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## Medieval Japanese Zen: Catalyst for Symbol System Formation

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**Medieval Japanese Zen: Catalyst for Symbol System Formation**

By

Kendall Ann Roper

A culminating thesis submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's  
in Humanities

San Rafael, CA  
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This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the Department of Humanities, School of Liberal Arts and Education, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master's of Humanities. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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## Abstract

Post-modernism asserts that the world as we know it does not exist independently from the symbolic interpretations we formulate about it. This symbolic and ever unfolding interpretation of reality applies to our understanding of science as well as philosophy, to religion as well as art. In striving to describe religious experiences, various cultures have developed complex symbolic languages whose purpose is to reference a culturally understood version of sacred reality as presented through religion. Religions contribute to shaping these cultural perceptions of reality by utilizing symbolic acts, objects, events, qualities, or concepts to express otherwise inexpressible elements of a culture's cosmology and ethos. Considering this, it becomes apparent that sacred symbol system formation can be identified and traced within cultures. Analyzing Zen Buddhism from this perspective as it flourished in twelfth century Japan is particularly interesting in light of the rapid proliferation of new symbol systems emerging in its wake. These included symbolic acts such as tea ceremony, Sumi-e painting styles, Zazen meditation, and haiku poetry. By creating, or providing new reference points for, these highly symbolic acts, Zen Buddhist monks altered the ethos and world-view of medieval Japanese culture in a powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting manner. From a post-modern perspective therefore, Zen Buddhism was acting as a catalyst for sacred symbol formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of that society to Zen.

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## **Medieval Japanese Zen: Catalyst for Symbol System Formation**

*Studying Zen Buddhism from a post-modernist perspective by observing emergent sacred symbol system formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of Zen.*

### **Introduction**

It is a particular argument of our post-modern age that the world as we know it does not exist independently from the interpretations we assign to, or formulate about, it. Rather all human knowledge is mediated by signs and symbols that we ourselves create. This inherent human capacity for concept and symbol formation must be recognized as being a “fundamental and necessary element in the human understanding, anticipation, and creation of reality” (Tarnas, Richard, The Passion of the Western Mind, 396). Reality as discussed here should not be viewed as a solid, fixed, self-contained given but more as a fluid, unfolding process continually shaped by our changing actions and beliefs. Post-modernist thought asserts that this symbolic, constantly arising, ever unfolding interpretation of reality applies to our human understanding of science as well as philosophy, to religion as well as art. When studying the topic of religion from this perspective we find symbol formation at its most intense, perhaps because religious experiences by their very nature are difficult, if not impossible, to define and communicate using literal means. In

striving to describe what may ultimately be ineffable, various cultures have developed complex symbolic languages whose purpose is to reference an understanding of sacred reality.

Social anthropologist Clifford Geertz discusses the purpose of such symbolic languages when he writes “sacred symbols function to synthesize a people’s ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are” (The Interpretation of Cultures, 89). Geertz asserts that religion, being a system of sacred symbols, therefore acts to “establish powerful and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating concepts of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (90). Thus religion as a sacred symbol system may be understood as serving the purpose of synthesizing a culture’s perception of reality. How do religions such as Zen Buddhism accomplish this task? In attempting to answer this question we will study sacred symbol systems generated in the wake of Zen’s introduction to medieval Japanese society. To approach this study from a post-modernist perspective we must further define what is meant by the term “symbol”.

According to Geertz, a symbol is “something which expresses in an oblique and figurative manner that which cannot be stated in a direct and literal one” (91). A symbol may also be understood as an “object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a vehicle for conception—the concept is the symbol’s meaning” (91). As

Gertz explains, the number 6 would be considered a symbol. So too would the Christian cross “talked about, visualized, shaped worriedly in the air, or fingered at the neck” (91). An example of this act is shown in figure 1 below.



Figure 1. Russian Orthodox making the sign of the cross. [www.Kremlin.ru](http://www.Kremlin.ru).

Therefore Picasso’s painting *Guernica*, seen below in figure 2, should also be considered a symbol as it depicts anti-war sentiments from the 1930’s in an oblique and non-literal form. Similarly symbolic in nature, Geertz explains, would be a bit of wood or stone called a *churinga*, which served to represent sacred entities manifest in tangible form for central Australian indigenous people from the Arrernte or Arunta groups.



Figure 2. Picasso. "Guernica", 1937. Oil on canvas. Museo Reina Sofia. Madrid, Spain.

These are examples of symbols, or symbolic elements, Geertz argues, because they are tangible formulations of concepts, abstractions from experience fixed in perceptual forms, and concrete embodiments of ideas.

Religions contribute to synthesizing cultural perceptions of reality by utilizing the types of symbols mentioned here to express otherwise inexpressible elements of a culture's cosmology and ethos. For instance, medieval Byzantine monks utilized a symbolic liturgical language in painted form to communicate their understanding of Christian mysteries. This is the language of orthodoxy expressed in icons.

