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Zen

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If I say “Zen,” what ideas come to mind? We hear the word Zen all the time. Zen style furniture, Zen decoration, Zen gardens, Zen anything... What’s behind all of it?

Zen is, first of all, the Japanese name of a form of Buddhism, but we don’t usually think of Buddhism when we talk about Zen.

When Zen reached Japan from China, where it was called Chan, it underwent some changes to adapt to Japanese culture. As a result of these changes, Zen became present in many aspects of Japanese social life, almost erasing the boundaries between the religious and the secular.

This integration of Zen into everyday Japanese life produced a rich variety of rituals, art expressions, and ceremonies that still last even today and have caught the attention of western civilizations. Zen expressions include Zen gardens, Zen paintings, Zen calligraphy, and the tea ceremony.

I would like to tell you more about Zen gardens. In Japan they are called KareSanSui, which literally means Dry-Mountain-Water. A better English translation would be Dry- Rock-Garden.

A Zen garden is a giant sandbox that contains mainly sand and rocks. There is a theory that states that the sand symbolizes water and it is indeed raked in patterns that suggest rippling water. The rocks represent islands or mountains and they are arranged in different ways inside the sandbox.

Zen says that truth cannot be learned from others, but must be discovered internally. Zen gardens convey harmony and peace to the onlooker. They are not only beautiful, but are also an instrument for calming the mind. Like calming water, they allow the dirt to settle and the water to clear. I really like that sense of peace of mind they give when you look at them.

I hope to see a lot of them this year in Kyoto, especially Ryoan-ji, the Temple of the Peaceful Dragon, perhaps the most famous of all Japanese Zen gardens.

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