Is Rev. Tokio Yokoi the monk in Takata's story?

dr. Jojan L. Jonker

version October 2025

1. Abstract

Many Reiki practitioners know the story told by Hawayo Takata about Usui's retreat on Mt. Kurama (when hearing Koriyama as Kurama) and his meeting with a "Zen abbot". This article looks more closely at that part of the story and asks who this teacher might really have been. In Japanese, the word often translated as "abbot" (住職 *jūshoku*) can also mean "teacher" (師 *shi*), which opens new possibilities. One suggestion is that the story may echo the life of Rev. Tokio Yokoi, a Christian minister and teacher who was active at the same time as Usui. Rather than weakening Takata's story, this connection shows how Reiki's beginnings grew out of several traditions at once: Zen images, Christian influences, and older Japanese mountain practices. Understanding these layers helps us appreciate Reiki's roots as both spiritual and universal.

2. Introduction

Reiki, a Complementary and Alternative Medicine modality, best known by its practice of laying on of hands, is marked by the interplay of Japanese origins and global transmission.

Commonly, it is suggested that there is one single founder, Mikao Usui (1865–1926), who is said to have developed Reiki in 1922, without any explanation of what or who inspired him prior to that date. For scholars in the fields of i.e. religious studies and anthropology, this has always been an implausible story with many gaps and illogical elements. In academia, it is commonly accepted that religions and spiritualities are always the product of convergence and encounters between schools of thought, individuals, *Zeitgeist*, geopolitical influences, and so on.

In 2023, it is theorized that a second person was explicitly involved in the development of Reiki, Rev. Tokio Yokoi (1857–1927), challenging the single-source presumption (Latham 2023, Jonker 2024). In the new alternative narrative, Yokoi is seen as the 'originator' prior to 1922, and Usui as Reiki's 'public face' after 1922. Yokoi and Usui lived in close proximity to each other making it historically plausible that they knew each other and even may have been good friends (Jonker 2024, 2025). But at present date, there is no concrete evidence in the form of documents that they actually knew each other.

It was Hawayo Takata (1900–1980) who carried the practice beyond Japan and established it in the West. Born in Hawaii to Japanese immigrant parents, Takata traveled to Japan in the mid-1930s, where she encountered Reiki through Chujiro Hayashi, one of Mikao Usui's direct students. After undergoing treatment and training, she returned to Hawaii and began practicing and teaching Reiki, eventually initiating twenty-two or more

Reiki Masters. Through her oral teachings, public demonstrations, and the training of a new generation of practitioners, Takata transformed Reiki from a little-known Japanese healing art into a global practice.

Because she was the first to present Reiki to Western audiences, Takata must also have been the person who translated and interpreted its original Japanese terminology into English. In this way, she not only transmitted Reiki practice but also shaped how it would be understood and remembered outside Japan. Yet her shaping inevitably leaves room to question whether the most accurate interpretation of a Taishō-era Japanese spiritual practice was preserved in its transformation into a Western healing practice. This tension opens a bridge to the following discussion, where linguistic nuance and historical context become crucial for reassessing how Reiki's story has been told.

This article presents the hypothesis suggesting that Yokoi transferred knowledge to Usui in the period 1919–1922, and that this can be heard in a veiled way in the Takata story. It searches the possibility that a relationship between Yokoi and Usui can be recognized in the Takata story, more precisely, in the part where Usui visits a Zen monastery and meets a monk there. To this end, we also look at the choices Takata had to make when translating Japanese *kanji* into English. Unfortunately, to my best knowledge there is no archival material showing the Takata narrative in Japanese dated in the 1940s or -50s when she gave classes to the Hawaiian Japanese population. This absence makes it even more important to reconsider Takata's English retellings and how they shaped Reiki's remembered origins.

To explore this possibility, this article proceeds in a series of steps. Section 3 *Remembering and reframing* revisits Takata's retelling of Reiki's beginnings, focusing on how her narrative shaped later memory. Section 4 *Abbot? No abbot!* examines the contested figure of the "abbot", showing how this detail entered the tradition. Section 5 *Japanese English linguistic Challenges* looks more closely at the Japanese terms involved, highlighting translation issues that broaden the range of possible meanings. Section 6 *What does the Memorial Stone say?* turns to the Usui Memorial Stone, often treated as an authoritative source, to assess how its wording and silences affect our understanding. Finally, Section 7 *Fragments of Takata's narrative* reviews fragments of Takata's story in detail, reinterpreting them considering the preceding discussion. This structure makes clear how linguistic nuance, textual evidence, and biographical context converge in the question of whether the "abbot" in Takata's story might refer to Rev. Tokio Yokoi.

3. Remembering and Reframing: Takata's Retelling of Reiki's Origins

Since Takata consistently refers to a single founder, this article considers the possibility that her narrative occasionally merges the lives of Usui and Yokoi, presenting them as if they were one person. The analysis in this treatise draws on an audio recording in which Takata recounts the story of Usui in her own words. While the recording dates from the late 1970s, the story itself reflects accounts she first received in the 1930s. Over the intervening decades, some details may have shifted, been reinterpreted, or remembered differently. It is also plausible that Takata consciously reframed elements of the narrative to resonate with an American audience of the 1950s till her death in 1980, emphasizing themes that would be meaningful and accessible within that cultural context, by which I do not imply that she made things up deliberately. Recognizing this process with compassion allows us to appreciate both the preservation and the adaptation of Reiki's foundational story.

