

# A Journey to Discover Zen

B. A. Dulani Nisansala Balasooriya

දර්ශනයක් වශයෙන් මෙන් ම සංස්කෘතියක් වශයෙන් ද සෙන් (Zen) දහමට ඇත්තේ දිගු ඉතිහාසයකි. මේ සම්ප්‍රදායය ඉන්දියාවෙන් චීනයටත්, චීනයෙන් ජපානයටත්, සම්ප්‍රාප්ත වී ඇත. වර්තමාන ජපානයේ සෙන් දහම හුදෙක් ආගමක් පමණක් ම නො ව මිනිසුන්ගේ ජන ජීවිතයේ කොටසක් බවට ද පත් වී ඇත. ජපන් ගෘහ නිර්මාණ ශිල්පය, සාම්ප්‍රදායික තේ කලාව (sado), මල් සැකැසීමේ කලාව (ikebana) සහ විවිධ සාම්ප්‍රදායික කලා යනාදිය ද සෙන් දහමට අදාළ මූලික පදනම සමඟ ගොඩනැගී ඇති බව පෙනේ. ජපන් සෙන් දහමේ මූලික පදනම, එහි එන භාවනා ක්‍රම මෙන් ම ජන ජීවිතය හා බැඳී පවතින සමීප සම්බන්ධතාව පිළිබඳ කරුණු ඉදිරි පත් කිරීම මේ ලිපියේ අරමුණ යි.

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## The Story of Zen

When you hear the word “Zen” what springs to mind? Most people probably think of it as something that requires asceticism and austerity and from this they assume that Zen is all about strict restrictions on life. While it is true that Zen has these characteristics, it has another side too—one that is actually very dynamic and free. Zen developed in China into two distinct sects before coming to Japan. The Northern School (Hokushuzen) emphasised doctrine and asceticism, while the Southern school (Nanshuzen) stresses a relax belief in oneself over doctrine.<sup>1</sup> While it was a later approach that was initially adopted in Japan, both schools of thought were eventually incorporated as time passed.<sup>2</sup> Thus Zen in Japan emphasises ascetic practice and doctrine while also adopting a free-spirited outlook. It is unique form developed from these two seemingly contradictory approaches.<sup>3</sup>

At the root of these difference sides lies the concept of “two ways” (ryoko). The concept originally developed in the Chinese Taoist classic Zhuangzi, suggests that instead of looking at something in absolute terms, it is more effective to consider its opposite side as well, placing one in relation to the other. This way of thinking became even more popular after its introduction in Japan.<sup>4</sup>

Beginning long before Buddhism’s arrival, the Japanese had enshrined a myriad of deities, which were prayed to at different times and occasions.<sup>5</sup> The tradition created an open attitude toward diverse values—even when apparently contradictory—and the appropriate one would simply be adopted, depending on the situation. So the Japanese didn’t find it odd to embrace both sides of “Zen”. The tendency to accept diversity is clearly seen in the Seven Gods of Good Luck, a frequent subject of Zen drawings, which are close to the hearts of the Japanese people to this day. The seven gods sprang from the inspiration of a monk in Rinzai Zen School. They were selected from the gods in India, China and

Japan; each god looks different and helps people in different ways, but they all bring happiness.<sup>6</sup> The jovial Hotei, known as "The Laughing Buddha", represents them all. His laugh seems to say "You are different from me, but you are lots of fun too!" It also implies that there is no such thing as an absolute truth.

Why isn't Zen interested in an absolute truth? The answer lies in its belief that every human being is endowed with an original nature at birth that is self-contained. It doesn't require the pursuit of something extraneous. And since humans are born with an innate Buddhahood (the potential to become Buddha), they should try to find it from within, rather than from outside themselves. If you are in connection with your true nature, your Buddhahood is readily apparent, and your spirit will be at its purest. However as our true nature is wrapped inside an ego shaped by knowledge and experience, it is hard to recognise. To draw out and discover our fundamental nature, we must work at removing the overlying wrappings of the ego.

