



People from all over the world take part in the Zen events

THE WORLD'S IN LOVE WITH ZEN

KATSUMI YASUKURA

Zen concepts and practices have heavily influenced prominent people in the West in all fields, from business to entertainment to the arts. What is it about Zen that attracts them?

ZEN spread in Japan during the Kamakura and Muromachi periods (1192-1573), a type of Buddhism first practiced by Bodhidharma of India and then in China by Linji Yixuan centuries earlier. The Rinzai, Soto and Obaku schools in Japan, among others, are Zen Buddhist sects.

“When we are born none of us have anything, but as we grow older we acquire knowledge, goodness, morals and values,” says Gyokaku Horio, the chief priest at Tanden-an, a temple affiliated with the Myoshinji school of Rinzai Zen Buddhism. “Zen is a discipline where one seeks to cast off whatever is unnecessary and tries to achieve enlightenment by pursuing one’s truest self. For example, you could say the rock garden at Ryoan-ji in Kyoto is a place that concisely expresses a Zen worldview.”

Jiyu-jizai is one of the words that symbolize Zen, he explains. “*Jiyu* is often interpreted to mean freedom or liberation, but in the world of Zen *jiyu* means ‘to be based on one’s self.’ *Jiyu* comes when your individuality, completely separate from the world around you, has been established. If you achieve



A sharp tap to help refocus the mind

that *jiyu* then you are true to yourself, a concept called *jizai* in the world of Zen, thus making you *jiyu-jizai*.”

Horio believes one reason Zen is so popular with many people outside Japan is that, unlike Christianity or Islam, even high-ranking priests and monks of advanced age are considered the same as beginners in terms of finding enlightenment, so they do not seem so distant. “Another reason is the emphasis placed on actual practice over studying and reading sacred texts,” he adds.

It also bears mentioning that the actual practice of Zen is comparatively easy to understand, with few words involved so the language barrier is low. For example, *zazen*, the cross-legged posture of seated meditation that brings mind, body and breath into harmony, and Zen calligraphy—the transcription of words from Zen literature—are not easy, but the meaning behind them is clear. And the idea that even simple tasks necessary for life such as cleaning, doing the laundry, cooking and the preparation and cleanup involved can be thought

of as Zen practice is thought-provoking and new for those in the West.

Horio notes that in recent years, in addition to Zen temples in and outside Japan, there have been many Zen-themed exhibitions held at museums and galleries, including at Tokyo’s Roppongi Hills.

“They’ve brought an increase in the number of people interested in Zen—and not just non-Japanese but young Japanese people as well,” Horio explains. “We feel a need to tell people that Zen Buddhism is not only a part of milestone occasions in their lives, but also part of daily life. If you take a single stick and draw a circle in the water that has collected in a wooden tub, at first not much of the water will move. But if you keep at it, eventually all the water will swirl together.

“My hope for the next generation of young Buddhist monks,” he concludes, “is that they will become the stick that stirs the water. I want them to use their unique vantage point to spread Zen to the world.” 

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