First, a reflection is needed on one of the most discussed words of her narrative: "abbot".

4. ABBOT? NO ABBOT!

Hawayo Takata states explicitly that Mikao Usui entered a Zen context before undertaking his retreat on Mt. Kurama. As late as in 2025, a book published in 1928 is retraced by the hand of Okuna Shigejirō: *Tenrai no koe*, that holds a chapter on Reiki Therapy, *Reiki ryōhō* 霊気療法. This publication states that Usui consulted a Zen master but does not mention a monastery.

In her 1979 oral recording, transcribed in Elizabeth Latham's *Samurai Reiki Master*, Takata recounts that Usui, after fruitless searches in Christianity and other teachings, visited a Zen monastery and ask for the highest monk, asking permission to study scripture. Importantly, Takata does not use the words "abbot" (Latham 2023). Later practitioner retellings introduced the term "abbot", and it is these versions that have shaped the familiar image of Usui being guided by a Zen abbot. Nevertheless, 'abbot' is reflected on 'just in case' Takata did use the word.

It is noteworthy that to date, this Zen center or monastery remains unidentified by scholars and practitioners in the field. This lacuna does not provide substantial support for the Takata account in this particular instance. Instead, it offers a degree of flexibility that could allow for an alternative explanation, namely, an alternate setting.

Another indication that the term "abbot" was a later addition to the Takata narrative comes from her own unpublished 1975 manuscript. In this early version of her book project, Takata recounts Usui's spiritual search in detail, describing his turn to Christianity, his study of Buddhist sutras and Sanskrit, and his fasting and meditation on Mt. Kurama. Yet nowhere in this manuscript does she mention a Zen abbot or monastery (Takata 1975, unpublished draft holding a polished version of the transcription of the audio tape). The absence of such terms in her earliest written account indicates that the "abbot" motif was not part of Takata's original narrative framework. Rather, it seems to have entered the Reiki tradition in subsequent decades, likely through the retellings of her students or later popular authors. This supports the conclusion that the figure of the "abbot" was a retrospective elaboration, shaped by translation choices and Western expectations of Buddhist authority, rather than a detail originating with Takata herself.

Now that the term abbot has come up, we can take a closer look at the language used in the story. In particular, the original Japanese words may also be translated as *teacher* or *master*, which opens new ways of understanding what Takata may have meant.

5. JAPANESE ENGLISH LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

Japanese terminology opens another layer of interpretation. The English "abbot" would most naturally translate 住職 (*jūshoku*), the head priest of a Buddhist temple. Yet Japanese versions of the Usui story rarely use this word. Instead, they more often employ terms such as 師 (*shi*, teacher), 禅の師 (*zen no shi*, Zen teacher), or 禅師 (*zenji*, Zen master). These expressions emphasize a teacher–student relationship rather than an official monastic office. This makes it less certain that the figure Takata rendered as the "highest monk" was a temple abbot; more likely, he was remembered as a respected teacher or spiritual guide. In this light, "abbot" seems not a precise translation of the Japanese vocabulary but a Westernized choice that shaped how Reiki's story came to be told.

As linguist Kayo Kondo points out, *shi* in particular has a wider semantic range and may refer to respected spiritual teachers even outside formal Zen lineage (Kondo 2025). Thus, Takata's English "abbot" or "highest monk" may not be a literal rendering of *jūshoku* but rather a broad translation of *shi*. Under this interpretation, the "abbot" of Takata's story could have been any recognized senior teacher, not necessarily a Zen priest.

Extending these linguistic insights, the figure remembered as the Zen abbot or monk may not have been a temple priest at all, but rather Rev. Tokio Yokoi himself.

Moreover, Yokoi suffered a stroke after returning from the 1919 *Paris Peace Conference*, where he was a member of the Japanese delegation. He was bedridden from then until the end of his life. Latham notes that after his stroke Yokoi often received visitors and students at home, continuing his theological reflections and private teaching. Yokoi's obituary confirms that he continued to receive students at his home until his death in 1927. Thus, his residence could easily have functioned as the "center" (宗教センター *shūkyō sentā* or 教会 *kyōkai*), later remembered in Takata's story as a "temple" (寺 *tera*) or "monastery". Within such a setting, Yokoi's role as a respected teacher would naturally have been expressed with the term 師 (*shi*), a designation that Takata or her translators may later have rendered into English as "abbot". This possibility aligns with Yokoi's stature: an ordained Congregationalist minister, president of Dōshisha University, and a public intellectual engaged in theological debates on sanctification and healing in the Holiness Movement (Jonker 2024). His reputation as a spiritual guide made him precisely the kind of figure who could have been remembered in Takata's narrative—though under Buddhist monastic imagery rather than his actual Christian identity.

In conclusion, if the term 住職 (*jūshoku*) is understood more broadly as 師 (*shi*, teacher), this opens the possibility of considering figures outside the Zen monastic hierarchy, including contemporaries such as Rev. Tokio Yokoi, whose role will be discussed further below.

6. What does the Memorial Stone say?

The Usui Memorial Stone[1], erected in 1927, further complicates the picture. It states that Usui "climbed Mt. Kurama and practiced fasting and *shugyō* (修行) for twenty-one days, whereupon he attained Reiki".

