

Exorcising a Corporate Demon

By Emily Sachar

Port Washington, L.I. — It might all have seemed coincidental — the incidents of divorce and auto accidents, deaths and a robbery, dipping profits and slack sales.

But at TDK Corp., a series of misfortunes during the past few months has produced a superstitious fear among the 150 employees. A few have quit the company. Others say they may do so. And some believe that the headquarters building is inhabited by demons.

"You begin to feel that things are happening too frequently to be explained by statistical probability," says Roc Challender, an American-born computer programmer at one of the world's largest makers of audio and videotape products. "It's kind of scary."

So, yesterday, Japanese executives of this conservative Japanese firm — which has imported native corporate values of employee involvement and

pride in productivity to its American headquarters — called in a Buddhist priest to perform a ceremony of prayer and song. The ritual, they hope, will bring luck and good will to a plant now buzzing with talk of misfortune.

In August, armed robbers handcuffed a TDK truck driver to a tree and made off with their truck and an estimated \$250,000 in blank videotape cassettes. Several weeks later, the 3½-year-old son of a Japanese TDK executive hit his head in a bathtub and drowned. Several employees later were injured in serious automobile accidents. And others have begun to believe that such personal misfortunes as marital separation and family deaths are not coincidental. Meanwhile, corporate profits for the fiscal year that ended last month were down more than 30 per cent.

At yesterday's ceremony, the priest said he was welcoming friendly spirits to take the place of evil forces clinging to the building and its land. As the

smoke of burning incense swirled against the backdrop of TDK's modern architecture, Eido T. Shimano, abbot of the Zen Studies Society in New York, ordered the 24 employees gathered about him to pray.

"Your mindfulness and intensity are critical to the purification," said the priest, his head freshly shaven and his body clad in layers of white and black robes. "Your intensity will erase the bad memories."

He scooped salt into his palm and purified water into a ladle, then threw both upon the ground. The Japanese called it a purification. The Americans called it an exorcism.

"We thought this would be another opportunity to ask for good luck in the year ahead," Rocky Kawakami, president of the firm's American operation, said through a translator. He sipped tea in his spacious office after the ceremony. "We want only luck here."

It was as much a ceremony for the American employees — among them

Christians, Jews, a Taoist and an atheist — as for the Japanese-speaking Buddhists. The priest spoke English for much of the ceremony. And he informed the employees present, 15 Japanese and 9 Americans, of the significance of the various accoutrements — the three chrysanthemums in an antique Japanese vase, a bowl of salt, a jar of purified water.

"Do we face East or West?" a visitor asked. "We face TDK," the priest responded, smiling.

Ordering the employees to repeat his words, to clap and to bow to Buddha, Shimano faced the building as he looked to the heavens and chanted.

Along Harbor Park Drive, cars stopped and passengers leaned from windows to watch the bodies bowing in unison. Employees inside the headquarters pressed their noses to the tinted glass — their faces as serious as the visage of the priest outdoors.

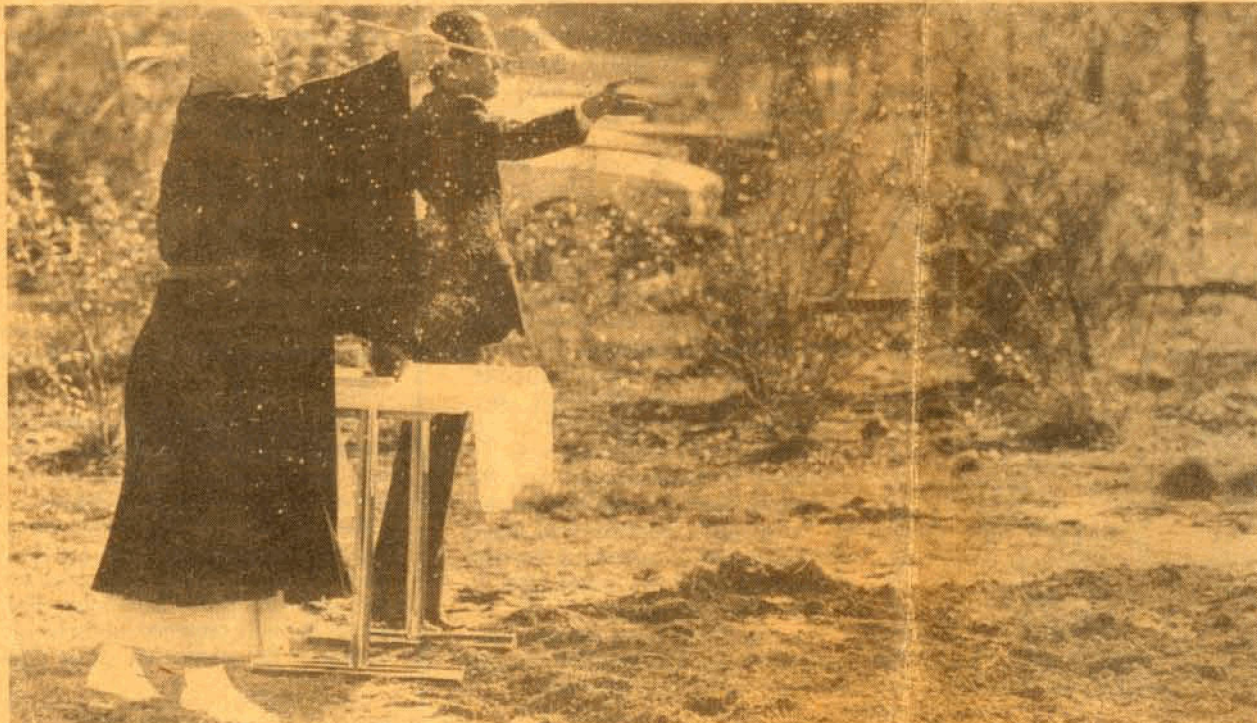
"We need this," one American clerical employee said. "It's like a fun house around here."

Not all workers appreciated the event, which was nearly identical to a ceremony performed two years ago when the building first opened. "Can you believe they're doing this?" said one employee on the maintenance crew.

The ritual is only the most recent attempt top management has made to quell employee worry. Last month, drinking fountains were replaced with purified water coolers because employees worried that the fountain water was contaminated. The plant also has set up Japanese language classes to facilitate understanding between the two groups of employees.

The executives said they arranged the ritual — which is performed in Japan about as often as cornerstone-laying ceremonies are performed here — after both American and Japanese employees requested it.

Several of the Americans said they felt heartened by the prayers. Lou Abramowitz, the national advertising manager, picked up a fluttering ladybug. "That's Japanese luck for you," he said, as the ladybug crawled around in his palm. "A sure sign of something."



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Eido T. Shimano, a Buddhist priest, leads service to "purify" TDK plant. At right is TDK U.S. President Rocky Kawakami.