

Cultivating Enlightenment

The Manifold Meaning of Japanese Zen Gardens

By Eric Cunningham

While Zen gardens have been a fixture of Japanese aesthetics since the Muromachi Period (1336–1573), the purposes and meanings of these austere landscapes have been far less fixed, and indeed have changed somewhat since their first appearance as places for meditation in the Zen temples of medieval Japan.

For those of us who have been fortunate enough to visit such magnificent sites as Ryōanji or Tenryūji, the primary function of Zen gardens today seems to be to remind the busloads of tourists who visit these gardens how remote their hectic modern lives are from the tranquility that is promised—but not quite delivered—by the Zen temple environs. Unless one has some pull with the monks and can visit the temple off-hours, to appreciate these gardens in the state of serene reflection that they are supposed to enhance is more or less impossible. It is the glossy photograph, perhaps—and not necessarily a color photograph—that best evokes the contemplative quality of the Zen garden.

The image of the Zen garden, however it is consumed, “speaks” for itself, and provides us with a representation of spiritual quality that is best experienced rather than discursively argued. This is only appropriate since the transmission of Zen wisdom is supposed to be nonverbal. Since the moment the monk Mahākāśyapa received the first dharma transmission from the Buddha himself, marked by a silent smile in response to the beholding of a white flower, this progenitor of Zen and his successors have privileged the wordless experience of *satori* (enlightenment) over the dialectical understanding of its logic. Yet burdened as we are with the heavy baggage of language and history, we have to try to understand the elusive elements of Zen enlightenment with the expedient means of words in the pedestrian contexts of mundane reality. This essay will examine the Zen garden in several selected meanings: as an artifact of landscaping, as an aid to Buddhist contemplation, and, finally, as a kind of historical “text” to be read by the beholder. It goes without saying, perhaps, that every act of beholding—whether inspired by contemplation or sightseeing—adds new dimensions to the meaning of these gardens.

A Quick Introduction to Zen Aesthetics

At the outset, I would propose that Zen, despite its fabled love of simplicity, is a very complex subject that encompasses a wide range of religious, philosophical, and cultural topics, of which stylized landscaping is only a part. Why are some gardens in Japan “Zen” gardens, rather than merely a Japanese garden, an Asian-style garden, or even just a garden? Zen is a Japanese translation of *Chan*, which is a sinification of *dhyāna*, a Sanskrit word meaning “meditation.” The Zen sect of Buddhism prioritizes above all things the central activity of meditation, the means by which the Buddha himself received enlightenment while sitting under a pipal tree sometime in the sixth century BCE. The Zen “way” is built primarily upon the practice of meditation, and its aesthetic values are geared to optimizing meditation and bringing about the “perfection of wisdom” (*prajnaparamita*) that meditation can deliver to the diligent, single-minded seeker.

What we first notice about Zen art is its conspicuous austerity and simplicity. For example, the ink paintings of the Chan monks of Song China, reproduced as a generic style by such Japanese Zen masters as Sesshū, Josetsu, and Shūbun, evoke the most meaning from the fewest materials and place the least demands upon the senses in doing so. Japanese art historians have suggested that the Zen garden is an attempt to cast the monochrome ink painting into a three-dimensional form. Zen art is also characterized, if not defined, by a set of aesthetic values that artists seek to express in their works, whether they be paintings, gardens, ceramics, or architecture. These are, in brief:

Wabi, a nostalgic sense of shabbiness, or decay brought on by age

Sabi, a bittersweet sense of sadness or forlornness

Shibui, a stark sense of unadorned simplicity

Yūgen, a mysterious sense of hidden or suggested beauty

Zen gardens will likely exhibit one or more of these values, and again, they are better apprehended through experience than through explanation.