The word *shugyō* is crucial. While transcriptions differ slightly—苦修 (*kushū*), 苦行 (*kugyō*), or simply 修行 (*shugyō*)—all convey "ascetic training". In Japanese religious culture, however, *shugyō* is more than generic austerity: it is the standard term for Zen training. In Rinzai and Sōtō contexts, *shugyō* refers to the full range of monastic practice—encompassing *zazen* meditation, chanting, sutra copying, work (*samu*), ritual observance, and temple life more generally (paraphrasing Borup 2008). Novice monks are even called *shugyōsō*（修行僧, monks engaged in training）(Heine 2008).

Thus, when contemporaries or later interpreters read that Usui had undertaken *shugyō*, it was natural to connect his practice to Zen.

This helps explain why Takata framed Usui's pre-enlightenment period in Zen terms: the very language of the Memorial Stone evokes Zen training. Yet *shugyō* is not exclusive to Zen. It is also a central term in Tendai and Shugendō, traditions closely tied to Mt. Kurama. Shugendō practitioners likewise described mountain austerities as *shugyō*. The Memorial Stone's wording thus sits at a semantic crossroads: it is broad enough to include Tendai and Shugendō practices, but in early 20th-century Kyoto, where Zen was prominent, it also resonated as a Zen idiom.

Here the hypothesis reopens: if the stone says *shugyō* and Takata's version later became "Zen monastery under an abbot", perhaps the two were linked not by historical necessity but by linguistic interpretation. The use of *shugyō* could have pushed Takata (or her translators) toward a Zen reading, even though the underlying figure guiding Usui might not have been a Zen priest at all, which gives space to introduce Yokoi in the narrative.

[1] At the time of writing, the credibility and authoritativeness of the Memorial Stone are under pressure for various reasons which call for reservation in reciting the Stone's text (Jonker 2025, Klatt 2025).

In this light, Takata's "abbot" may conceal a more complex reality. She may have heard of Usui's *shugyō* and, interpreting this through her Western audience's categories, translated the guiding *shi* as "abbot". If that *shi* was actually Yokoi—a Christian intellectual steeped in Holiness healing theology—the Christian details in Takata's narrative (Dōshisha, Bible study, ordination) suddenly align. The Zen language of *shugyō* and monastery could thus mask, rather than reveal, the true identity of Usui's senior teacher as well as the physical place of their meetings: Yokoi's house rather than a monastery.

This shift from linguistic nuance to material evidence is crucial, because the Usui Memorial Stone offers the earliest written account of Usui's practice and has long shaped how his retreat has been understood—yet, as recent scholarship shows, its authority is contested, since the inscription omits key Christian elements of Usui's biography and reframes him in line with the Taishō zeitgeist (Jonker 2025).

7. Fragments of Takata's narrative

With all these new insights and preconditions at hand, some fragments of the transcription of Takata's telling pass in review and can be reinterpreted. For this, the unpolished version is used as to be found in Latham's 2023 *Samurai Reiki Master*.

> The next day, Dr. Usui started to apply for visa, and he chose America and when that was all done, he took the boat, and he came and travelled by train, and he entered the university of Chicago. He studied philosophy, but number one, he wanted to study Christianity and also the Bible. And when he went to the studies in America, he found that the Bible and the Christian school that he went to were identical, the teachings were the same and he did not find in the Christian Bible, even in America, where Christ had left a formula for the healing. So, being in this university where they had philosophies of the world, …

Chicago and philosophies may refer to Yokoi. He represented Japan during the 1893 *Chicago World Parliament of Religions* where indeed 'all' religions of the world were represented (Jonker 2024). Noteworthy, Yokoi spoke about Japanese Buddhism which shows he was a leading expert in this in Japan at that time. This makes it plausible that Takata's references

> … he went into other philosophies. He studied Hinduism, Zoroastrianism and of course religion. When he came into Buddhism, he found a passage where it said that Buddha healed by laying on the hands as well as the blind, tuberculosis, and also leprosy. When he found this out, he said, 'I should further my studies in Buddhism and to find out whether Buddha has left any kind of a formula for the healing art.'

This may refer to Yokoi. Earlier publications (Latham 2023, Jonker 2024) mention that after the 1893 congress, Yokoi went to Yale University to enter the School of Divinity where indeed he studied these religions. After that, in the 1890s, he founded a Gakkai, a study group for Comparative Religions, the first of its kind in Japan. Also, in 1903, he visited India and in 1904, he lectured about the religions of India including Buddhism. Here again, Takata's words may be read as blending Usui's search with Yokoi's documented academic journey.

> He landed in Kyoto, where he lived before, and he went to all the great monasteries, (…) … he started with the most biggest (sic.) temple, the shin ….

The mention of "*shin*" in Takata's story most plausibly points to Myōshin-ji 妙心寺, the largest Rinzai Zen complex in Kyoto. Taken at face value, this would situate Usui's encounter within a monastic setting, reinforcing the image of a "Zen abbot" (住職 *jūshoku*). Yet this does not exclude the possibility that the historical meeting took place in a different

context as mentioned before, at Yokoi's home. When Takata later recounted the story in English, reframing Yokoi′s household as a great temple like 妙心寺 would have made the setting more recognizable and authoritative for her audience. In this way, the narrative reference to "*shin*" need not contradict the Yokoi hypothesis but rather illustrates how a domestic teaching space may have been retrospectively mapped onto the prestige of Kyoto's most famous Zen institution. Such retrospective mapping highlights how Takata's narrative may mask Yokoi's presence under Buddhist imagery.

