

On “Zen” Arts and Culture

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What is Zen?

Zen is a school of Buddhism that evolved in medieval China and subsequently spread to the rest of East Asia: Korea, Vietnam, and Japan. It was born of cross-cultural interaction, as alien Buddhist monastic institutions and philosophical principles imported from India were modified to conform with indigenous Chinese cultural values and practices, most notably those associated with the Confucian and Daoist traditions.

Zen teachings derive largely from the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrine of “emptiness” (Sanskrit, *śūnyatā*), which holds that all names and conceptual categories, while useful for navigating and making sense of our world, ultimately fail to provide a complete and accurate picture of what really exists. Language is a powerful tool that we humans cannot dispense with, but at root it is simply a set of conventional designations that we use to communicate with one another and to collect and transmit an ever-increasing body of knowledge down through the generations. Unfortunately, we misuse that tool, for we lose sight of it even as we employ it. We come to believe that the real world, in itself, is actually comprised of the quasi-static, separate but interacting “things” that we have distinguished and named for our own practical purposes. That is a kind of delusion that inevitably leads to anxiety, disappointment and suffering, for reality is always more complex and changeable than our conceptual models of it.

Zen Buddhism teaches that if one makes an intense and sustained effort at introspection, one can gain a deep intuitive understanding (*satori* 悟り) of the workings of one’s own mind. Such an awakening eases suffering, for it weakens deluded attachment to linguistic constructs by exposing them as products of our own (collective as well as individual) imaginations. Language can now be appreciated for what it is — an infinitely adaptable tool that can be picked up or put down at will — and the “things” and “events” that it conceives are no longer experienced as external chains that bind.

The sayings, calligraphy, and paintings produced in the Zen tradition express the wonder, joy, and awe that one feels in coming “face to face,” as it were, with the real world, as opposed to seeing it only through the veil of conceptual constructs. Awakening to the inherent limitations and pitfalls of language does not mean that one stops speaking, thinking discursively, or writing. On the contrary, it frees one to use words and concepts in a more flexible, creative fashion.

The expression “real world,” of course, is just another verbal construct, a convenient fiction: in the final analysis, there is no such thing that matches our simplistic conception of it. Indeed, Mahāyāna Buddhists happily concede that all of their religious teachings, including the key concepts of “delusion” (the condition of ordinary living beings) and “awakening” (becoming a buddha), are but conventional designations that are, from the ultimate point of view, false. To employ even the language of Buddhism itself is thus to risk deluded attachment, but if used with skill and compassion such linguistic formulations can help lead others to liberation.

Meditation (dhyāna in Sanskrit, channa 禪那 or chan 禪 in Chinese, sŏn 禪 in Korean, *thiền* 禪 in Vietnamese, zen 禪 in Japanese), is a basic Buddhist practice that found its way from India to China and the rest of East Asia. Seated meditation (Ch. zuochan 坐禪, J. zazen) has always been embraced by the Zen tradition as a powerful means of temporarily shutting down discursive thinking, or detaching from it even as it runs its habitual course, and thereby pointing the way to escape from the self-made prison of language.

In its rhetorical style, Zen Buddhism is very Chinese. Unlike Chinese translations of Indian Buddhist scriptures, which tend to be long-winded philosophical discourses that rely on allegory and syllogism, Chinese Zen texts employ a terse, colloquial, down-to-earth and sometimes enigmatic metaphorical language that is reminiscent of the Daoist classics. Doctrinally, however, Zen sayings remain true to the Indian Mahāyāna Buddhist teaching of “emptiness,” for they point to the limitations of language and conceptual thought itself while enjoining us to wake up to the real world of immediate experience that we actually live in, “before,” “apart from,” and “in the midst of” the linguistic processing in which we habitually engage.

Zen Calligraphy and Ink Painting

In its modes of artistic expression, Zen Buddhism has its roots in the literati culture of imperial China. The styles of calligraphy and ink painting that Chinese, Korean and Japanese Zen masters have employed over the centuries originated among the Confucian literati (Ch. ru 儒, J. ju): the socially and economically elite class of scholar-officials in China whose bureaucratic and political careers were launched when they passed a rigorous battery of tests on the Confucian classics. A high degree of education was the mark of the literati class, but they also prided themselves on their skill in using the basic tools and materials of Chinese writing: black ink (Ch. mo 墨, J. boku or sumi), brushes (Ch. bi 筆, J. hitsu or fude) of various sizes and materials (e.g. bamboo, horsehair), and paper. The writing of orders to underlings and reports to superiors in the imperial bureaucracy was the everyday business of scholar-officials, but calligraphy or the “Way of Writing” (Ch. shu dao 書道, J. shodō) was also raised to the level of an art in and of itself, especially when it was employed in the composition of poetic verses, a leisure-time activity that came to have great social significance. In the Confucian tradition, it was believed that the character and

intellectual refinement of a “gentleman” (women were largely excluded) were evinced in his calligraphy, which thus came to be called “traces [of the man] left in ink” (Ch. mo ji 墨跡, J. bokuseki).