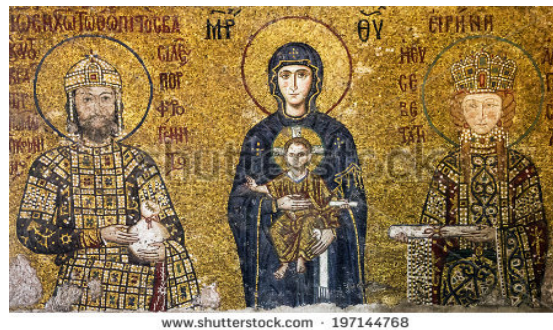


Figure 3. "Byzantine Mosaic of Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ with Emperor and Empress". Hagia Sophia, Istanbul, Turkey.

As observed in Figure 3, this symbolic language represented sacredness in the pictorial form of a golden circle of light located around the heads of the Virgin Mary, the child Jesus, and the Emperor and Empress. In Islam, the Qur'an itself—considered to be the physical embodiment of the word of Allah—is a sacred symbol (Figure 4). The act of reading and reciting verses from the Qur'an should also be viewed as being a sacred symbol (Figure 5). Similarly, some Native North American indigenous cultures interpreted the special bags used to carry ceremonial pipes as being sacred symbols (Figure 6). Many Russian Orthodox observers consider the act of taking a plunge into icy water on the Epiphany to be a sacred responsibility (Figure 7). And in Zen Buddhism the practice of sitting Zazen is understood by practitioners to be a sacred act linking the practitioner to a beneficial dynamic of culturally understood reality (Figure 8).

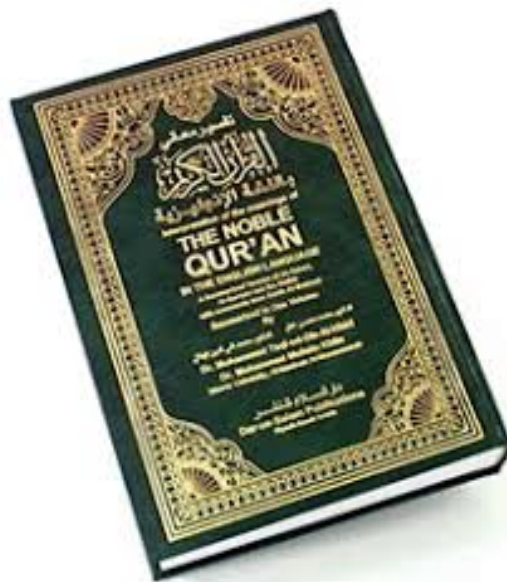


Figure 4. The Qur'an. [www.kalamullah.com](http://www.kalamullah.com)



Figure 5. Children reading the Qur'an. Karachi, Pakistan.



Figure 6. Lakota Sioux Pipe Ceremony Bag. Circa 1900. Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art, Indianapolis.



**Figure 7. Russian President Putin crosses himself as he takes dip in water to mark Orthodox Epiphany.**  
[www.kremlin.ru](http://www.kremlin.ru)



**Figure 8. Zen monk meditating. Himeji, Japan**

The symbols described above may be understood as the concrete embodiment of abstract ideas whose purpose is to express cultural conceptions about ultimate reality and are sacred symbols under Geertz's definition.

In considering these examples, and keeping in mind countless others from the world's religions, it becomes apparent that concrete expressions of perceived reality, in this case religious or sacred symbols, can be identified as such and observed within cultures. Although this approach may be applied to analyzing any of the world's religions, the study of Zen Buddhism as it was introduced to Japan in

the twelfth century is particularly interesting in light of the rapid proliferation of new symbol systems emerging in its wake. By introducing, or providing new meaning for, symbolic acts such as tea ceremony, haiku, ink-brush painting styles, and zazen practices to the military class in particular, Zen Buddhist monks effectively altered the ethos of an entire segment of medieval Japanese society in a powerful and pervasive manner. Ensuing chapters will explore Zen Buddhism's impact upon emergent sacred symbol system formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of Zen.

## Chapter One

### Zen Background: Linguistics, history, and philosophy

#### Linguistics

In order to study Zen's contribution to sacred symbol formation in medieval Japan we should first arrive at a basic understanding of what is meant by the term Zen. From a linguistic perspective the word Zen is simply the Japanese translation for the Chinese word Ch'an which in turn derives from the Sanskrit word *dhayana*, signifying meditation or a meditative state. As Buddhist scholar Heinrich Dumoulin explains, in China the words *dhayana* and *Ch'an* were initially "the collective name for all manner of Buddhist meditation that the Chinese originally acquired (from India) together with related Yogic practices" (Zen Buddhism: A History, India and China, 38). Regarding this, Dumoulin says the linking of the words *dhayana* and *Ch'an* with the experience of enlightenment was significantly enhanced by the sixth Chinese Zen Patriarch Hui-Neng (638-731) who asserted that "dhayana"



(meditation) and “prajna” (enlightenment) were one and the same state. Thus the word *Ch’an* began to act as a linguistic referent for the concept of meditation practice as enlightenment. When the word *Ch’an* was translated into the Japanese word Zen, it retained this highly significant definition.