> … and when he arrived there he met a monk, and he said, 'does the Buddhist Bible or the Sutras, do the Sutras say that Buddha healed, is it written down in the Sutras that Buddha had healed leprosy, tuberculosis, and the blind, by laying on of hands?' And the monk answered, he said, 'yes, it is written in the Sutras.'

Yokoi most certainly was able to give an answer on those questions; here are two options.

(1) He could have informed Usui about Bhaisajya-guru Buddha (Medicine-master Buddha, Yaoshifo, Yakushi Nyorai). Quoting Irons (2008), this Buddha is a symbol of the healing aspect of the enlightened being. Like Amithaba he resides in a Pure Land. Baisajya Buddha's image is often found together with that of the historical Buddha and Amitabha in a triad, in which he sits to the left of Sakyamuni Buddha. He often holds a fruit, symbol of healing in his right hand. The Bhaisajya Buddha Sutra, which exists today only in Tibetan and Chinese versions, relates how Bhaisajya, then a famous teacher (guru), makes 12 vows, including guiding all beings to the Mahayana path and healing all illnesses. This figure is therefore of interest because he is worshipped as a Buddha but remembered equally for his bodhisattva like vows which he strives to accomplish before becoming a Buddha. Such an answer holds healing, sutra, and Pure land, all concepts related to the history of Reiki.

(2) Likewise, Yokoi could have informed Usui about the *Jesus Sutras* (Saeki 1937, Palmer 2001, Bays 2012, Latham 2023; Jonker 2024). Paraphrasing and summarizing these authors, the *Jesus Sutras* (景教經典, *Jingjiao Documents*) are ancient Christian writings brought to China by the Church of the East during the Tang dynasty, following earlier theological conflicts such as the Council of Nicaea (325 a.d.)[2]. These texts are remarkable for their use of Chinese cosmological language to express Christian theology: the Holy Spirit is rendered as 靈氣 *lingqi*, meaning in this case "numinous breath" or "sacred vitality". This linguistic choice established a conceptual bridge between Christian pneumatology and Chinese ideas of cosmic spirit, centuries before Reiki. Later copies of these Sutras circulated in East Asia and were preserved in Japan, in places connected to Tokio Yokoi's ministry. The Jesus Sutras emphasize that purity of mind and heart must precede physical healing (Palmer 2001), a teaching that closely parallels the Holiness Movement's view that inner sanctification is the key to divine healing. By linking the Holy Spirit to *lingqi*, these early texts reveal that the association between spiritual transformation, numinous breath, and healing has deep historical roots in the Sinosphere. Yokoi, as a learned Christian minister familiar with both Western theology and Asian traditions, could easily have drawn on these ideas when guiding Usui, thereby reinforcing a conceptual link between ancient Christian *lingqi* theology and modern Japanese understandings of 霊気 (*reiki*).

Significantly, one of the *Jingjiao* manuscripts (known as *Kojima B*) was housed at Dōshisha University Library in Kyoto. Dōshisha was the institution where Tokio Yokoi

[2] The First Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 a.d. by the Roman emperor Constantine. It produced the Nicene Creed, which gave authoritative expression to the doctrine of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as the foundation of orthodox Christianity. For Japanese theologians like Tokio Yokoi, this conciliar definition represented a Greek philosophical overlay on the Biblical message, and they sought instead to recover a more direct, practical Christianity free from metaphysical abstraction (Jonker 2024).

served as president and exerted lasting influence, placing *Jingjiao* material that uses *lingqi* (靈氣) for the Holy Spirit in Yokoi's immediate intellectual environment. This connection strengthens the plausibility that Yokoi, as a Christian intellectual versed in both Western and East Asian religious traditions, was aware of the *Jesus Sutras* and their conceptual bridging of Christian pneumatology and Chinese cosmology.

> He said, 'have you mastered the art, can you do it?' And the monk said, 'well, in Buddhism, physicality is very important, but we consider the church, or ministry, to minister to the people so they have better minds. We want to straighten their minds first, so they'll become more spiritual and then show more gratitude and learn all, everything of life, and this is a temple or a church, and we monks do not have time for the physical in reaching the spiritual growth; spiritual healing is first.'

The answer of the monk (Yokoi) fits in what we know now about Yokoi and concepts of the Holiness Movement. Paraphrasing an earlier publication (Jonker 2024), the Holiness Movement, which arose from the search for a recovery of apostolic Christianity, emphasized sanctification, the experience of the Holy Spirit, and divine healing (*iyashi* 神癒). Japanese Christians influenced by this movement stressed that inner purity and the transformation of the heart had to precede physical healing, reflecting a theological order of sanctification first, healing second. Tokio Yokoi, who shared this emphasis, sought ways to indigenize the experience of "Baptism with the Holy Spirit" and its healing effects in the Japanese context. This priority on purity of mind and spirit before the restoration of the body shaped both the Holiness understanding of healing and later resonated in practices like Reiki.

> Finally, he learned it in a Zen temple. and when he approached the temple, he rang the bell, and a little page boy came out. And he said, 'I would like to speak to the highest monk of this grand temple'. He said, 'please come in and who are you?' And he said, 'I am Mikao Usui. and I would like to study Buddhism, and therefore, I would like to meet the monk.'

