

Making Paper Cranes Fly: A Report from Fort Sill, Oklahoma Rev. Duncan Ryuken Williams



Buddhist Leaders Join Tsuru for Solidarity and Other Marchers at Fort Sill Protest [July 20, 2019] (credit, AP Wire)



Tsuru for Solidarity x Buddhist Clergy and Lay Leaders: Group Photo Before the March onto Fort Sill Entrance (credit, Julie Yumi Hatta)

Tsuru for Solidarity NYC (alphabetical): Becca Asaki, Mike Ishii, Linda Morris, Lauren Sumida, Carl Takei

Buddhist Clergy and Lay Leaders (alphabetical): Rev. Myozen Joan Amaral (Zen Center North Shore, MA), Rev. Gyokuko Carlson (Dharma Rain Zen Center, OR), Rev. William Briones (LA Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple), Rev. Eijun Linda Ruth Cutts (San Francisco Zen Center), Rev. Zenshin Greg Fain (Tassajara Zen Mountain Monastery), Rev. Jitsujo Tina Gauthier (Zen Center of Los Angeles), Rev. Tova Green (San Francisco Zen Center), Rev. Gesshin Greenwood (Empty Moon Zen Center), Julie Yumi Hatta (Buddhist Churches of America), Rev. Ryuji Hayashi (LA Koyasan Beikoku Betsuin), Sandy Seiju Hockenbury (Eon Zen Center, CO), Maurice Hoover (Prairie Wind Sangha, Oklahoma City), Juliet Hwang (Plum Village Sangha), Rev. Shumyo Kojima (LA Zenshuji Soto Mission), Rev. Mui Mike Lewis (Great Mountain Zen Center, CO), Rev. Nick Ushin Lowry (Rinzai/Oklahoma City), Keigetsu Heather Martin (San Antonio Zen Center), Rev. Egyoku Nakao (Zen Center of Los Angeles), Steven Nakasone (LA Higashi Honganji/Plum Village Sangha), Judy Nakatomi (San Diego Vista Buddhist Temple/Plum Village Sangha), Kenley Neufeld (Plum Village Sangha), Rev. Inryu Bobbi Ponce-Barger (All Beings Sangha, DC), Rev. Tenku Ruff (Soto Zen Buddhist Association), Rev. Eric Kairen Russell (Tendai Buddhist Institute/Oklahoma City), Rev. Grace Schireson (Shogaku Zen Institute), Kathy Spengler (Rissho Koseikai/Oklahoma City), Rev. Duncan Ryuken Williams (author of *American Sutra*)

I. Chanting with Dreamers

We should study how kind and compassionate words [...] have the power to turn the destiny of the nation.

Zen Master Dōgen (1200-1253) from his *Bodaisatta Shishōbō*

Multi-layered Buddhist robes are not usually worn in 102-degree heat or advisable for marching down a two-lane highway in front of a U.S. Army base, but it felt perfectly fitting to wear them despite such conditions on July 20, 2019 in Lawton, Oklahoma. On this day, a group of 25 Buddhist priests and lay leaders donned their robes and marched with nearly 400 other protestors – including members of a Japanese American organization, Tsuru for Solidarity, that had invited us – towards a fence in front of the Bentley Gate at the Fort Sill Army Base.

We Buddhists walked the highway hoping not to get arrested before we could fulfill our responsibility to the day's direct action by chanting a Buddhist sutra as close to that fence as possible. A fence that was the site of two shootings of Japanese immigrants by U.S. Army guards at the WWII Fort Sill Internment Camp and a fence that was also slated to demarcate the confinement site of up to 1,400 asylum-seeking children from Central America, who have been separated from their families.



Buddhist Clergy and Lay Leaders Marching Towards Fort Sill Fence (credit, Mike Ishii)

Chanting scriptures is one of many forms of Buddhist speech. As Buddhist priests, our expressions can include everything from preaching Dharma messages to less formal conversations with a fellow sangha member seeking guidance at a difficult time in their lives.