### History

From a historical perspective Ch’an/Zen may be defined as a product of Chinese thought arising after China was introduced to Indian Buddhism in the first centuries A.D. About this introduction Dumoulin says, “The peculiar way of Zen...has its origins in China where the first Zen masters taught and the first Zen schools sprang up”(14). However, it must certainly be noted that Zen has “roots deeply embedded in the native soil of Buddhism in India” (14). For information regarding these roots, particularly focusing on the Buddha’s life story, please refer to David Ling’s book titled The Buddha as well as Smith and Novak’s excellent volume titled Buddhism. Both works provide detailed academic insight into the background and life of Siddhartha Guatama, the founder of Buddhism. After being transmitted in India through twenty-eight successors the Buddhist religion was then brought to China by a legendary monk named Bodhidharma in the sixth century.

Although long recognized as the first Chinese Zen Patriarch, the historical facts regarding Bodhidharma’s existence are uncertain. Dumoulin tells us the name Bodhidharma is first mentioned in a description of forty-five temples in the capital city of Lo-yang, contained in the Lo-yang Ch’ieh-chi, written about 547, not long after the death of Bodhidharma. However, according to this account, the person referred to as Bodhidharma came from Persia rather than India. Dumoulin

says, “miraculous tales are told of this *Shramana*, but no mention is made of his having practiced or taught a way of meditation (36). A slightly more reliable account of Bodhidharma’s existence is provided a century and a half later in Chinese historian Tao-hsuan’s (d. 667) work titled *Hsu-kao-seng-chaun* which contains a brief description of Bodhidharma. In this text “the profound wisdom of Bodhidharma is extolled, as is his enthusiasm for the teachings of Mahayana and for meditation” (Dumoulin, 36). The historical reliability of this source suggests that a Mahayana meditation master named Bodhidharma who travelled to China actually did exist, although the legendary tales traditionally associated with him are notably absent from the text.

As one might expect from the legendary founder of Zen, Bodhidharma is best remembered for his notable meditation style. Regarding accounts of this style, Dumoulin says “in an ancient text ascribed to Bhodidharma, his way of meditation is characterized by the Chinese word *pi-kuan*, literally wall-gazing or wall-contemplation” (38). Although legend tells us that Bodhidharma spent nine years meditating in front of a wall at Shaolin monastery, Dumoulin suggests that “adherents of Zen interpreted *pi-kuan*...as referring less to Bodhidharma’s sitting facing a wall than to the characteristic qualities of enlightenment, namely steepness and suddenness”(38). While this linguistic interpretation could possibly be construed as implying that Bodhidharma was a teacher of sudden enlightenment, it must be remarked here that spending nine years in front of a wall does not seem to represent an experience of sudden awakening. Nevertheless, Dumoulin explains

that although Buddhist meditation masters from all schools travelled across China during the fifth and sixth centuries recruiting students for their particular forms of meditation, Bodhidharma's way of meditation "was destined to surpass all other ways of Buddhist meditation and to acquire a unique place in history and worldwide significance today" (39). This is perhaps the most important fact to remember regarding Bodhidharma's contribution to Zen.

Over time Bodhidharma's teaching attracted followers who formed the school or sect known as Ch'an. This school blended with and became part of the cultural expression of the T'ang Dynasty (618-907). As an expression of T'ang culture, Ch'an was strongly influenced by various Chinese schools of thought including those of Taoism and Confucianism. Resulting from its ability to blend with indigenous Taoist beliefs, in particular, Ch'an seems to have been more readily accepted during the T'ang period than other Mahayana Buddhist schools. Indeed, Ch'an was one of the only schools of Buddhism to survive the sudden wave of Chinese persecution in the later part of the T'ang with its monasteries, practices, and philosophies remaining relatively intact. This survival subsequently allowed Ch'an to flourish among the Sung Dynasty (960-1279). It was during this period that Ch'an migrated to Japan and was formally established as Zen in that country.

### Philosophy

Having provided a brief backdrop to the linguistic and historic foundations of the term Zen we now turn to a study of its philosophical roots. It must be noted that studying the foundations of Zen from a philosophical perspective poses a somewhat challenging task as this requires engagement with a number of traditional

Mahayana concepts. These are difficult to grasp from a purely academic point of view. They include ideas and experiences such as sudden enlightenment (*satori*), practice enlightenment (*Zazen*), emptiness (*sunyata*), and Buddha Nature (*tathagatagarbha*). Dumoulin asserts that the textual basis for these concepts within Ch'an, or Zen, derives from four Mahayana sutras, "the Sutras of Perfect Wisdom (*Prajnaparamita Sutra*), the Garland Sutra (*Avatamsaka Sutra*), the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, and the *Lankavatara Sutra*" (*Zen Enlightenment*, 26). Ch'an philosophy additionally appears to have been strongly influenced by indigenous Chinese Taoist beliefs. Although it is not within the scope of this thesis to provide an exhaustive academic review of the research conducted to date regarding the above mentioned philosophical influences, a brief discussion of these concepts in the following pages will reveal the foundational position each occupies in developing an understanding of Zen.