As mentioned above, Yokoi was an expert on Buddhism and most certainly was in no need to study that. Usui on the other hand, seemingly had reached a point where he thought that he could find the answers of his quest in Buddhism. Takata's narrative continues:

> Does the Zen believe in healing?' He said, 'yes, we do. it is written in the Sutras that the Buddhists that Buddha did it, and so in Buddhism we have the healing.' 'Well, can you heal the physical self?' He said, 'not yet'. And so, he said, 'what do you mean by not yet?' He said, 'oh, we monks are very very busy, giving discourses, lectures and preaching so that the mind can be attuned for the spiritual level. And we want to better the mind before we touch the physical.' 'And then how are you going to get the physical training?' He said, 'that will come, we have not given up although we do not have it yet. and therefore the [?] prayer in our chanting of the Sutras are very necessary in our faith, is stronger than ever and we have not lost it, and someday, during our various meditations, that we shall receive that great light and then we shall know. then we know we are ready, but do not get discouraged, we are striving for it, but we know we are not there. But before our meditation ended and before I go into transition, I am sure it will all be enlightened and will be able to do.'

An interesting part of the answer is "before I go into transition". At that moment in time, Yokoi has had a stroke and might be well aware of the fact death was lurking and may have wondered if he would solve his quest for healing before his own death.

> And he said, 'thank you very much.' He said, 'may I come in and stay here and study all the secrets that you have? And, I would like to hear your lectures on Buddhism …

In this passage, Usui recognizes a teacher in the man he speaks with and asks him to teach all this secrets he has and knowledge of Buddhism. Clearly qualifications Yokoi had. The idea of coming in and staying can also be interpreted as asking permission to visit Yokoi more often in a context of teaching.

> … because I was a Christian minister and I have faith in the Christian Bible and I've looked all over and yet I could not find any formula of healing though I believe that Christ did it, and I still believe it.'

In this passage, we may hear a part of Usui's life that took place in the years prior to 1919, that are yet uncovered. Usui's 1904 CV, discovered in 2025, shows he worked for Christian Missionary Schools for several years. He worked in Taiwan until 1911 and somewhere in the period 1911–1919, Usui must have become interested in healing and may well have looked in Christian sources. However, the statement that he was a minister is either, according to me, an echo of the life of Yokoi projected in that of Usui which makes Usui look more prominent, more respectful, more senior, or an indication that Usui also was a Minister, which I doubt.

> Therefore, when he went into studying Sanskrit, and when he later studied very hard to master it, he found a formula. just as plain as day. (…) And so, he said, 'very well, I've found it. Now, I have to try to interpret this because it was written 2,500 years ago because I do not know if this will work or not, but I have to go through the test and going through this test.'

Usui must have entered a path of seeking and this may reflect that. Perhaps the monk, Yokoi, guided him to read the right manuscripts. The formula Usui speaks about, may have been given to him by Yokoi as an outcome of the study group on 'direct transmission' Yokoi participated in (Jonker 2024). This 'formula' may echo what is now called initiation or *reiju* considered as the gateway to perform healing.

> He said, 'I cannot guarantee myself whether I will live through it, or not. but if I don't try the test,' he said, 'everything will be lost. We'll go back three years.' He talked it over with the monk, and the monk said, 'yes, you are a very courageous man. Where are you going to test this, right in this temple?' He said, 'no. I would like to go up into the mountains', and this was Kyoto also. …

Yokoi may have understood that Usui needed a similar mystic experience of receiving bright light from the spiritual world like what he had experienced on Mt. Hanaoka when he was a boy of 18/19. This would be a necessary connection with *rei* to perform *reiju*.

At this point in the story, Okuna states that the monk would have said, *"If you die, the world will change"* (死せば、世からんと *shiseba, yo karanto*). This expression resonates with the Zen phrase 大死一番 (*daishi ichiban*), the "one great death", which refers not to literal death but to the radical surrender of the self — a symbolic ego-death regarded in Zen as the necessary breakthrough for awakening.

Paraphrasing and summarizing Irons (2008), the concept of "great death" (大死 *daishi*) occupies a central place in Zen practice as the decisive moment of transformation. Zen teachers often explain that enlightenment requires undergoing this symbolic death of the ego and its attachments. The phrase 大死一番 (*daishi ichiban*, literally "the one great death") points to the complete letting go of the self, an inner collapse of delusion that opens the way to direct realization. In this light, the accounts of both Takata and Okuna converge, each evoking the Zen idea that awakening comes only through the experience of such a "great death".

> … and he went up to mount Koriyama and he said, 'I will test myself for twenty-one days. and if I do not come back on the night of the twenty-first day, on the twenty-second day

> morning, send out a searching party into the forest to find my body. I will be dead.' And so, with that farewell, he left, and he said, 'I shall go through this meditation without food, only water.

Usui's decision to climb Mt. Kurama for a twenty-one-day retreat is best understood in light of Japanese ascetic traditions. I iterate, the Usui Memorial Stone itself describes his training as 修行 (*shugyō*), a term that in early twentieth-century Kyoto resonated strongly with Zen discipline yet also encompassed Tendai and Shugendō practices. Shugendō (修験道), the "way of mountain ascetics", combined Shintō, esoteric Buddhism, and Taoist elements, and its austerities—fasting (断食 *danjiki*), seclusion in sacred mountains, and prayer rituals such as 加持祈祷 (*kaji kitō*)—were aimed at attaining revelation and healing powers (Jonker 2016, Beeler & Jonker 2020). Narratives of Usui's retreat echo these indigenous forms, especially in his willingness to risk death through fasting, a practice reminiscent of 断食入定 (*dajiki nyūjō*, fasting unto death). Thus, while Takata presents Usui's retreat as an individual test, it closely parallels long-standing Japanese ascetic patterns where physical austerity served as the gateway to spiritual empowerment. This sets the stage for Usui's climactic vision, which Takata describes in striking detail.