Sometimes our speech can provide perspective or shift things when we are in a rut; but as one of my colleagues at the march, Rev. Joan Amaral, noted using a classic text of Zen Master Dōgen, kind and compassionate words also have the power to change the destiny of a nation.

And indeed, our chanting of the *Heart Sutra* at the Fort Sill gates was intended to shift the current course of our nation. We are at a moment in American history when our government’s lawyers make arguments that migrant children placed in cages in border detention facilities do not need to be provided with soap or toothbrushes for basic hygiene. Our nation’s officials claim that a concrete floor and a Mylar blanket is the full extent of what America is required to provide to these children who yearn for freedom and refuge from violence, who are seeking the legal right to have a hearing for asylum in our great nation.

The fate of these migrant children was not an abstract matter for the hundreds of youthful Latinx Dreamers – individuals who entered the U.S. without legal documents as babies or young children – affiliated with United We Dream, the nation’s largest immigrant-youth led network that organized the protest. The Dreamers marched in front of the priests wearing Mylar blankets and orange T-shirts adorned with the words “Close the Camps” while chanting “Down, Down with Deportation; Up, Up with Liberation.”



Young Dreamers Taking a Knee and Lay Down the Mylar Blankets as a Signal to the Buddhist Priests (credit, Evan Kodani)

During a protest rehearsal held the previous evening in a large conference room at a Best Western hotel in Lawton, we had arranged that the Buddhist priests would bring up the rear of the march. Four Buddhists had been assigned to the “rapid altar set up team” to prepare for our Buddhist ceremony on the highway’s median as soon as the young people reached the

fence of the army base. The makeshift altar consisted of a folding table, a tablecloth, a framed photo of Kanesaburo Oshima (one of the Japanese immigrants shot by guards at the WWII Fort Sill Internment Camp fence), a Buddha statue carved in 1943 in the War Relocation Authority camp at Manzanar, and maile lei (a special flower offering sent by the Oshima family from Hawai'i). With a pre-designated signal, the Dreamers' chants would cease, their Mylar blankets would come off, and they would turn quietly towards us on one knee.



Buddhist Priests Lead the Chanting of the Heart Sutra at the Fort Sill Fence (credit, Evan Kodani)

The repeated chants of “Un-documented, Un-afraid” – a brave statement of identity and state of mind – gave us Buddhist priests, many of whom had no prior experience of protests or civil disobedience, the requisite courage to take a stand. One counter-protester, holding a Trump 2020 sign and visibly armed with a large hunting knife and a gun, moved in towards us to record the Buddhist priests with his cell phone. Our friends from the American Indian Movement (AIM) and the ACLU Oklahoma non-violently surrounded this counter-protester to ensure our speech would be protected. Throughout this march, the Japanese American Tsuru for Solidarity team from New York City also served as our protectors.

With the resounding voice of our chant leader, Rev. Shumyō Kojima of Zenshuji (a historically Japanese American Zen Buddhist temple in LA's Little Tokyo), we intoned the *Heart Sutra* into the respectful silence offered by the youth. This Buddhist form of free speech was not only dedicated to those who had suffered at Fort Sill in the past, but also a prayer that

history would not repeat itself with the reports of an imminent transfer of 1,400 Central American migrant children here.

To be chanting with Buddhist priests from a variety of lineages took me back to the WWII internment of 700 Japanese immigrants who recalled their time in Oklahoma as one of extreme heat, unpredictable winds, with “No soap rations. No toothpaste. ... Eat, sleep, Wake Up. Eat, sleep, Wake Up. [O]ne cannot but help but begin to lose one’s mind.”