The Zen Garden as Landscape

When we think of Zen gardens, the first image that generally comes to mind is the iconic (in every sense of the word) *karesansui* garden of the Japanese Zen temple grounds. *Karesansui*, which is translated as “dry landscape” (literally “dry mountains and water”), refers to a constrained, highly stylized method of landscape gardening that conjures from simple materials like rock and gravel a multiform, small-scale natural environment. The most famous of these, perhaps, is the garden at



Kennin-ji Temple garden in Kyoto, Japan.
Source: Stock photo. © coward_lion/123RF.



Zen mountains and “waterfall” in the garden of Daisen-in.
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/hjmt2mc>.



Forest moss garden on the banks of Golden Pond at the Saihōji, Rinzai Zen Buddhist Temple in Matsuo, Kyoto Prefecture, Japan. Source: *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/pr2vu8m>.

Ryōanji, which calls to mind a vast ocean dotted by small islands, or Daisen-in, which features a stone waterfall “pouring” into a vigorously flowing mountain river. The use of rocks as the dominant feature of the garden has both historical and aesthetic origins. Art historians tell us that rocks were highly valued in ancient China and were, in the view of Daoist sages, the very bones of the earth. In this understanding, there is something fundamental to rock that no artifact or even plant can reproduce in terms of revealing the essence of nature and reality. The only thing comparable would be water; rock, like water, is completely nonartificial, nonfabricated, and essentially pure. Yet rock, symbolized by the towering, immovable mountain, exists in contrast to water, which is ever in motion and ever seeking the lowest place available. These two elemental features thus stand in for the basic polarities of *yin* and *yang* that are so cherished in the Daoist worldview. When a Zen garden uses rock to represent water, it reminds us that Zen, unlike Daoism, seeks to transcend the dualities of nature in a deeper stratum of consciousness. Rock, hyperstable in its essential form, can better suggest the perfect and undivided stillness of the contemplative mind. It is also worth noting that if the Chinese Daoist of old venerated the elements of nature, he or she did so with an abiding respect for the uncultivated wildness of nature. The Zen garden does not celebrate the wild or the untamed, but reconfigures nature to use as a means of passing beyond nature.

Not all Zen gardens are *karesansui*. Many of the most famous Zen temple gardens incorporate other natural elements, for example, quiet streams and ponds at Tenryūji, a vibrant moss lawn at Saihōji, thick forests at Nanzenji, and stunning groves of Japanese maple at Tōfukuji. Almost all these temple gardens include essential architectural features such as bridges, which suggest a physical crossing into another world, or open porches, which bring the human element into direct contact with the constructed natural environment. Although Zen gardens as landscape vary in size,



Cherry tree in bloom at the Ryōan-ji Temple dry stone garden in Kyoto, Japan. Source: Didier Moïse at *Wikimedia Commons* <http://tinyurl.com/hxbzg7m>.



Ginkakuji temple. Source: Photo by Antoinejou, *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/jkkejo7>.



Sand cone, *Kogetsudai* (moon viewing platform), Ginkakuji Temple (Silver Pavilion), Kyoto, Japan.

Source: Photo by John Hill, *Wikipedia* at <http://tinyurl.com/jkkejo7>.

components, and design, they all share a primary spiritual function. This function, as has been suggested earlier, is to invite the beholder of the garden to enter into a state of meditative stillness, and, ideally, participate in the perfection of wisdom that the Buddha experienced when he attained the breakthrough of enlightenment.

The Zen Garden as a Gateway to Contemplation

While the sutras and doctrines of Buddhism make no stipulation for the necessity of temple landscaping, Zen gardens have come to perform something similar to the function performed by stained glass, statues, and icons in the Christian tradition, i.e., they are made through an impulse of voluntary devotion and serve as a physical representation of a spiritual ideal intended to transport the “faithful” into a metaphysical space.