### *Sunyata*

One of the philosophical points bearing particular significance for the understanding and practice of Ch'an stems from the Mahayana concept of negativity. The key terms for this concept are "empty (*sunya*) and emptiness (*sunyata*)" (Dumoulin, 26). In defining *sunya* and *sunyata* Dumoulin says:

The phenomenal world and all that appears in it is empty, void of definition, qualities, or characteristics, without substance and essence. Even the empirical and conscious human ego is empty and without essence. For this reason, one is mistaken as long as he clings to appearances and to his own ego (26).

David Loy echoes Dumoulin in describing the significant role occupied by *sunyata* in Buddhist philosophy. Loy says “The most important term in Mahayana philosophy is *sunyata*” (Lack and Transcendence, 23). Loy explains the doctrinal grounding for *sunyata* by quoting the first verse of Nagarjuna’s *Mulamadhyamikakarikas* text (second century A.D.) which says “No things whatsoever exist, at any time or place, having arisen by themselves, from another, from both, or without cause” (88). This is called the Doctrine of Independent Origination. Loy explains the relationship of emptiness or *sunyata* to the Doctrine of Independent Origination:

That none is self-present is the meaning of sunya and its substantive sunyata, terms notoriously difficult to translate. They seem to derive from the root su, which means “to be swollen”, like a hollow balloon but also like a pregnant woman; therefore the usual English translation “empty” and “emptiness” needs to be supplemented with the notion of “pregnant with possibilities” ...rather than being a negative concept...it is only because everything is sunya that any change, including spiritual transformation, is possible (89).

Although difficulties occur in the translation and cognitive understanding of emptiness, Loy asserts that the point of *sunyata* is clear. He says it is meant to deconstruct the self-existence or self-presence of things.

Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock echoes Loy in describing the meaning of *sunyata* as a relational pattern of interdependence. Hershock explains that things should be viewed as being empty, or having no essence or core, “because they actually consist of particular patterns of relationship” (Chan Buddhism, 19). This means that

nothing exists separately from anything else. Hershock says:

Emptiness—the absence of any abiding, essential nature—is...equated with fullness. Far from signifying its privation, the emptiness of a thing consists in its unique way of bringing all other things into focus. Through each thing, all things join (19).

Thus emptiness according to Ch'an, or Zen, is not considered a pejorative concept or experience. Rather it is seen as being pregnant with possibility for attaining a new understanding of the interdependent relationship between one's self, which does not exist as a separate unchanging entity, and everything else in the world. Arriving at an understanding of this interdependent relationship often leads to an experience of enlightenment for the Zen practitioner. Because of this, *sunyata* is regarded as being centrally and foundationally related to the understanding and practice of Zen.

#### *Anatman*

The concept of *anatman*, or no self, is centrally related to the philosophical understanding and practice of Zen as well. Although difficult to describe from a purely intellectual point of view many Buddhist scholars have provided skillful explanations of this concept. Dumoulin says the term derives from the Sanskrit Pali word *anatta*, which refers to the insubstantiality of individual existence. Providing a similar translation, author Toshihiko Izutsu relates *anatman* to the traditional Buddhist practice *sabbe dhamma anatta* which means that all things are ego-less, or “nothing of all existent things has a svabhava, i.e a self-subsistent and permanently fixed cause” (Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism, 13). Buddhist scholar Sallie B. King similarly discusses this concept when she writes “Buddhism, and especially

early Buddhism, is known for the anatman (no self) teaching. By any account this teaching is central to both doctrine and practice from the beginning” (The Buddha Nature: True Self as Action, 255). King continues this explanation:

The Buddha taught that nowhere in the human being can one find a permanent, unchanging self or soul (atman). Instead our identity is constituted by a constantly changing compound of...psychological factors...there is no self because we are compound entities. Each element constantly changes. Therefore the aggregate is not a permanent, changeless self (255-256).

Clearly the concept of *anatman* or no self occupied a central role in early Buddhism. As Buddhism migrated to China and blended with that culture in the first centuries A.D. the significance of *anatman* was retained and as a result became an important part of Ch’an philosophical teachings and practices.

### *Satori*

Having thus discussed two of the most important philosophical concepts related to Zen it next becomes necessary to explore the topic of enlightenment. In tracing the philosophical foundations for belief in the experience of enlightenment we must first and foremost recall the story of the Buddha who, after many years of spiritual seeking, sat under a tree and during a process of deep meditation became the Enlightened One. As a result of the Buddha’s experience and teachings regarding this matter many disciples later sought and attained a similar state of enlightenment. Some attained this state in a gradual manner and some quite

suddenly. Buddhist scholars generally trace the historic origins for belief in sudden enlightenment to a Chinese monk named Tao-Sheng (360-434). Bodhidharma, the legendary founder of Zen, is also credited with espousing belief in the experience of sudden awakening. Later a monk named Hui-Neng (638-713), the well-known sixth patriarch of Zen, established his views on the topic as well. While controversial, the belief in a sudden, single, indivisible moment of enlightenment gained favor among Ch'an practitioners and became a defining characteristic of its philosophy. The emphasis upon belief in sudden enlightenment was retained as a central doctrine when Zen migrated to Japan.