Our remembrance ceremony paralleled a funeral held within Fort Sill on May 13, 1942. On that day, nearly 90 Buddhist priests from the Jodo Shinshu, Nichiren, Shingon, Zen, and Jodo sects – the entire spectrum of Japanese Buddhist lineages present in America at that time – performed the largest inter-sectarian Buddhist funeral up until that point in American history. Viewing Buddhist rites as a security threat, the U.S. Army permitted only one joint funeral ceremony for a remembrance of three of the men who died whilst in camp, surrounding the priests with machine guns in case the gathering turned into a riot. The authorities feared such an outcome because two of the three men – Kanesaburo Oshima from Kona, Hawai’i and Ichiro Shimoda from Los Angeles – were killed at the hands of guards by the fence surrounding the internment camp. The large group of Buddhist priests set aside their sectarian differences to mark an important moment in American Buddhist history; to claim in a united show of conviction, their right to religious freedom even when their liberties had been taken away from them.

The chants during the 1942 remembrance ceremony for the immigrants who suffered due to racial and religious animus back in WWII was not disconnected with ours. When we see human dignity and decency eroded, we cannot be silent. When we observe anyone being excluded from America because of racial or religious prejudice, we American Buddhists cannot be silent. It is said that the Buddha, after emerging from his awakening under the Bodhi tree, distinguished himself from other enlightened beings by not dwelling in quiescence, but demonstrated his unsurpassed and complete awakening by speaking up – during his first sermon at Deer Park uttering “I teach one thing and one thing only: suffering and the end to suffering.”

When it comes to the suffering endured by these migrant children separated from their families, in what can only be described as new forms of American concentration camps, we cannot remain silent. Mike Ishii from Tsuru for Solidarity spoke forcibly to those gathered, “We are here because we represent the voice of outrage in our community and in communities across this country who have historically been targeted by white supremacy and racism. ... If you bring the children here – every one of us represents thousands and thousands of people and we will come back.” The treatment of these children is not a partisan political issue – we should recall that a previous Democratic administration similarly used Fort Sill to house unaccompanied migrant children back in 2014 – but a question of basic human decency and our nation’s values and character; it was wrong then and it is wrong now.

The youthful chants of Dreamers and the Buddhist recitation of the *Heart Sutra* joined the multitude of expressions of concern at Fort Sill. Our words have the power to turn the destiny of our nation.

II. Naming Names: Memorializing Our Interlinked Histories

Before leaving the Fort Sill fence to a rally in nearby Shepler Square Park, Rev. Egyoku Nakao, the Japanese American abbot emeritus of the Zen Center of Los Angeles (ZCLA), and I took a brief detour to pay homage to Kanesaburo Oshima, a father of 11 children who had run small businesses in Kona, Hawai'i before being shot in the back of the head by a guard at Fort Sill in May 1942. Our fellow Soto Zen Buddhist priest, Rev. Jiko Nakade (the abbot of Kona Daifukuji Soto Zen Mission and granddaughter of Kanesaburo Oshima) had sent special maile lei from Hawai'i as a flower offering for the memorial service. Instead of randomly leaving them at the highway median where we had set up the ceremonial altar, we draped them on the cannon at the Fort Sill sign at Bentley Gate, a bigger version of the weapon used to end his life.



Draping the Lei from the Oshima Family on the Fort Sill Cannon at Bentley Gate (credit, Linda Morris)

Our role at the Shepler Square Park rally was to perform a Buddhist memorial service in ever-widening circles of inclusion. We began with a tribute to Kanesaburo Oshima with a letter from the family read by Rev. Egyoku Nakao, one of only a handful of Japanese Americans to have served as the head of an American Zen Center. The letter written by his granddaughter noted that his, “untimely death behind barbed wire was the source of great sorrow and trauma for his wife Matsu Oshima and their eleven children, who had been patiently awaiting Grandfather’s return to Kona since the night he was unjustly taken away after Pearl Harbor was attacked. Grandfather Kanesaburo did eventually return to his family, but in the form of ashes,

carried back to Hawai'i by my father Noboru Oshima, the eldest of the Oshima children, at the end of WWII.”