It is only appropriate that gardens should serve this iconic purpose for the Zen adept—as has been noted, the Buddha himself was sitting in the open air under a tree when he attained his crucial insight into the Four Noble Truths. These were (1) that life is suffering, (2) that suffering is caused by desire, (3) that the cessation of desire will lead to the cessation of suffering, and (4) that the cessation of desire can be brought about by adherence to the Noble Eightfold Path. The “steps,” or requirements, of this path are:

- | | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Right Understanding | 5. Right Livelihood |
| 2. Right Thought | 6. Right Effort |
| 3. Right Speech | 7. Right Mindfulness |
| 4. Right Action | 8. Right Concentration |

What the Buddha gave the world, then, in his moment of enlightenment, or *samadhi* (J. *satori*), is an integrated way of theory and practice that gives a seeker after wisdom a means of liberation from the sorrows of earthly life.

The natural environment as a site of enlightenment is both fixed in the short run and perishing in the long run, and thus provides a perfect example of the conflicting realities of impermanence and stasis in human life. Ironically, the components of the Zen garden are natural, but the garden is radically unnatural in its cultivated form. To reiterate, there is nothing wild, untamed, or random about the Zen temple garden. Its features are as constructed, as a Buddhist might say, as the false ego itself. Indeed, the artificiality of the Zen garden is a mirror of the contemplative mind seeking to escape its own constructedness. In the same way that Zen riddles (*kōan*) such as “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” can bring the thinking mind to a state of crisis and propel it into a free space of nonthinking and nonduality, so can the perfectly sculpted mini-landscape show us the inconsistency between the natural world of entropy and the contrived world of the garden itself. In both cases, the juxtaposition of order and disorder can bring about a clarity of mind that exists completely outside these categories.

In more commonplace applications, the Zen garden can simply be regarded as a place of beauty and refreshment, and invite us to think about something beyond the pressing concerns of our busy lives. They were certainly used as such by some of the greatest patrons of Zen Buddhism in Japanese history. The shōgun Ashikaga Yoshimasa (1436–1490), for example, whose reign was plagued by political crises and persistent warfare, turned to the building of gardens as a means of escaping Kyoto’s urban upheavals during the decline of the Muromachi Period (1336–1573). His most enduring accomplishment was the construction of the Silver Pavilion (Ginkakuji), which, now a Zen temple, was

designed as a retreat in the northeastern hills of the capital. Ginkakuji is home to some of the most celebrated landscaping and architectural features in Kyoto, including a rustic teahouse, a three-layered hedge of stone, bamboo, shrubbery, and an extensive sand garden emanating from a *kogetsudai*, or “moon viewing platform,” which itself is a large, flawless, truncated cone of white sand.

The Ginkakuji *kogetsudai*, whose practical purpose is nonexistent and whose aesthetic purpose can only really be guessed at, gives us an example of another “contemplative” use of the Zen garden, i.e., the labor-intensive construction and maintenance of the garden itself. Visitors to the grounds of a Zen temple will invariably see monks painstakingly weeding and sweeping the gardens with the simplest of tools, using this neverending and tedious work as a means of meditation in action. Thus, the contemplative utility of the Zen garden includes focused care for every pebble and blade of grass, and is not limited to the act of “spectating.” That said, the act of spectating today is not limited to the monastic community residing on the grounds. Since the end of World War II, Japanese Zen gardens have become sightseeing destinations for tourists from all over the world. For Japanese Zen Buddhists, who make up a minority of the nation’s Buddhist population, it is something of an oddity that these gardens, which were never regarded as “public treasures” in the past, should have come to hold so much meaning for modern “pilgrims” both inside and outside Japan. Of course, the manner in which anything acquires meaning is subject to unpredictable historical forces.

The Zen Garden as a Historical Text

The history of Japanese gardening traces its origins to the estate gardens that had been cultivated by wealthy Chinese for centuries prior to the establishment of Japan’s first recognizable monarchy in the Yamato Period (250–710). As Japan’s early kings sought the diplomatic patronage of Chinese emperors, its aristocrats emulated the practices of their Chinese counterparts, including the creation of hunting grounds, man-made lakes, teahouses, and recreational retreats on their vast estates. Chinese gardening, which combined a Daoist naturalist vision with the popular Buddhist aesthetic of the Pure Land paradise, was readily assimilated into the nature-venerating aesthetic of Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan. As in China, aristocratic gardens were symbols of wealth and power, and even if they were often designed as replicas of sacred or mythical sites, they existed for the benefit of their owners and served no public religious purpose.