In addition to developing styles of cursive writing (cao shu 草書, J. sōsho) that were highly artistic and hard for the untrained eye to decipher, some literati used brushes and black ink, in various degrees of dilution with water, to paint scenes from nature — mountainous landscapes, plants, birds, animals, etc. — as well as portraits and caricatures of people. Ink paintings (Ch. mo hui 墨繪 or shui mo hui 水墨繪, J. sumi e or suiboku e) of that sort almost always included calligraphic inscriptions that identified or commented on, typically in verse, the scene or subject portrayed. Such ink painting remained a largely amateur pursuit — an avocation of the literati — in East Asia, whereas formal polychrome painting, which required more specialized techniques and materials, was the domain of a small number of professional artists.

“Amateur” or not, the fact remains that good calligraphy and ink painting both require a high degree of practiced skill and confidence. The medium is such that any undue hesitation or haste with the brush, not to mention any poorly executed or erroneous stroke, results in immediate and irreparable failure. If the brush pauses on the paper, ink pools and spreads uncontrollably. Unintended strokes or splatters cannot be erased, and it is virtually impossible to “paint over” any mistakes. Artists using polychrome oil paints can gradually build up their works, making corrections and alterations as they go. Ink painters and calligraphers have but one shot. Their works — for better or worse — are generally completed in a single, relatively short sitting.

So, how did the Chinese literati arts of calligraphy and ink painting, which originally had no essential connection with Buddhism, find their way to Japan, and how did they become so intimately connected with the Zen Buddhist tradition in that country?

In Song dynasty (960-1278) China, monks who belonged to the Zen school formed a privileged elite that came to dominate the upper echelons of the Buddhist monastic order at large. They succeeded in gaining literati patronage because they were able to make Indian Buddhist teachings appealing to that class of educated scholar-officials. At the same time, they themselves embraced many elements of literati culture, notwithstanding the fact that it was essentially Confucian in its world view and values.

During the Kamakura period (1185-1333) in Japan, a movement arose to import the latest and most prestigious forms of Buddhist teaching and monastic practice that had evolved under the leadership of the Zen school in Song China. The Zen that was initially transmitted to Japan at that time was embraced as a new form of Buddhism, but it employed distinctively Chinese (loosely, “Daoist”) modes of rhetoric and carried with it all the elements of Chinese literati (loosely, “Confucian”) culture. The styles of calligraphy, ink painting, landscape gardening, and tea drinking that were popular in elite circles in

China — non-Buddhist as well as Buddhist — all became known as “Zen” in Japan, for the Japanese were initially exposed to them almost exclusively in the setting of the newly established Zen (i.e. Song Chinese style) monasteries.

When Zen monks in medieval China and Japan engaged in calligraphy, they tended to quote sayings attributed to famous ancestral masters in the Zen lineage, or to compose original verses that employed Buddhist tropes and concepts. As in secular literati circles, an eminent monk’s “traces left in ink” were believed to reflect his character and degree of cultivation. In the Buddhist context, however, it was a monk’s level of spiritual attainment, as opposed to mere erudition, that was said to be evinced in his calligraphy.

Ink paintings by Zen monks in China and Japan were stylistically indistinguishable from those of literati artists and featured many of the same natural scenes. Often the only thing identifiably “Zen” about them were the inscriptions, which typically expressed Buddhist sentiments. Only when the subject matter is itself an anecdote or personage from Zen lore can we speak meaningfully of “Zen painting” (Zenga 禅画) as a truly distinctive genre of art. In modern Japan, nevertheless, that term has come to refer in a general way to all works done in the style of Song Chinese literati ink painting, whether or not they were produced by monks, allude to any Buddhist themes in their inscriptions, or depict any people or incidents found in Zen lore.