We then turned to the idea that this Buddhist memorial service would not be just about one life, but a remembrance of the interlinked histories of many communities. Rev. William Briones, the head minister of the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple (one of the oldest Japanese American temples in North America), served as the chant leader for this part of the ceremony. He prefaced the ritual with a reflection on how, as a Mexican American Buddhist priest serving a historic Japanese American sangha, what is happening to the migrant children was personal; his own grandparents crossed the border without papers in the early 1900s.



Rev. William Briones (LA Honpa Hongwanji Temple) Leading the Chanting of the *Juseige* [The Three Sacred Vows] (credit, Evan Kodani)

This memorial service was about making manifest the interlinked histories of communities that had been targeted for exclusion from America, placed into indefinite detention, separated from their families in migration, and experienced death – naming people who might otherwise be relegated to the ash heap of forgotten history.

As the chanting began, we invited Michael Topaum, the spiritual leader of the American Indian Movement, to bring Buddhist memorial tablets to the altar, on which he had written down the names of the Kiowa Chiefs – White Bear, Lone Wolf, Sitting Bear, and Big Tree – the indigenous peoples moved to southwestern Oklahoma in 1867.



Michael Topaum (American Indian Movement) Spiritual Elder Writing the Names of the Kiowa Chiefs on Buddhist Memorial Tablets (credit, Evan Kodani)

Rev. Ryuji Hayashi of the Los Angeles Koyasan Buddhist Temple, whose predecessor Bishop Seytsu Takahashi had been interned at Fort Sill during the war, approached the altar next with the names of the four Japanese immigrants who died during their incarceration in Oklahoma: Kanesaburo Oshima, Ichiro Shimoda, Alessandro Ochi, and Shiro Y. Nakahata.



Rev. Ryuji Hayashi (LA Koyasan) Placing the Memorial Tablets of the Four Japanese Immigrants Who Died at Fort Sill in May 1942 (credit, Evan Kodani)

The final offering of names on Buddhist memorial tablets was dedicated to the group of ten young people who had died in the past fourteen months at the border or in U.S. detention centers. Whether it was the 1-year old Mariee Juárez from Guatemala who passed away from

respiratory infection, 2-year old Valeria Martinez from El Salvador who drowned in the Rio Bravo River alongside her father, or the 20-year old Claudia Patricia Gomez Gonzalez from Guatemala who was shot and killed by a border agent, there is a real human cost of a “zero tolerance” policy aimed at deterrence. The other seven names of the migrant children who have died, Wilmer Josue Ramirez Vasquez (2 years old), Gurupreet Kaur (6 years old), Jakelin Amel Rosmery Caal Marquin (7 years old), Felipe Gomez Alonzo (8 years old), Darlyn Cristabel Cordova Valle (10 years old), Juan de Leon Gutierrez (16 years old), and Carlos Gregorio Hernandez Vasquez (16 years old), were written on tablets by Rev. Briones and brought to the altar by ten young Dreamers wearing “Close the Camps” T-Shirts.



[left – 1-Year Old Mariee Juárez from Guatemala Died Soon After Release from ICE Custody (credit, ABC News)]

[right – 2-Year Old Valeria Martinez with Father Oscar Drowned in Rio Bravo River Trying to Cross into the United States (credit, Reuters/Stringer)]



Dreamers Bringing Up Memorial Tablets for the Ten Children Who Died in the Border Crossing or in Border Detention Facilities (credit, Evan Kodani)

In the Japanese Buddhist tradition, this is the time of year when we hold Obon or Urabon (Skt. Ullambana) ceremonies and festivals to remember and honor the dead with gratitude. And in that spirit, as a spontaneous ritual act, Tsuru for Solidarity co-founder Mike Ishii delivered a heartfelt invitation to all those assembled to write the names of those they would like remembered onto memorial tablets – those who have passed as well as individuals who may currently be experiencing suffering in migration through family separation, indefinite detention, sexual abuse, or deportation. To our surprise, over a hundred people solemnly wrote the name of a loved one and offered the memorial tablet at the front altar as we repeatedly chanted the *Juseige* (Three Sacred Vows).