> Finally, the morning of the twenty-first came, (…) And then he saw a flicker of light only large as a candlelight, in the dark. and then he said, 'oh, now this phenomenon is very strange', but he said, 'it is happening, and I am not going to even shut my eyes, or I shall open my eyes as wide as I can, and to witness what happens to the light.' And the light begins to move very fast towards him. Then he said, 'oh, the light! Now I have a chance to shut the light, or dodge. What shall I do?' Then he said, 'even if the light strikes me, and if I fall, or if I drop back, or I might burn' he said, 'this is the best', he said, 'I am not going to run away, I'm going to face it'. And when he faced it, he began to brace himself more, and to say, 'come! If this is the [?] hit me, I am ready'. And with that, he relaxed and with eyes wide-open, he saw the light strike in the centre of his forehead. [?] 'I made a contact', he said. He fell backward because the force was so great. Then he said, 'I died, because I have no sense, no feeling, and my eyes were open, but I couldn't see', and then he said, 'I don't know how long, how many minutes I was down, but he said, 'when I awoke' he said, 'that light was gone but I could see it was beginning to have [?] and far away, I could hear the roosters crowing. and far away I could see that there were roosters and that I know that they [?] would be dawn pretty soon.' Then he happened to look a little on the right side and then he saw from the right side of his face millions and millions of bubbles all came out, bubbling up, bubbling up, bubbling up, bubbling up, millions and millions and millions of bubbles. and these bubbles all had colours. and they were the colours of the rainbow. And he said they danced in front of him and then went to the left [?] this time. He said, 'the colour of another rainbow,' he said, 'the blue, and then went through the right, to the left' and then he said, 'the lavender came in' and then he said, 'some rose came in, and the yellow carne out' and he said he was counting those colours, and it had seven colours, all seven. and so, Dr. Usui said, 'Waa! This is a phenomenon. I was blessed today.' Then last of all, he saw the great white light coming from the right, and then like a screen they just stood right in front of him, like a screen. And when he drew his eyes to the screen, he said, what he had studied in the Sanskrit, what he saw and studied in the Sanskrit, he said, one by one flew out, and then in golden letters, he said they, just radiated out in front of him as if to say, 'remember! remember!' And so, he said he didn't read them with his eyes, but he just studied and studied, and he said, 'yes!'. Then this one came into the left, and another came out and all that he had studied and learned out of the Sanskrit moved in front of him as if to say, 'this is it, this is it. Remember, remember.' And so, he just moved his eyes. He said he felt no pain, no hardship, and he said he felt no hunger, no pain. He said, 'I began to feel my body was good' and so all these phenomena had passed on, he said, 'I must close my eyes and for the last meditation give me a vision'. And he could see all the glowing letters in

front of him. So, he said, 'now, I can open my eyes and throw away the last stone' and he said, 'I'm going to stand up' and he stood up.

Accounts of Shugendō (修験道) practice often emphasize visionary phenomena as a fruit of mountain austerities: practitioners report encounters with *kami* 神, luminous presences, or revelatory visions that confirm the efficacy of their practice. Usui's description of seeing a flickering light that grew until it struck his forehead resonates with these traditions, as visions of light are a common marker of spiritual attainment in mountain asceticism. Yet the rich detail of his narrative introduces a distinctive element: the vision unfolds into "millions of colored bubbles" dancing like rainbows, followed by glowing Sanskrit letters radiating before his eyes. Such elaborate imagery exceeds what is typically documented in Shugendō sources, where visions tend to involve more straightforward manifestations of deities, spirits, or cosmic light. This suggests either that Usui's experience was an unusually vivid mystical episode or that later retellings amplified its symbolic dimension to align with esoteric Buddhist motifs and the textual authority of Sanskrit learning.

In his 1928 narrative, Okuna reports that following his twenty-one-day retreat on Mt. Kurama, Usui experienced a moment of 霊感 (*reikan*, "spiritual inspiration" or "sensitivity"). While the term does not seem to appear as a technical category in classical Buddhist doctrine, it carries strong resonance in the intellectual climate of Meiji and Taishō Japan. The words *reisei* (霊性 "spirituality", "spiritual nature") and *reikan* (霊感 "spiritual sensitivity", "inspiration", sometimes also "psychic sense") became part of a modern discourse that sought to articulate inner, non-empirical forms of experience as legitimate spiritual knowledge in the face of scientific rationalism and secularization. By employing *reikan* to describe Usui's breakthrough, Okuna framed the event not merely as a private vision but as an instance of culturally recognized spiritual sensitivity, placing Reiki within the same discursive space as other early twentieth-century *seishin ryōhō* (psychospiritual therapies). This suggests that Reiki was understood, at least by Okuna's contemporaries, in terms that bridged traditional Buddhist imagery with the emerging language of modern Japanese spirituality.

