

A photograph of a traditional Japanese Zen garden. In the foreground, a wide, light-colored gravel path leads towards a wooden pavilion with a gabled roof. The garden is landscaped with large, dark rocks, small trees, and patches of moss. In the background, a traditional Japanese building with a tiled roof is visible, surrounded by trees with autumn foliage in shades of red, orange, and green. The sky is clear and blue.

ZEN GARDENS AS A PORTAL TO CONTEMPLATION

By Manjula Nanavati

“To study Zen is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be awakened by all things”
 – Dogen Zenji

It is said that the founder of Buddhism in Japan, the monk Mahakashyapa, received his illumination directly from Shakyamuni (Gautama Buddha), during what is known as the Silent Sermon or the Flower Sermon. Buddha held up a white flower to a crowd of assembled monks. Mahakashyapa alone smiled, signifying that he understood the wordlessness of the wisdom that would become known as Zen. Since then, Zen has emphasized understanding through non-verbal, direct transmission, from heart to heart, based on the precept that words, concepts, and categorizations are inadequate to communicate the deepest essence of truth; and Zen gardens are a physical manifestation of this spirit of Zen. Explorer and Art historian Langdon Warner observed that Japanese gardens are designed “to express the highest truths of religion and philosophy precisely as other civilizations have made use of the arts of literature and philosophy.”(1)

Zen Buddhism prioritizes meditation to experience heightened awareness of self, nature, and humanity, and Zen temple gardens were created for monks to immerse themselves in contemplation, either seated (Zazen), or through the work of maintaining the garden. The temple gardens that are karesansui (which is composed of the Japanese characters for ‘Dry’, ‘mountain’ and ‘water’) have particular distinguishing characteristics. They are not intended to stimulate the senses through extravagance, ornate decoration, variety of colour, species of blooms etc. Neither are they spaces to stroll leisurely and admiringly through, but rather invitations to sit down, slow down, and experience stillness. They are often in stark contrast to the natural wilderness or forest that usually surrounds the temple. They were never meant to imitate nature, but using subtle symbolism, to transcend nature, enabling an intuitive leap into the experience of merging with, and becoming one with nature.(2) The Zen gardens that truly deserve that appellation are those that have been created with spiritual insight, and have been maintained and nourished with spiritual practice, as a living work of art that communicates what cannot be directly verbalized.

The result of this is that they exude both a deep, solitary stillness, as well as a vital vibrating energy. These two diametrically opposed sensations were to simultaneously envelop me every time I walked through numerous zen gardens on my recent tour of the temples of Kyoto: an experience of the paradox of emptiness and fullness in the same moment. These paradoxes are at the heart of Zen teachings in the form of *koans* or





unsolvable riddles that force the mind to explore contradictory perspectives in an effort to free the thinking mind and propel it beyond its linear, logical, rational limits.

Zen garden elements and their symbolism (2):

ROCKS and STONES: The *Sakuteiki* (*Records of Garden Making*) (3) The first known manual of Japanese Gardening written over a thousand years ago, prescribed specific rules for the selection and placement of stones, how to follow the 'desire' of the stones, and the allegorical and mystical meaning behind rock gardens. Rocks are considered the bones of the earth and symbolize solidity, stability and resonate with timelessness and eternity.

SAND and GRAVEL: An integral feature of Zen gardens is gravel, that has been meticulously raked to create ripples or waves symbolizing fluidity and impermanence. Gently undulating lines signify serenity and tranquillity, while swirling patterns symbolize enlightenment.

Not all Zen Gardens are *Karesansui*, which employ the minimalist technique that conjures up an extremely natural landscape of mountains, oceans, streams, islands, and pathways with the precise placement of rocks stone and gravel. Other styles of gardening incorporate elements such as water, bridges and even a moon-viewing platform.



WATER: In the form of ponds, streams or waterfalls, water symbolizes purity, transparency, reflection and the ability to go around obstacles.

MOSS: Naturally found in ancient forests or growing over untouched surfaces, moss symbolizes age and tradition.

BRIDGES: These symbolize the journey between 2 worlds, the outer external world, and the inner reality. It could also tangibly represent leaving behind the material world of humans and moving into a more inclusive world of nature and all sentient beings.

PATHWAYS: Created from gravel or stepping stones, curved, twisting and zig zag pathways are not meant to lead you from point to point. Rather they are meant to remind you of your path, of life's twists and turns, and to guide you carefully step by step, towards spiritual awakening.

STONE LANTERNS: These symbolize illumination on your inward journey into yourself.



Although Zen gardens may vary widely in size, elements used, and how the landscape is designed, they all serve the same spiritual purpose. The foundational principles that govern Zen Buddhism apply to life in all its dimensions, and Zen priests specifically designed temple gardens to reflect these 7 spiritual principles.[4]

1. **KOKO:** Austerity

Koko is reflected in the bare, frugal, ascetic setting of a Zen Garden. It emphasizes absence and omission, to encourage focus and clarity. Limiting yourself to only what is essential allows for the potential of the limitless to emerge.

“When you go into nothingness, you become everything.”

– Buddha

2. **KANSO:** Simplicity

Simplicity eschews ostentation, extravagance or overstatement as unnecessary. The aspiration is to use the minimum of intrusion to have the maximum impact.

“Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.

After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water.” – Zen proverb

3. **SHIZEN**: Naturalness

Moving away from the artificial, incorporating only natural materials, but also adapting to the environment by incorporating natural light, wind, topography into the landscapes, *shizen* implies being part of nature but at the same time subtly reminding you of something greater. For all their naturalness, Zen Gardens have been precisely designed and meticulously created, with each element strategically placed to jolt you out of the comfort zone of a dualist world, into the higher consciousness of unity.