Receiving Memorial Tablets from All Communities (credit, Evan Kodani)

At ceremonies like this, we recall how those who came before us make us who we are. We make present those absent. And in so doing, recognize how our lives are interlinked with the past; that we are not alone, connected in community with the vast web of existence. Our own liberation co-arising with the liberation of all beings.

In that moment of the ritual, the Dreamers' chants of "This is what community looks like" from earlier in the day rang true. Documented or undocumented, all residents of our nation, one big sangha coming together.

Upon reflection, it also occurred to me that “This is what American Buddhism looks like.” There we were in Oklahoma, united by our concern for migrant children. A Mexican American priest serving one of oldest historically Japanese American Buddhist temples leading the chanting; a Japanese immigrant priest serving another historically Japanese American Buddhist temple walking up with the memorial tablets for the Fort Sill dead; a dozen white and two mixed-race Japanese American Soto Zen priests; and four dharma teachers ordained in a Vietnamese lineage of engaged Buddhism, two of them Japanese American, one Korean American and one white. Only in America.

We went to Fort Sill to remind America of its duty to honor the yearning for freedom. America reminded us that our freedoms must be embodied and actualized through seeing interconnectedness – of the past and the present, of the shared futures of a multiplicity of religious and ethnic communities.

III. Why Fold Paper Cranes to Protest Inhumane Treatment of Migrant Children?

On Independence Day – July 4, 2019 – I began circulating a letter inviting Buddhist clergy and lay leaders to join me in supporting Tsuru for Solidarity, a Japanese American group dedicated to the idea that American concentration camps that incarcerated children and families back in WWII were wrong then and similar camps for Central American children detained at the border are wrong now. By the day of the July 20th Fort Sill protest, about 130 Buddhist leaders publicly signed on to express their solidarity, and dozens of temples and organizations began folding paper cranes. Tsuru for Solidarity initially called on the Japanese American community to fold 10,000 paper cranes (tsuru is the Japanese word for “crane” and is a symbol of hope and transformation in Japanese culture) for their first protest in March 2019 at Dilley, Texas, where thousands of children and some women seeking legal asylum are being detained indefinitely by our government. The community responded with roughly 25,000 folded cranes, to be taken on a pilgrimage to Crystal City, a former WWII concentration camp that housed Japanese American and Japanese Latin American families, then to the detention facility in Dilley, Texas, located just a few miles down the road. Amongst the cranes placed on the fence were those made by Tsuru for Solidarity co-founder Nancy Ukai, who had unbeknownst to me, made cranes using color copies of the cover of my book about Buddhism and the WWII Japanese American incarceration *American Sutra*.



Examples of American Sutra Cranes Made by Nancy Ukai of Tsuru for Solidarity (credit, Nancy Ukai)

The current administration's immigration policies that target and exclude people because of racial or religious animus is all too familiar to the Japanese American community. They experienced a nationwide roundup of thousands of community leaders after Pearl Harbor, including hundreds of Buddhist priests, based on claims that they represented a threat to national security. Ultimately, even Japanese American babies and orphaned children were forcibly removed by the U.S. Army into remote camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. The mass incarceration of 120,000 people was a form of ethnic cleansing of the West Coast, which, according to Lt. Gen. John DeWitt in his 1943 Final Report, was necessary because of the community's race, religion, and customs.

So it was no surprise that when the Trump administration announced that 1,400 unaccompanied migrant children in overcrowded border facilities would be transferred to Fort Sill, Oklahoma, Tsuru for Solidarity swiftly organized another crane-making project for a protest on June 22. A group of 25 Japanese Americans, including six camp survivors who were children during WWII, took a stand expressing their concern about history repeating itself. When an angry Military Police officer interrupted the camp survivors at the Fort Sill entrance and told them they could not protest in front of the base, one of the survivors – Satsuki Ina, another co-founder of Tsuru for Solidarity – remarked “They’re wanting to remove us. We’ve been removed too many times.” The camp survivors stood their ground, ready to be arrested if necessary, until they had finished speaking about the connections between the inhumane exclusions and incarcerations that they had experienced with what is happening today. Standing with thousands of paper cranes made by fellow Japanese Americans from around the country, this small group of protestors was representing a much larger community.



