some differences, but I think Christ and Buddha’s “love” is the same.

When I got married [to a Sōtō Zen Buddhist family], I thought I should be with my husband’s ancestors. Since I thought Christ and Buddha were the same love, I thought I should just perform the rituals at the home altar. It took me a while to adjust. I’d pray at the family Buddhist altar and then go to the kitchen and chant “Ave Maria.” I was not confused about being
Christian and doing this. I just did what you do at the times you’re supposed to do them. This is the Japanese way. I felt no dissonance.85

One of the main features of domestic Zen is the lack of concern for knowing what practices go with which tradition or sect. We will therefore look at all manner of rituals.

Only a few of the consociates actually came from historically Zen families. Despite the common social practice of not making individual decisions about temple affiliation, all of the consociates deliberately sought out Zen practices and teachings for personal reasons. Each cited different reasons for having done so, but all found what they were looking for in Zen—at least, in part. Most of the women did not hesitate to do any ritual practice that they thought might suit and help them. These are mature women, known for not letting external structures impede their progress or limit their aims. Perhaps it is no coincidence that all the laywomen who sought out Zen nuns to be their spiritual guides would have such an attitude, given that Zen nuns have proven that institutional structures and regulations, as well as established practices, can be changed, especially if they are not in accord with their understanding of the Buddhist teachings.86 In this context, then, it is a matter of no consequence that most of the consociates draw on the teachings and practices of a range of sectarian traditions. The most common weaving of practices and traditions was with the Sōtō Zen sect and the Jōdo Shinshū True Pure Land sect. Two of the women also integrated the practices of the Sōtō Zen sect, an exoteric tradition, and the Kegon sect, an esoteric tradition. Such cross-sectarian practice is an indicator of the flexibility the women exercise in pursuing their spiritual needs. Also brought to light from a perspective of their lifespan are rituals not found in any formal religious tradition; this is an indication of their creativity in finding resources to meet their needs.

As one faces increasing challenges in life, there is a tendency to engage in more rituals. It seems to come out of awareness that we are not alone and cannot do things alone. The rituals are a way to enlist support from those who know. Noguchi-san is aware of this: “Life is so hard. You can’t live just on your own power. Gratitude increases with age, because I see how I have been able to live so far due to all that has happened to enable me. Ikasareteiru” (she uses the verb “to live” in the gratitude tense).87 Over a life, gratitude increases, too.

Many women turn explicitly to Zen because it validates everyday activities, including cooking and cleaning. Family concerns can be approached in
the mode of practice. It is part of Japanese religiosity in general to be concrete about spirituality. Indeed, such ritualization of daily activities may help the limbic system. “The neocortex rapidly masters didactic information, but the limbic brain takes mountains of repetition.” The repetitive dimension of cooking, washing dishes, cleaning floors, doing laundry, and tending to trash and recycling is ripe territory for the limbic system, feeding, nourishing, and entraining it in specific ways. The emotional dimensions of ritual also prime the limbic system.

The rituals explored in this book cannot be done “wrong” because they are events women weave into their lives. To note what does not work is to miss the point. It is not about perfect performance. It is about healing in the midst of a mess. Rituals of healing embedded in daily life are especially impervious to failure, because healing is about an orientation in life, and is not about a narrow cause-and-effect process. That is why what constitutes healing rituals for my consociates are not readily obvious to those looking for phenomena called “healing rituals” in some specific cause-and-effect relationship.

It is not that explicit healing rituals have no place. Formal healing rituals are often large and public. They are a place where people of similar orientation can gather together in community, often itself an important dimension to healing. These rituals tend to be infrequent, and usually are held annually. They are designed to offer minimal individual attention, often in a formulaic way, such as when each person does the same thing by turns.

Rituals performed in the home during daily life—though not labeled by the practitioners, or even by the tradition, as healing rituals—are primed and framed by the public healing rituals. The role of these more personal rituals is that they are honed to fit each person. They are actually often the result of a creative deviation from a more common ritual. These tailor-fit rituals can reach deep, because all the idiosyncrasies that constitute a person are accounted for and, hence, are personal affirmations of that person’s interconnectedness. The recent emphasis on positive emotions in mental health resonates with my approach at exploring the qualities and dynamics helpful for these women.

Through the hermeneutical lens of ritual, several things become clear. First, ritual in a Sōtō Zen context is an actualization of Buddha nature. Rituals performed in this mode help heal, especially by expanding perspective at the same time attention is directed through the whole body-mind on the present moment, a place where illness and wellness do not exist. Such distinctions require comparison to a past or future, which do
not exist in the present moment. Chapter 2 explicates my theory about the components and dynamics that constitute the way of healing as experienced by the Buddhist women studied. Through assessing this healing paradigm, it becomes clear that experiencing interrelatedness is the key that unlocks the dynamics for all other elements to be helpful in healing. Once this occurs, all the factors mutually amplify each other, resulting in heightened experiences of healing.

My concept of personal Buddhas is advanced in Chapter 3. It explores the role of mortuary and ancestral rituals in helping people integrate loss into their lives. This book takes an intimate look at grieving. It extends beyond the immediate period of the rites and looks at how mourners weave loss into the fabric of their daily lives. Exploring memorial and ancestral rituals from this perspective leads us to recognize both the centrality of the dead in Japanese Buddhist religiosity and the ways these ancestral rites can serve as healing rituals.

A ritual lens enables us to see a dimension of Zen that I call “domestic Zen,” a concept developed in Chapter 4. It is a messy Zen that responds to the needs and demands of people facing a wide range of challenges, including difficulty in giving birth, problems with child-rearing, complex family dynamics, and death by natural and unnatural causes. They range from lighting incense at your home altar, to cutting carrots, to chanting, to ingesting Sanskrit syllables written on rice paper (washi). In addition to these rituals, I analyze several others in terms of how they contribute to the ten-fold healing paradigm.

I further my interpretation of the aesthetics of healing in Chapter 5. That chapter investigates the phenomenon that beauty factors into all the women’s healing activities. Whether they are composing a poem or arranging flowers, or just enjoying a walk to see the plum blossoms in late winter, the power of beauty to help heal was emphasized by all the women. With expanded perception, inherent beauty can be revealed in that which appears ugly, for everything is a resource for beauty. Likewise, healing is found in the pain, not by destroying the pain. The women see themselves in relationship with (tsukiau) their pain and injury. Disease, pain, loss, and spiritual and family problems are the “abrasives” that a person can use to polish her heart.

The rituals documented and analyzed in the book respond to a range of needs, hopes, and fears, and span a gamut of methods, complexity, and simplicity. Even as I write about the ritual lives of my consociates, I am mindful of Bloch’s concern that there is tension and problems that attend “rendering into a text something which is not a text.” Keeping this tension in mind, I
frame their activities in a broad context in order to interpret the roles, functions, and dynamics of the rituals. This helps elucidate how they are woven into their lives over time, demonstrating that both large, public, explicitly recognized healing rituals, and personal, informal ritualized behaviors in the home are necessary for healing. From this perspective, it is also apparent that scholarship on healing rituals requires the ethical imperative to devote extensive time in a relationship of mutual respect and trust.