As a foundational characteristic of Zen philosophy the experience of sudden enlightenment or *satori* warrants further examination for this thesis. In discussing *satori* author Toshihiko Izutsu says:

What is actually experienced and realized in cases like these may perhaps best be described as the sudden realization of the ontological transparency of all things, including both the things existing in the external world and the human subject which is ordinarily supposed to be looking at them from the outside. Both the 'external' things and the 'internal' of man divest themselves of their ontological opaqueness, become totally transparent, pervade each other, and become submerged into one (Toward a Philosophy of Zen Buddhism, 203-204).

This type of experience is usually described as consisting of a feeling of deep unity with all existence. It often occurs in moments of extreme psychological, and in some



cases physical, tension. These are moments when “the shell bursts and the cosmic dimension opens up” (Dumoulin, Zen Enlightenment, 145). In many accounts we read of enlightenment “flashing forth at the sound of an evening bell, the stroke of a clock, or rain pattering outside” (147). As an example, Izutsu quotes a monk named Hsiang Yen describing his experience thusly:

The sharp sound of a stone striking bamboo! All that I had learnt was at once forgotten. No need there had been for training and discipline. Through every act and movement of everyday life I manifest the eternal Way. No longer shall I ever fall into a hidden trap. Leaving no trace behind me I shall go everywhere (201).

Many Zen practitioners came to this kind of awakening in the same way.

Considering the seemingly universal nature of sudden enlightenment, or *satori*, as it has occurred among Zen practitioners over the centuries, one begins to understand why the experience of *satori* came to be regarded as a defining characteristic of Zen.

### *Zazen*

In identifying sudden enlightenment in as a defining characteristic of Zen it naturally follows that the practice or practices leading to the experience of *satori* must be addressed as well. Although consisting of many ritual and symbolic actions related to its observance, Zen has traditionally and primarily concerned itself with the practice of sitting meditation called *zazen*. This is the meditation taught by Bodhidharma when he came to China and it is the same meditation taught by Dogen (1200-1253), who was the founder of Zen’s Soto School in Japan. The importance

attributed by Zen to *zazen* practice is perhaps best described in the words of Dogen. Regarding this topic, author Kazuaki Tanahashi quotes Dogen as saying:

The essential thing for studying the way is *zazen*. This comes first. Many people in Song China attained the way through the power of *zazen*...students should engage in just sitting and not pursue other activities. The Buddha ancestors' way is simply sitting...dedicate your time to sitting upright, not seeking achievement, and not seeking enlightenment...the true power lies in sitting (Enlightenment Unfolds, 57-58).

This passage clearly reveals the central role occupied by *zazen* in Zen philosophy. It also reflects belief in *zazen* as something called practice-enlightenment.

In further exploring Dogen's views regarding the relationship between *zazen* and the concept of practice-enlightenment, we turn once again to the work of authors Toshihiko Izutsu and Heinrich Dumoulin. Discussing this matter, Izutsu says:

The primary aim of *zazen* as understood in the Soto school is to bring the whole of the psychic energy into an intensely concentrated state of unity, so that the mind, now absolutely one-pointed, might immediately witness its own depth level (Toward a Psychology of Zen Buddhism, 163).

Izutsu explains that by witnessing this depth during *zazen*, the Zen practitioner realizes enlightenment whether he is aware of this or not. He says "Dogen...saw in the practice of sitting meditation the very actualization of the Buddha Nature itself, that is, the intrinsically undifferentiated oneness of being" (164). Because of this,

Dogen regarded enlightenment and zazen as being one and the same thing. In similarly discussing Dogen's teachings, Dumoulin says that the equation of practice with enlightenment was a crucial point. Dogen characterized enlightenment in his teachings in terms of the "light of Buddha Reality perceived in zazen" (93). Thus, zazen was viewed as being the "preeminent, if not the only means, to the way of enlightenment" (93). Considering this, we begin to understand the philosophical importance attributed by Zen to zazen practice; it was undifferentiated from the absolute character of universal unity or reality called Buddha Nature.

#### *Buddha Nature*

Mahayana scriptures contain a number of expressions describing the concept of universal unity or universal reality mentioned above. According to Dumoulin these expressions include, but are not limited to, terms such as mind-nature, Dharma-nature, absolute essence, Buddha-nature, and Buddha-mind. The textual derivative of these terms stems from numerous sources including the Mahaparinirvana Sutra which asserts that all living things have the Buddha Nature. Dumoulin describes the meaning of this concept when he writes:

All living beings that exist in the round of birth and death have Buddha-nature in themselves like a seed. For this reason, at a given time—i.e. when all obscurities are overcome and the Buddha fruit is ripe—they attain Buddhahood. The one, unchanging Buddha-nature exists in all living beings; it is the eternal mind nature of the Tathagata, the Perfect One (104).