The June Tsuru for Solidarity Protest at Fort Sill with WWII Japanese American Camp Survivors (credit, Molly Hennessy-Fiske/LA Times)

On June 22, I was privileged to be at Fort Sill with these brave camp survivors and other descendants of families who had been incarcerated. I was invited to perform a Buddhist service at the rally in a nearby park after the camp survivors' statements at the Army base entrance. Here, a couple hundred local Oklahomans from many backgrounds – including immigrant rights organizations, the American Indian Movement, Black Lives Matter, ACLU Oklahoma and others in a diverse coalition – assembled to amplify their voices to stand with the incarcerated children seeking asylum and refuge in our nation.

At that rally, I posed a question, a Buddhist koan, “How do folded paper cranes fly?” What can paper cranes do to alleviate the suffering endured by so many? One of the classic Buddhist symbols of liberation is likened to a bird soaring freely in the sky. We say that for a bird to fly, it needs both wings: the wing of wisdom and the wing of compassion. What I witnessed at the rally was the embodiment of all the elements necessary to make paper cranes fly.



Some of the Paper Cranes at the July 20 Rally at Shepler Square Park (credit, Evan Kodani)

At the July 20 protest, a more complete answer to the question came. As part of the memorial service, a ceremonial hanging of the paper cranes onto a rope held by Tsuru for Solidarity NYC members and Dreamers took place during the chanting. Some of these cranes were from the previous protest and made by Japanese Americans, but the bulk of the cranes came from Buddhist sanghas from around the country. Children at Dharma camp in Portland, Oregon; Japanese American seniors at Kona Daifukuji temple in Hawai'i; Zen practitioners from

San Francisco, Los Angeles, Seattle, Brooklyn; and countless others made over 4,000 cranes for this occasion.



Crane-Making for July 20 Fort Sill Protest: [top – Kona Daifukuji; bottom – Brooklyn Zen Center] (credit, Jiko Nakade and Grace Schireson)

Each fold, an expression of concern for the migrant children, is a prayer for freedom. The Tsuru team and the Buddhist clergy was a combined group of only 30 people, but in reality, thousands were present in the form of paper cranes. At the conclusion of the rally, Tsuru for Solidarity decided to gift these paper cranes to the primary organizers of the July 20th Fort Sill protest: the young Dreamers adopted the paper cranes with plans to take them to all of their future protests at migrant detention centers around the United States. Paper cranes will indeed fly.



Dreamers with the Paper Cranes Posing with the Buddhist and Tsuru for Solidarity Group (credit, Evan Kodani)

POSTSCRIPT

On July 24, U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe's (R-Oklahoma) office relayed to the media that the plans to transfer the migrant children to Fort Sill in the summer of 2019 have been put on hold. And on July 26, the White House contacted Oklahoma Governor Kevin Stitt about the change in plans, with the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announcing that their "UAC (Unaccompanied Alien Children) Program does not have an immediate need to place children in (holding) facilities." One camp closed.

There is still work to be done. Cranes to be folded. Compassionate words to be spoken to turn the destiny of America as a nation. Fellow American Buddhists, this is but one approach to fulfilling our bodhisattva vows – "Sentient beings are numberless, Yet I vow to save them all" – though if this style of engagement with the suffering of the world proposed by Tsuru for Solidarity appeals to you, they are awaiting your support. Our next goal is to fold more than 120,000 cranes to represent the number of Japanese Americans incarcerated in concentration camps during WWII. Our next protest location, the White House (Washington D.C.) in May 2020. Please look out for updates at <https://www.duncanryukenwilliams.com/buddhist-leaders-for-tsuru-for-solidarity>