In Taishō-era Japan, it was common for founders of new religious movements and spiritual practices to omit the names of their formative teachers from their official narratives. Leaders such as Deguchi Nao (Ōmoto), Nakayama Miki (Tenrikyō), and Mokichi Okada (Sekai Kyūseikyō) all emphasized a decisive moment of personal revelation—whether spirit possession, divine vision, or mystical experience—rather than human lineage. Even when their intellectual or spiritual influences are historically traceable, their public narratives strategically foregrounded divine origin to strengthen their charismatic authority and distinguish their movements from established traditions. In addition, the nationalist climate and increasing suspicion toward Christianity made explicit acknowledgment of Christian mentors risky. Placing one's teaching in a culturally "indigenous" framework was safer than referencing Christian or foreign sources. It is therefore historically plausible that Usui did not disclose Yokoi's role to his students, including Hayashi. This silence aligns with a broader narrative strategy of Taishō new religions rather than contradicting Yokoi's influence (Hardacre 1989, Shimazono 1992).

In describing Usui's transformation, Okuna states that he became "a person who has harmonized the spirit of the great universe (大宇宙の霊 *daiuchū no rei*) with his own spirit (自己の霊 *jiko no rei*)". These expressions are not found in standard Buddhist doctrinal vocabulary, nor are they recorded in Irons's *Encyclopaedia of Buddhism* (2008). Instead, they echo the idiom of 霊性論 (*reiseiron*, theories of spirituality) that emerged in Meiji and Taishō Japan. Scholars such as Miyajima Masako have shown how terms like "Great Spirit of the Universe" (宇宙大霊) were used to articulate a cosmic–individual polarity in which religious experience meant aligning the microcosm of the self with the macrocosm of

universal spirit. Similar phrasing circulated in new religious movements—Seichō-no-Ie's "Great Life of the Universe" (宇宙大生命), and even Soka Gakkai's contrast of "small universe" and "great universe". Within this broader spiritualist and 精神療法 (*seishin ryōhō*, psychospiritual therapy) context, Okuna's description positioned Reiki not as an esoteric Buddhist secret but as part of a modern discourse of harmonization between self and cosmos, aligning it with contemporary ideas of spiritual healing and universal energy. Now, back to the narrative:

> (…) the first thing Dr. Usui said, 'how is our dear monk?' 'Oh, he's suffering from arthritis, backache, (…)

Given the age of Yokoi, arthritis would not be uncommon. Being bedridden often leads to backache so, this also may make sense.

> And so, he said, 'yes, and while I talk to you, I would like to put my hands on top of the silk covers,' where he had the silk futon covers on him. And then he told him all about what had happened, and from the time he sat for meditation and on the twenty-first morning, and what has happened throughout the day. And then it was late at night already when he said, 'very good, very good, we shall hear more about it, and let me think tonight' the monk said, 'and by the way, my pain is all gone. I can sleep now, I can move the stove alone, my body feels wonderful!

This can be a typical Reiki story through time and space.

> I [the monk after he receives a treatment of Usui] feel that I am very, very full of energy' and so he said, 'this is what you call Reiki' he said, 'yes Reiki. We'll talk more about it tomorrow morning after our breakfast.'

Takata's wording do not make clear who says to who 'what you call Reiki'. My interpretation is that Usui says it to Yokoi because Yokoi may have told Usui already about the *lingqi* that Confucius experienced during his moment of direct awakening (Jonker 2024) and explains to Usui that his experience on Mt Kurama equals just that hence "what you call Reiki".

> And so, Dr. Usui had a good night's sleep, and so the monks next morning after breakfast, first thing Dr. Usui said, 'what shall I do to experiment with this?' And so, they talked over, and over and other monks came in, and they decided that the best place for him to experiment was to try and go into one of the very big slums in Kyoto.

Here, Usui and Yokoi depart, for now, where Usui makes his first steps spreading Reiki. But, as reflected on earlier (Jonker 2024), Yokoi must have helped Usui later, like introducing him to high-ranked officers of the Imperial Navy, made possible given the much higher social status of Yokoi.

8. Conclusion

This article has explored the ambiguity in Hawayo Takata's narrative of Usui Mikao's path to Reiki, particularly the episode of a meeting with a "Zen abbot". Careful attention to Takata's own words, her unpublished writings, and the Japanese Memorial Stone for Usui reveals that the figure of the "abbot" is less straightforward than later retellings suggest. Linguistic nuance shows that terms such as 住職 (*jūshoku*) and 師 (*shi*) could easily have been rendered in English as "abbot", even if the intended meaning was more general, such as "teacher" or "spiritual guide".

By placing this in dialogue with the biography of Rev. Tokio Yokoi, a new hypothesis emerges: the figure retrospectively remembered as the Zen monk or as the "abbot" in later versions of Takata's story may in fact have been Yokoi himself. Yokoi, a Congregationalist

minister and the president of Doshisha University, welcomed students to his home from 1919 until his death in 1927, following his stroke. His residence could well have functioned as the "center" (宗教センター *shūkyō sentā* or 教会 *kyōkai*) that Takata later remembered in Buddhist terms. The Christian elements in Takata's narrative—references to ordination, the Bible, and Dōshisha—align more closely with Yokoi's life than with Usui's, suggesting that Takata may have merged or reframed the lives of the two men in her oral teaching. Yokoi's return to a more explicitly Christian orientation in his final years may also have contributed to the subsequent downplaying of Christian elements in public narratives of Reiki, making Buddhist framings more convenient and culturally acceptable in 1920s Japan.