Scholars further define this concept in terms of actualizing one's effort to attain

Buddhahood as well as “the causal stage of the person who has not yet begun to practice Buddhism” (King, Sallie. 153). It is important to note that this stage of Buddhahood may be concealed from an individual but that does not mean its importance or influence should in any way be considered to be less than or diminished from that of somebody actively pursuing a path toward enlightenment. In other words, “the true body of the Buddha and the nature of sentient beings are the same” (Hershock, 58). Thus all beings are Buddha-nature. This last definition of Buddha-nature, in particular, became central to Zen doctrine in medieval Japan. It was through this understanding that individuals in medieval Japanese society were able to consider possibilities for enlightenment as residing within themselves as well as within all of existence.

### *Taoism*

Having arrived at a brief understanding of some of the central philosophical contributions made to Zen by Mahayana Buddhist foundations, we must also acknowledge the significant role played by indigenous Chinese Taoist beliefs in shaping Zen. Although Zen philosophy locates itself solidly within the Mahayana tradition, it has also been described by many scholars as being what Thomas Merton called a blend of “speculative Indian Buddhism with practical Chinese Taoism” (Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, 2). Recognizing the impact of Taoism upon the formation of Zen, Andrew Juniper says, “although Zen is in name a Buddhist movement, the impact of Taoism was far reaching, and the two ideologies are closer in nature than are Zen and other Buddhist teachings” (*Wabi Sabi*, 20). As Juniper further explains, in early China both Ch’an and Taoism eschewed purely

intellectual learning and both advocated “a return to the natural state of non-dualism by transcending our shared view of the world to see reality as it is” (20).

Discussing the same topic, Dumoulin reminds us that in evaluating the Taoist impact upon Zen “we must consider not only the philosophical teachings but also the meditation that played a significant role in the sphere of Taoist...religion” (Zen Enlightenment, 31). In fact, Dumoulin asserts that Tao-Sheng (360-434), the first monk to promote the doctrine of sudden enlightenment in China, received much of his inspiration from association with Taoist teachings on the matter. Considering this, Dumoulin tells us we can understand why early western Zen scholars occasionally “went so far as to take for Zen’s very foundation the Taoist elements that surround and permeate it like an atmosphere” (34). Zen philosophy was obviously deeply influenced by and saturated with indigenous Chinese Taoist beliefs.

In thus having briefly explored Zen from linguistic, historical, and philosophical perspectives we begin to arrive at an understanding of what is meant by the term Zen. Linguistically it is related to the Chinese word Ch’an which derives from the Sanskrit *dhyana*, meaning meditation or a meditative state. Historically Zen is linked first and foremost to the teachings of the Buddha. Zen may next be considered a product of Chinese thought arising after that culture was introduced to Indian Buddhism in the first centuries A.D., perhaps as a result of a visit by a legendary monk named Bodhidharma. Over time Bhodidharma’s teachings attracted followers who formed themselves into a school or sect known as Ch’an. Ch’an blended with Chinese culture and eventually migrated to Japanese soil during

the later part of the Sung (960-1279) dynasty. Philosophically Zen derives many of its concepts and practices from traditional Mahayana Buddhism. These include ideas and experiences such as sudden enlightenment, emptiness, no self, *zazen*, practice-enlightenment, and Buddha Nature. Additionally Zen seems to have been strongly influenced by Chinese Taoist philosophies and practices. Considering this background, Zen must be regarded as a fluid amalgam of diverse influences that evolved from Mahayana Buddhism. It naturally follows that the linguistic, historical, and philosophical foundations of Zen as discussed in this chapter provided a wealth of symbol formation opportunity within both early Chinese, and later within medieval Japanese, culture. Ensuing chapters will explore Zen Buddhism's impact upon emergent sacred symbol system formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of Zen.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Zen in Japan**

Most academic sources recognize 552 A.D. as being the year when Korean diplomats introduced the Buddhist religion to Japan as a result of cultural exchange with the Japanese Emperor. By the early seventh century Buddhism had been established as the recognized state religion, replacing focus on indigenous Japanese Shinto practices. With support from prince Shotoku (d. 621) in particular, Buddhism flourished during this time (552-794 A.D.). This flourishing is well documented and leaves no doubt regarding early Buddhist influence upon Japanese culture. Attempting to establish a specific date for the importation of Zen to Japan, however, remains a more difficult endeavor.

Records suggest that in the seventh century a Buddhist monk from the Hosso school, under influence from Chinese Ch'an teachers visiting Japan, built the first meditation hall at a temple in Nara. While this can be seen as a movement towards supporting the practice of Zen it is important to note that the hall itself was not dedicated exclusively to Zen practice. Later, in the eighth century, there is record of a Chinese Zen monk named Tao-hsuan visiting the same monastery at Nara where he taught for a number of years. Subsequently, in the ninth century, a Chinese Zen master named I-k'ung visited both the Japanese imperial court and a temple in Kyoto where he too taught Zen principles to disciples. Shortly afterwards Zen influence appears to have fallen out of favor in Japan due to political reasons and was not practiced for the next three hundred years. As a result, Zen had minimal impact upon Japanese society during this period and cannot be considered a catalyst for sacred symbol system formation at this time.