During the Heian Period (794–1185), when the great Buddhist monasteries became immensely wealthy and powerful, temple gardens came to rival those of the Imperial Palace and aristocratic villas. Since many Japanese Buddhists believed that the year 1052 marked the beginning of the age of *mappō*, or “end times,” landscaping monks sought to create the appearance of the Pure Land, or “western paradise,” that awaited the believer at the end of life, if not the end of the world. Because the construction of the garden as paradise became the driving concern, the strategic placement of shrubs, water features, and stones became paramount. The “canons” of garden construction were laid out in an eleventh-century text called the *Sakuteiki*. This classic of gardening, compiled by Tachibana Toshitsuna, explained the five kinds of gardens (ocean style, mountain river style, broad river style, marsh style, and reed style) and affirmed the primacy of stone in garden construction.

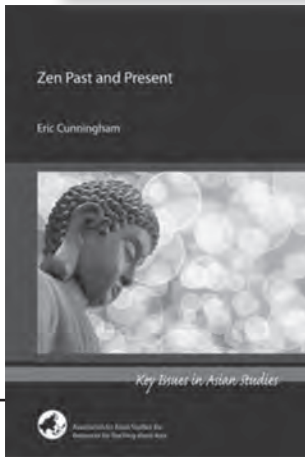
It was not until the twelfth century that Zen Buddhism made its first appearance in Japan and rock-based temple gardens became more simplified. This followed naturally as the primary meaning of the garden turned from providing a representation of paradise to cultivating meditation through the distillation of sensory information.



View of Ginkakuji temple with *kogetsudai* and *ginshadan* (sea of silver sand). Source: Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/j5ccqrm>.



Genji-Garden at Rozanji Temple in Kyoto. Source: Photo by PlusMinus, Wikimedia Commons at <http://tinyurl.com/hzu7u5g>.



Key Issues in Asian Studies: Zen Past and Present

By Eric Cunningham

Available now at
<http://tinyurl.com/he5ph2b>

From the book's back cover

This booklet of less than eighty pages is miraculously a comprehensive coverage of key aspects of Zen Buddhism from its origin in India to Japan and the West. Nothing crucial for the understanding and appreciation of Zen tradition is omitted, including history, doctrine and practice, and texts and figures. Eric Cunningham even finds space to highlight the impact of indigenous culture on the development of Zen as an East Asian form of Buddhism that in turn was accepted into the Western culture. Zen Past and Present will serve as a useful launching pad to inform students and readers and to stimulate further readings and discussions on contextual factors and scholarships.

Kyoko Tokuno
Senior Lecturer of East Asian Religions
University of Washington

The golden carp is out of the net! This clear and confidently written overview of the development and dissemination of a key element of the Buddha's practice—meditation leading to self-knowledge and insight—is a welcome contribution. While not shying away from the paradox and play of Zen, including its often controversial worldly involvement, Professor Cunningham avoids attachment to numbing pedantry, and thoughtfully presents highlights of the understandings and explanations of Zen as they arose in varied historical and cultural contexts. We are offered a multi-colored string, continuous but not identical, and come to appreciate Zen as a trajectory of appropriation, shaping, imprinting, legacy, and ongoing transmission. Share the coolness!

Andrew Edmund Goble
Departments of History and Religious Studies
University of Oregon

A versatile priest named Musō Soseki (often styled as *Kokushi*, or “national teacher”) emerged as the chief landscaper of the era and lent his aesthetic expertise to the building of gardens at Engakuji and Zuisenji in Kamakura, and Tenryūji and Saihōji in Kyoto.

As has been noted, under Yoshimasa, the design and construction of gardens became matters of the highest national priority; contemporary art lovers can thank this shōgun, although he was largely inept at statecraft, for a commitment to the creation and preservation of a Zen-inspired culture of beauty.