Zen and Tea

Any discussion of Zen arts and culture in Japan naturally turns to the “tea ceremony,” which in Japanese is called the “Way of Tea” (sadō or chadō 茶道) or simply “Tea” (chatō 茶湯 or cha no yū 茶の湯). What the tea ceremony involves, in essence, is a host preparing and serving tea to one or more guests, usually by mixing powdered green tea (matcha 抹茶) with hot water (oyū お湯) in a small bowl that is handed to the guest to drink from. A less common but equally formal variation involves steeping tea leaves (sencha 煎茶) in a teapot, then serving each of the guests in somewhat smaller cups. In either case, the preparation and serving of the tea follows a ritualized, step-by-step procedure that takes a long time to learn and years to master. It is conducted in a deliberate, solemn manner, largely in silence. Guests are expected to sit quietly, to appreciate the grace and studied simplicity of the host’s every movement, and to fall under the spell of contemplative calm that this performing art is designed to induce.

The physical setting in which the tea ceremony is performed, and the various tea implements (cha dōgu 茶道具) that are used, are all considered very important in creating the proper atmosphere and sense of aesthetic refinement. The best location is a rustic Japanese tea house, off in the corner of a beautiful garden. Wherever it is, the tea room (chashitsu 茶室) should be decorated with flowers in a vase (hanairi 花入), an incense

burner (kōro 香炉) or incense box (kōgō 香合), and a hanging scroll (kakejiku 掛け軸), ideally in a formal alcove (tokonoma 床の間) designed to hold those items.

So, what is “Zen” about the Japanese tea ceremony? As with calligraphy and ink painting, that question must be answered in a historical context.

The drinking of tea as a highly refined social ritual originated in China. Together with other aspects of literati culture, it found its way in the 11th and 12th centuries into leading Chinese Buddhist monasteries, the abbots of which were members of the Zen school. In the monastic setting, as in the world of the Confucian bureaucracy, tea was served at all sorts of convocations that involved the appointment or retirement of officers, as well as formal shows of appreciation of seniors for their juniors, and vice versa. In a large-scale tea ceremony (Ch. cha li 茶礼, J. sarei), the places where individuals were seated and the order in which they were served signalled their ranks in the hierarchy. Hosts provided the tea and sent out the invitations, and the quality and cost of the tea and sweets that were served were taken as signs of their status and disposition toward the guests. As in literati circles, moreover, it was common courtesy for monk officials to offer tea to any guests who entered their individual quarters. In Buddhist monasteries, finally, tea and various other decoctions (Ch. tang 湯, J. tō) were routinely placed as offerings (along with food, flowers, and incense) before altars where icons of buddhas, bodhisattvas, and other deities were enshrined.

The social ritual of tea drinking first found its way to Japan in conjunction with the establishment of Zen (i.e. Song Chinese style) monastic institutions during the Kamakura period (1185-1333). The abbots quarters (hōjō 方丈) of Zen monasteries, which were decorated with Chinese literati art (calligraphy and ink paintings) and surrounded by beautiful landscape gardens, were the places where important lay patrons were entertained and served tea by eminent monks. The simple act of drinking tea together became, in that highly refined and ritualized setting, symbolic of the wordless “mind to mind transmission” (ishin denshin 以心伝心) of awakening from master to disciple that the Zen tradition claimed as its stock in trade.

In the Muromachi period (1336-1568), the tea ceremony found its way out of Zen monasteries and into the social life of various elites: warlords, courtiers, and other aristocrats. In the Edo period (1600-1868), it filtered down to mid-level samurai and wealthy merchants, and began to involve their wives as well. In the twentieth century, the “Japanese tea ceremony” was proudly proclaimed to the West as part of Japan’s distinguished cultural heritage, and it gained widespread popularity domestically as one of the social graces that all well-bred young women were expected to learn, at least in some rudimentary way, in preparation for a good marriage.

Throughout all of those historical developments, the Japanese tea ceremony retained various elements of its original association with Zen Buddhism. To begin with, the finest

tea houses and tea rooms continued to mimic the architectural features and ambience of traditional Zen abbots quarters. Convention has always called for the hanging scrolls (*kakejiku* 掛け軸) displayed in the formal alcove (*tokonoma* 床の間) to feature Zen sayings (*zengo* 禅語). The flower arrangements (*ikebana* 生花) and incense boxes (*kōgō* 香合) placed in alcoves, moreover, are reminiscent of altar decorations in Zen monasteries. Finally, the slow, precise and deeply mindful movements of the person serving the tea are indebted, stylistically, to the ritual offerings (*kuyō* 供養) of tea and food to buddhas, bodhisattvas, and ancestral teachers enshrined on altars in Zen monasteries. Such rites are performed by the abbot, a Zen master, in a formal assembly that includes all of the resident monks and any lay patrons who care to attend.