During the Kamakura period (1185-1333) we find Zen experiencing a powerful renewal in Japan initiated by a Japanese Buddhist monk named Eisai (1141-1215) who is credited with being the founder of Japanese Zen. After travelling twice to China, Eisai returned to Japan where he established the first Rinzai Zen temple at Hakata in 1191. He was followed shortly thereafter by Dogen (1200-1253) who founded the Soto Zen sect in Japan at Eihei-ji temple in Echizen in 1245. Resulting from the zealous efforts of both Eisai and Dogen in particular, this iteration of Zen took root in Japanese culture and quickly flourished. Thus Zen Buddhism became a catalyst for emerging sacred symbol formation in medieval Japanese society during this time. By introducing, or providing new meaning for, symbolic acts such as tea

ceremony, brush-ink painting styles, zazen meditation practices, and haiku poetry. Zen monks altered the ethos or world view experienced by entire segments of medieval Japanese society in a powerful and pervasive manner. The symbol systems emerging in the wake of such activity served to synthesize cultural perceptions of reality as mediated by Zen.

### Tea Ceremony

Tea-drinking as a practice appears to have existed in Japan since at least 815 A.D. when court records provide an account of emperor Saga drinking tea prepared by a Buddhist monk for medicinal purposes. As author Theodore M Ludwig reveals, this written account, titled the *Nihon-koki*, describes a priest named Eichu as “decocting tea with his own hands and offer(ing) it to the Emperor who in turn presented his outer robe to the monk” (Before Rikyu: Religious and Aesthetic Influences in the Early History of the Tea Ceremony . p 375). Regarding the purpose of this tea-offering Ludwig says:

the implication of the phrase ‘decoct tea’ is no doubt the same as that as the familiar phrase ‘decoct medicine’ suggesting an emphasis on the medicinal use of tea...(however)...the ceremonial preparing and offer of tea...‘with his own hands’ ...implies that Eichu was conducting a tea ceremony similar to that performed...in Buddhist monasteries in China (375).

In addition to use among Buddhist monks during this period, tea drinking as a secular practice appears to have gained popularity among the aristocratic class. There are many references to the act of drinking tea for medicinal purposes found in



poems among imperial records from 814-818 A.D, and ceremonial use of tea among Buddhist monks seems to have continued undisturbed during this time as well. However in the middle of the Heian period (794-1185) tea drinking fell out of favor and was forgotten among the aristocracy and lower classes alike.

When tea drinking was reintroduced to Japan in the twelfth century Ludwig says:

it is significant that when Buddhist priests reintroduced and popularized the practice of tea-drinking in the Kamakura period, they did not draw upon the traditions of tea-drinking or even the tea-fields from the Heian period, but they brought new seeds and new methods of preparing and drinking the beverage from the monasteries of Sung China(376).

During the Kamakura, and later in the Muromachi, the ceremonial use of tea became an integral part of Japanese culture in tandem with, and as a result of, the concurrent reintroduction of Zen to medieval Japan. Indeed, as Ludwig tells us, “the priest generally credited for the reintroduction of tea-drinking into Japan and its widespread propagation is...(the founder of Zen)...Myoan Eisai” (376). In addition to founding the Rinzai Zen sect in Japan, Eisai also brought tea seeds back from China and cultivated them for ritual use at a temple in Hakata. He then wrote the first Japanese treatise about tea in a work titled the *Kissa Yojoki*, often translated as “An Account of Drinking Tea and Preserving Life”, which encourages the use of tea to cultivate a long and healthy life as the title suggests. Although Eisai’s tea-practice may not yet have taken the form of codified ritual that would be adopted by later

Zen monks, “Eisai certainly played a pivotal role in the development of religious and aesthetic attitudes toward tea-drinking in...(medieval)...Japan” (Ludwig, 379).

From Eisai on, the practice and promotion of tea drinking continued unabated by Japanese Zen monks in their monasteries where it is speculated that the demands of communal life required ceremonial tea drinking to be included into the rigors of a monastic schedule. Ludwig tells us that “although historical records are scanty with regard to such seminal ‘tea ceremonies’ in the Kamakura and Nambokucho periods, it appears that Zen monasteries were particularly important in the development of rubrics for the ceremonial drinking of tea” (380). Indeed, Dogen (1200-1253) is known to have included codified rules for the inclusion of daily tea drinking ceremonies to be held in his own monasteries in his essay titled *Eihei Shingi*. Although tea drinking as a secular activity later became popular among the general population, it was in the formal confines of Zen monasteries that the solemn and spiritually transformative tea ceremony, with its emphasis on Zen philosophy and principles, developed.