In Zen we try to uproot ego and neutralise knowledge and experience through repetition of the same action. The Soto school of Zen places importance on Zen on Zazen (seated meditation), and other activities that lead to Buddha-like behavior. In addition to physical discipline, the Rinzai School also uses koan conundrums—a question and answer session to help one learn the Buddhist way of thinking.<sup>7</sup> "Tie a rope around Mount Fuji and bring it here" is an example of the many puzzling, esoteric koan presented.<sup>8</sup> You are expected to consider it intently and offer your interpretation to the teacher, yet it is hard to reach any correct answer. You must continue to ruminate on it, concentrate the entire mind on the task so that ultimately your self-consciousness disappears. Only then will the thing of primary importance come into view. This state is known in Buddhism as Sanmai (deep spiritual concentration): The self and the koan join together, and the koan becomes the self.

Japanese Buddhism teaches the attainment of detachment by the removal of self-consciousness through spiritual concentration.<sup>9</sup> A technique for this is the repetition of a kata (form), just like those often used in tea ceremonies, flower arrangement, kendo (swordsmanship) and other Japanese martial arts and performing arts. In essence, all of them keep practicing an action in a certain way, time after time, so that in the end we come into contact with our true nature.

### **Zazen Meditation: the Heart of Zen Discipline**

Zazen is the primary form of meditation in Zen Buddhism, practiced while sitting cross-legged. Meditation is at the heart of Zen practices. Especially during this time, the aim is to discipline the mind and body. The fingers of the left hand lie on the top of the fingers of the right, with the thumb tips together. The eyes gaze towards the floor in front and the upper body remains perfectly straight.<sup>10</sup>

Eiheiji temple is considered to be the headquarters of the Soto Zen school of Zen Buddhism. It is located in a mountain valley in the remote eastern area of Fukui prefecture and is a collection of over 70 buildings of varying sizes stand on a plot of land spanning approximately 330,000 square meters. Here rigorous training to become a monk is undertaken by about 200 people.

### **Zazen Meditation**

The Zazen meditation doesn't seem different from everyday living, except that every action follows a strict form. Fully concentrating on achieving the stipulated form constitutes the discipline. At the heart of such training lies Zazen meditation. Buddha achieved satori, a stage of enlightenment, while meditating. After achieving satori, he continued to meditate. Not wanting anything but meditating-zazen is merging out our body into that aspect of Buddha.<sup>11</sup>

To practice zazen properly, the back is held erect in order to maintain a straight posture, one sits cross legged on a round cushion, making a triangle formation with the knees and tailbone. Posture is adjusted so that the center of the gravity is vertical. The ears are positioned directly above the shoulders, the nose directly above the navel. The tongue should touch the palate, while the lips and the mouth are closed. One gazes downward toward the front, at an angle of about 45 degrees from horizontal, and breathes through the nose, expelling the first few breathes forcefully while adopting the position. The posture is reaffirmed by swaying to the left and right a few times to a decreasing degree, as vertical balance is ascertained.

During zazen, the point is to think nothing, which is not easy at all, as random thoughts tend to be difficult to dispel. "If you become distracted concentrate your awareness on each breath in and out, concentrate only on that. Then you won't be pulled this way and that, and you will settle down" says Nishida Masanori, a learned monk and master instructor at Eihei-ji Temple.

### **Every Act during the Day is a Part of Discipline**

The day begins at 3.30 in the morning (4.30 during the coldest time of winter) and ends at 9.00pm. The schedule is fixed, practically down to the minute. Manners and practices have been established on how to rise from bed, wash, meditate, chant sutras, eat, work, bathe and sleep. They have been maintained for more than 750 years and are strictly followed by the monks. Every action during the day is a part of the training discipline.<sup>12</sup>

In a Soto school temple, monks gather for meals and meditation in the same place, the sado hall. As eating and meditating are both part of the same discipline, it follows that not a word is spoken during meals. Similarly the clothing worn a formal dress of

a monk in training, the kesa robe. The silence of the hall is interrupted only by a gong that struck to signify the start of the meal. Explicit conventions govern its every facet: how a napkin-like cloth is placed on the knees; where to set the spoon and the chopsticks; the way to receive food, hold the bowl and eat; how to wash the utensils afterward with a dishcloth, place them together and wrap them in a cloth. So many conventions guide the monks during the meal-right up to placing the palms together in thanks at the end. And yet, these monks are so efficient and nimble in their movements, one cannot help being impressed. Their everyday actions demonstrate a detachment that holds natural beauty.