At the same time, the Memorial Stone's use of 修行 (*shugyō*) and the prominence of Zen in early twentieth-century Kyoto help explain why Takata would have situated Usui's preparation within a Zen framework. Her retelling thus reflects both cultural translation and narrative adaptation. For Western audiences, casting the story in Zen idioms made Reiki intelligible and authoritative, while for Japanese listeners, the term *shugyō* naturally evoked Zen and Shugendō ascetic traditions associated with Mt. Kurama.

Taken together, these strands suggest that Reiki's early history is best understood not as the work of a single founder but as the product of convergence—of Usui's quest, Takata's reframing, and Yokoi's theological vision. The "monk" may therefore be read as a narrative mask, under which the intertwined influences of Christianity, Zen, and Japanese ascetic practice continue to shape how Reiki's origins are remembered.

Why, then, was Yokoi's role forgotten? The answer lies in two coinciding aspects of the historical climate.

First, scholars of Japanese new religions have long observed that the founders of many movements—particularly those emerging in the Taishō to early Shōwa period—are depicted as receiving "direct supernatural inspiration", often undergoing a "call" or initiation and being represented as semi-divine or charismatic figures (Earhart 1969; Dorman 2012; Baffelli 2023). Reiki and Usui appear to follow this pattern. Usui likely acted in the same Taishō-era *Zeitgeist*, refraining from naming Yokoi to Hayashi or others both to universalize his revelation and to avoid drawing attention to sensitive Christian connections.

Second, in the 1920s, Christianity was under suspicion in Japan, while Buddhist and Shintō language offered a safer public framework. On top of this, Yokoi's return to a more explicitly Christian orientation in his final years made the situation even more delicate. At the time of their deaths, it became necessary to remove overt Christian elements from Reiki's story.

Despite these two aspects, traces remained—in Hawayo Takata's oral narrative, which speaks of a "Christian minister" and "principal of Dōshisha", and in the Usui Memorial Stone, whose silences are as telling as its words. Yokoi's influence persisted within Takata's account, where biographical and theological details closely mirror his life.

Finally, earlier interpretations have tended to trace the conceptual roots of Reiki 霊気 to the Confucian–Daoist cosmological notion of *lingqi* 靈氣—the numinous breath that, in Confucian thought, was received by sages such as Confucius as they aligned themselves with Heaven's Way (天道). While this lineage is significant, the Tang-dynasty *Jesus Sutras* offer an equally compelling source: these early Chinese Christian texts used *lingqi* to render the Holy Spirit and emphasized inner purification as the precondition for healing, thereby linking pneumatology, spiritual transformation, and therapeutic practice. For a Christian intellectual like Yokoi, this Sino-Christian vocabulary would have provided a meaningful theological bridge. The recent recognition that 霊気 (*reiki*) resonates with this

early Christian use of 靈氣 (*lingqi*)—where it denotes the Holy Spirit—opens an important new line of research. This linguistic and theological convergence broadens the genealogy of Reiki, situating its emergence within a transreligious East Asian history that interweaves numinous breath, inner purity, and healing. It is plausible that Yokoi, who possessed the relevant theological and cosmological knowledge, taught about this within the suggested teacher–student relationship and transmitted such insights to Mikao Usui. A full exploration of this topic falls outside the scope of this article.

SUGGESTED LITERATURE

Baffelli, Erica. 2023. “Fear and the Construction of Minority Religions in Japan”. In: *Religion* 53, no. 3.

Bays, Daniel H. 2012. *A New History of Christianity in China*.

Beeler, Dori-Michelle, Jonker, Jojan L. 2020. *Reiki Practice and Surrender*.

Borup, Jørn. 2008. *Japanese Rinzai Zen Buddhism: Myōshinji, a Living Religion*.

Dorman, Benjamin. 2012. *Celebrity Gods: New Religions, Media, and Authority in Occupied Japan*.

Earhart, H. Byron. 1979. “The Interpretation of the ‘New Religions’ of Japan as New Religious Movements”. In: *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 6, no. 1–2.

Fueston, Robert. 2017. *The History and System of Usui Shiki Reiki Ryōhō*.

Hardacre, Helen. 1989. *Shinto and the State, 1868–1988*.

Heine, Steven. 2008. *Zen Ritual: Studies of Zen Buddhist Theory in Practice*.

Irons, Edward A. 2008. *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*.

Jonker, Jojan L. 2016. *Reiki. The Transmigration of a Japaense Spiritual Healing Practice*.

———. 2024. *Tokio Yokoi. From Japanese Christianity to Universal Reiki*.

———. 2025. *Reframing Tokoio Yokoi and Mikao Usui*.

Klatt, Oliver. 2025. *Gedenksteininschrift bröckelt*. In: ReikiMagazin September 2025.

Kondo, Kayo. 2025. Personal correspondence with Kayo Kondo, Durham University.

Latham, Elizabeth. 2023. *Samurai Reiki Master: The Story of Usui Mikao and Reiki*, Appendix 2, transcript of Takata’s 1979 audio.

Miyajima, Masako 宮嶋正子. 2022. “近代日本における霊性論 [Theories of Spirituality in Modern Japan]”.

Okuna Shigejirō. 1928. *Tenrai no koe*.

Palmer, Martin. 2001.*The Jesus Sutras: Rediscovering the Lost Scrolls of Taoist Christianity*.

Saeki, P. Y. 1937. *The Nestorian Monument in China*.

Shimazono, Susumu. 1992. *Shinshūkyō to kyūshūkyō* 新宗教と旧宗教 [*New Religions and Old Religions*].

Takata, Hawayo. 1975. *Book Takata* (unpublished manuscript).