The corrupt and ineffectual reign of the Ashikaga shōguns disappeared with the rise of pragmatic Neo-Confucianism at the end of the sixteenth century, and the public patronage of Zen culture largely disappeared with it. During the long Tokugawa Dynasty (1603–1867), Zen monasteries fell into decline, and their gardens became ignored and overgrown. Even in Japan's modern period, which began with the Meiji Restoration of 1868, there was little general feeling that Zen temple gardens should hold the status of national monuments or sites of world heritage. Cultural historian Donald Keene reports that as recently as the 1950s, the fabled Ryōanji rock garden was largely vacant and neglected. This evidence is confirmed by Shoji Yamada, author of *Shots in the Dark*, who argues that Zen gardens were strategically reinvented during the post-World War II Occupation. Part of the process of restoring Japan to international respectability, Yamada claims, was to showcase the nation's Zen gardens as treasures of a common world culture. Only in the last seventy or so years have Zen gardens become not only iconic representations of Japanese culture, but also visible anchors of religious value for a globalized, materialistic humanity cast adrift in a spirit-deprived world. Today, any spiritually striving modern person anywhere can recreate the tranquility of a Zen temple with a few carp, some gravel, and a couple of Japanese maples. For would-be Buddhists on a budget, a desktop Zen kit (a microcosm of a microcosm—supreme detachment indeed!) can be purchased online or elsewhere for around US \$35.

One is very cautious about drawing any deep conclusion concerning what all this “means,” knowing that meanings will change. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that our need to get relief from the busy world will never disappear, and we should be grateful that the Zen garden, in its varied forms and meanings, can offer us such a ready means of obtaining it.

Further Reading

A number of fine historical and modern works, academic and general use, are available for further research into Zen gardens, including the classic *Sakuteiki* itself, now available in English by Jiro Takei and Marc P. Keane, *Sakuteiki: Visions of the Japanese Garden* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2008). Also, see François Berthier and Graham Parkes, *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005) and Joseph D. Parker, *Zen Buddhist Landscape Arts of Early Muromachi Japan (1336–1573)* (New York: SUNY Press, 1999).

I would also recommend the following journal articles: Hugo Munsterberg, “Zen and Art,” *Art Journal* 20, no. 4 (1961): 198–202; Ichiro Ishida and Delmer Brown, “Zen Buddhism and Muromachi Art,” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 22, no. 4 (1963): 417–432; and Camelia Nakagawara, “The Japanese Garden for the Mind,” *Stanford Journal of East Asian Affairs* 14, no. 2 (2004): 83–102. Shoji Yamada's *Shots in the Dark* (Tokyo: Kobundo, 2005) is an interesting critical analysis of the constructedness of Zen and Zen garden in the post-World War II world.

For general information, Donald Keene's *Yoshimasa and the Silver Pavilion: The Creation of the Soul of Japan* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003) is a great resource, as is Judith Clancy's *Kyoto Gardens* (Tokyo: Tuttle, 2014). Penelope Mason's *History of Japanese Art* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1993) provides fine discussions of Zen gardens in the context of Zen temple art.

Finally, I would recommend Masaaki Tachihara's *Wind and Stone*, trans. Stephen W. Kohl (Berkeley: Stone Bridge Press, 1979). In this fascinating novel, Tachihara uses the precepts of classical Japanese gardening as the thematic backdrop for a compelling and complicated story of modern middle-class life. ■

ERIC CUNNINGHAM is Professor of History at Gonzaga University. He received a PhD in Modern Japanese History from the University of Oregon in 2004. A specialist in Japanese intellectual history, he has taught East Asian and World History at Gonzaga University since 2003. Cunningham's research interests include modern Japanese literature, modern Zen Buddhism, Catholicism, psychedelic experience, and eschatology. In addition to a number of articles written on these topics, he is also the author of *Hallucinating the End of History: Nishida, Zen, and the Psychedelic Eschaton* (Palo Alto: Academica Press, 2007).