## **The Zen Garden**

Around 6<sup>th</sup> century, the Japanese began fashioning earth and stones into mounds to symbolise mountains. Ponds came to represent sea. These forms presented an idealistic garden landscape, to which Zen Buddhism contributed new elements at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>13</sup>

According to Zen thought, as introduced to Japan from China, the ideal setting for a temple is a place with beauty and scenery in a fine natural environment-perhaps in a deep mountain valley-where one can make a garden for quiet contemplation, a place for reflection. Many temple gardens were designed by Muso Soseki, a Zen monk (1275-1351).<sup>14</sup>For him, a garden was more than just a place to enjoy natural beauty-one should feel how each tree, each small plant, as a part of the cosmos, part of the life experience. The garden he said, is a place to try to achieve the mindset aimed for in Zen “Look at the garden through the eyes of your mind and soul”. His concepts gave Zen gardens a wider influence. Soseki’s concepts found expression in Saihoji Temple’s garden in Kyoto. In 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries sometime after Soseki died, major Zen temples began building tatchu (small sub-temples),

which also had their own gardens, as dwelling for high-ranking influential priests. Over 20 tatchu stood in the grounds of Kyoto's Daitokuji Temple, each one expressing the worldview of Zen in its small restricted area. The limited space demanded simplicity and symbolism, and led to the birth of waterless garden style unique to Japan known as "karesansui" (dry landscape).

Zen monks in Japan took up their brushes to represent scenery through symbolism, using monochrome ink lines and shades. The aesthetic ideals evident in their art exerted an influence on dry landscape garden design. The most celebrated example is the stone garden at Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto. Surrounded by a low clay wall, a flat expanse of white pebbles is decorated with only 15 stones. They are arranged to create an austere tension, while the pebbles call to mind a far-reaching cosmos. Here Soseki's teaching, "Look at a garden through the eyes of your mind and soul", achieves its ultimate expression.<sup>15</sup>

### **Zen and Design**

To understand the relationship between Japanese design and Zen, a good place to start would be to look at the traditional architectural style of Zen temples. An excellent example of this style is the Shariden relic repository at Engakuji Temple in Kamakura. The exterior avoids decorative elements, opting instead for simplicity and bold lines. Zen architecture generally favors steep roofs, boldly sweeping eaves, narrow wooden boards, relatively few pillars and interlocking wooden beams. These features blended in well with the graceful lines and sensitivity of older architectural styles and the blend soon became norm for Japanese architecture.

In Zen we can also find links connecting Zen and design in the way of Tea (sado). The way of tea took the act of preparing and serving tea to welcome someone, and transform it into an art

form cultivating courtesy, setting out principles for everything from tea utensils to tea room design. Sado began as tea serving ceremony at Zen temples, indicating its strong connection to Zen. Murata Juko, a tea master active in late 15<sup>th</sup> century developed the Wabi-cha style, which values the spiritual side of an experience and the enjoyment of simplicity.<sup>16</sup> Before it had been common to use ornate, gorgeous tea utensils, but Juko’s wabi style opted for beauty experienced quietly, without ostentation. This gave new life to the way of Tea. Later another tea master Sen no Rikyu, brought even more of the Zen spirit into Sado. Wabi-cha, he said, expresses the pure and innocent state of being that is the ideal of Buddhism. His designs for his own tea rooms and utensils attempted to eliminate anything that could be considered unnecessary, until nothing more could be removed.

Modern Japanese designs include Zen carpets and aesthetic principles that play up the intrinsic nature of the object, in its pure and pristine state. When designs highlights the basic function of the object, it achieves a sense of freedom. Design expressing the spirit of Zen avoids unnecessary elements, emphasises austerity and function, and opens up possibilities for freedom beyond the original purpose of the object.

Zen’s aesthetic sensibilities live on in Japanese design today. Some examples include:

- Uchida Shigeru’s JI-AN tea rooms are ultra-modern versions that work well in many environments, from gardens to concrete, yet they take their inspiration from the ancient interior design of the tea room.
- Ando Tadao’s residence, the first case in Japan where exposed concrete was used as walls for living quarters.



## A Journey to Discover Zen

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- Yanagi Sori's Butterfly Stool, consisting of five components: two pieces of laminated wood, one brass brace, and two screws.
- Isamu Noguchi's Akari lamps takes the design of the Washi paper lantern and give it a simple round or square configuration to express a cosmos without limit.

As above mentioned many aspects of Japanese culture have been influenced by Zen thought, right up to this day. These pages explore some of the many expressions of Zen, is an attempt to understand its essential spirit

### End Notes

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