“Meditation is an attempt of the conscious mind to find its way in the unconscious world” – Zen proverb



4. **YUGEN**: Subtlety, Mystery, Profound Grace
Yugen implies that what is invisible is more important than the visible. In playing with areas of light and shadows, reflections, and what is partially hidden from view, *Yugen* encourages the use of imagination, exploration and discovery.

Sen Rikyu, a 15th Century Japanese Tea Master who redefined the artistic and aesthetic standards of Japanese culture, designed his garden in Sakai so that the expansive view of the sea was hidden; until guests stooping down to wash their hands before entering the tea-garden, and catching a glimpse of the shimmering sea before them, were forced to contrast the relationship of a cupful of water against the boundless ocean, and bring to mind the relationship of themselves as a microcosm of the macrocosmic universe.[5]

“Enlightenment is when the wave realizes that it is the ocean.” – Thich Nhat Hanh

5. **FUKINSEI**: Asymmetry, Imperfection.

Zen believes that imperfection is part of existence, and one of the most inspirational, impactful and tangible manifestations of this principle is the Ryonji Temple Garden in Kyoto. (1) In Oriental culture the number 15 means perfection while the number 14 means 'imperfection'. The Ryoanji Temple Garden consists of an open courtyard in which 15 rocks are strategically placed on carefully raked gravel, such that whichever angle you view them from you can only see 14. (Unless of course you were somehow floating above the garden). Confronted with this enigmatic mindscape on my visit to Kyoto I was struck with three thoughts: that there is more to reality than what your senses are presently limited to; that while what is visible may be imperfect, it can still be harmonious, balanced and beautiful; that the only way to glimpse the perfection that is lying hidden in plain sight is to raise your consciousness high enough so as to encompass an elevated more wholistic perspective.

“Nothing we see or hear is perfect. But right there in the imperfection is perfect reality.” – Shunryu Suzuki

6. **DATSUZOKU**: Transcendence, Freedom from habit.

Our conditioning and our belief systems predispose us to think and behave in habitual patterns. *Datsuzoku* is a way to escape conventions and limitations imposed by society, culture or ourselves, to live a freer, more authentic life.

**“Obstacles don’t block the path, they are the path.”
– Zen proverb**

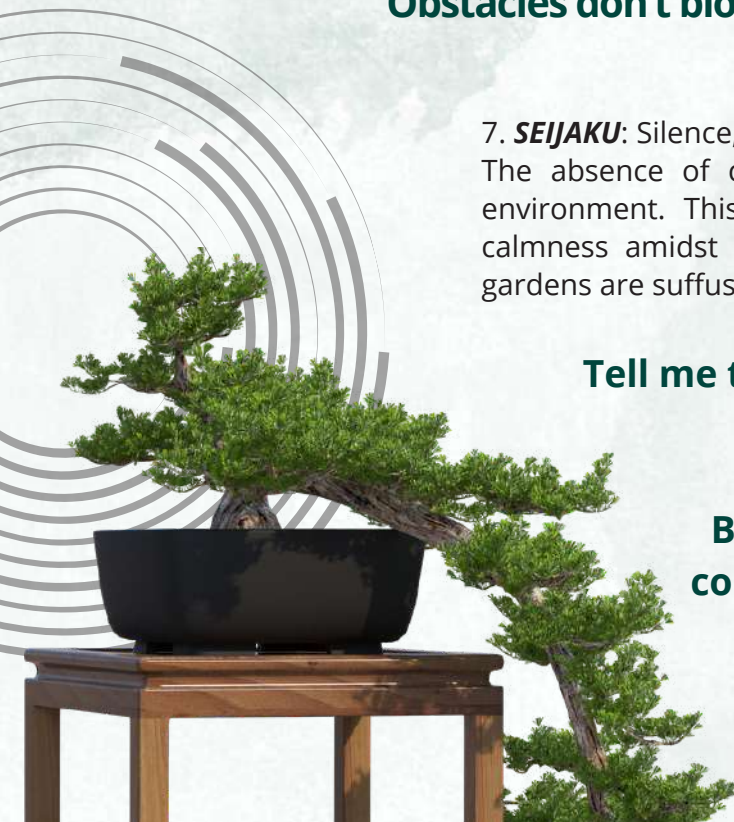
7. **SEIJAKU**: Silence, Tranquillity.

The absence of chaos and noise in the body, mind and environment. This principle is about retaining a sense of calmness amidst the tumult and agitation that is life. Zen gardens are suffused with the energy of silence.

Tell me then, what is the most important principle or teaching of Zen?”

“Vast emptiness,”

Bodhidharma replied, meaning, of course, the void of nonattachment.



But of all the principles that Zen teaches us, perhaps the most startling and inspiring to me, is the profound realization that we are already enlightened beings, that there is an enlightened aspect of us that is waiting to be remembered: It is our highest potential, our buddha-nature. Whether we come to this realization gradually or in a flash of insight, it is our own assiduous efforts at inner work that will ultimately get us there.

“When we discover that the truth is already in us, we are all at once our original selves.” – Dogen

Centuries ago, Zen masters created the enigmatic mindscapes of Zen Temple Gardens as an invitation to embark on the challenging inward journey, and the tenacious spiritual practise of meditation, towards awakening to the True Reality. But for us that live far away from these mystical fields of subtle energy, life offers many invitations to contemplation. My hope for those of us on the formidable path to remember the essence of who we already are, is that perhaps, on seeing a white flower, we can be reminded of how that fleeting gesture awakened Mahakashyapa; and maybe, we will be nudged into contemplation of the many luminous principles of Zen Philosophy that are embodied in a single simple, subtle, mysterious, imperfect, natural flower. ☸☸

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