Resulting from this early nurturance and guidance by Zen, the simple act of preparing a bowl of tea became what author Jennifer Anderson describes as “a positive step towards achieving enlightenment” (Japanese Tea Ritual: Religion in Practice. 481). As Anderson explains, this act utilized a “highly symbolic language which conveys...(a)...meaning...(that)...cannot be fully interpreted out of the context of disciplined practice and conscientious study” (475). For example, by employing carefully chosen utensils such as the water bowl pictured in figure 9 to hold fresh

water to rinse tea bowls or fill the kettle during tea ceremony, tea practitioners



Figure 9. Japanese tea ceremony water pot from the Edo Period (1615-1868). Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.

conveyed a symbolic aesthetic connection to the Zen philosophy of imperfection related to the concept of *Anatman*, i.e. “no self”, which asserts nothing has a permanent fixed cause and therefore everything is impermanent and constantly changing. Indeed, in observing the asymmetrical flowing shape and uneven composition of this particular bowl, one get the sense that the very form of the bowl itself is in the process of shifting into a new shape which will then take on another and another form as existence continues. As the bowl itself is meant to symbolically represent the concept of having no fixed permanent “self”, the tea participants employing its use in ceremony would have been reminded of their own essential



Figure 10. Japanese Shigaraki ware water jar. Kamakura era (1185-1333). Metropolitan Museum of Art.

impermanence.

Similarly, the Shigaraki Ware water jar pictured in figure 10 above provides an exquisite example of Zen's influence upon early Japanese tea ceremony aesthetics. Dating from the twelfth century, this jar would have been used to store water or hold flowers during tea ceremony rituals. Often molded by hand rather than on a potter's wheel, these jars exhibited a rough and asymmetrical shape. While in the kiln, ash settled on the shoulders of the jar, melted, and dripped down the sides in an unstructured manner. Observation of these unpredictable qualities would have served as a vehicle for connecting the creation of the jar itself to the Zen philosophy of impermanence. The earthy, unrefined quality of this particular Shigaraki jar also may have connected tea ceremony participants to an experience of their own sense of Buddha-nature, as yet unrecognized but pregnant with unpredictable possibility.

Further examples of Zen influence upon tea ceremony may be found in the specific appearance and structure of what came to be known as "tea rooms" or "tea houses" which were essentially sacred spaces created for the purpose of conducting ritual. Reproduced tea-rooms from medieval Japan, as viewed in figure 11 below, provide an interpretation of what the original monastic surroundings may have been like when Zen monks were practicing the art of tea. Spare, rough, unrefined, and serene these ritual rooms have a sacred quality to them where each decoration has a specific function meant to create what Jennifer Anderson calls "a metaphorical relationship between physical space and the cosmos" (493). As she explains:

The geomantic orientation of the tearoom identifies it with the celestial plane. Walls function to both define sacred precincts and to

connect them to limitless space beyond. Architectural style also locates the ritual in a historic and ethnic milieu while seeming to affirm the theory of non-existence of space to the truly enlightened (493).

Considering this, one begins to comprehend that the structural spaces utilized in Japanese Zen tea ceremonies existed as sacred symbols whose purpose was to connect practitioners to the wider cosmology of Zen and in doing so, lead them to an experience of *satori*, or enlightenment.



Figure 11. Reproduction Tea Room. Asian Art Museum, San Francisco. [education.asianart.org](http://education.asianart.org)

### Ink-Brush Painting

When discussing Zen influence upon medieval Japanese Ink-Brush painting styles, it is perhaps relevant to quote Dumoulin at the outset. He says:

It is in the realm of painting, however, that we find Zen art at its highest. The landscapes of the Chinese and Japanese painters,

inspired by the religious world view of Zen, are the most abiding contribution of Zen to the fine arts...In Japan this art (Sumi-e) found its true home in the Zen temples where talented monks expressed their enlightenment by their brushwork (A History of Zen Buddhism, 194).

As with most cultural expressions related to Zen the Sumi-e ink-brush painting style owes its origins to Chinese influence. Author Sherman Lee remarks in his essay titled Zen in Art: Art in Zen, “The spontaneous use of ink on paper or silk to produce sketchy images drawn from nature is Chinese in origin and has various, equally important derivations. Taoism played a part...Confucianism, too had its influence...” (240-241). Regarding Chinese influence upon ink-brush painting techniques adopted and later refined by Zen monks in medieval Japan, Lee further explains:

a class of Chinese artistic elites was constantly refining and experimenting with the wide possibilities of ink and brush as a means of conveying not just the appearance of nature, but its principles, its morality...mood and emotions...and under Ch’an Buddhism, of expressing the visual metaphors flashed in meditation. The subjects of these elitist artists were drawn not only from nature but from traditional and Ch’an Buddhist imagery” (241)

Records suggest that Chinese artists influenced by Ch’an philosophy were particularly active early in the thirteenth century. Later in the same century a Zen monk named Mu-ch’i is believed to have created a series of exemplary brush-ink paintings at a temple near Han-chou. Upon subsequently being brought to Japan

these paintings inspired Zen monks in their monasteries to produce artwork directly expressing experiences of enlightenment manifested through their brush strokes.

In observing examples of Japanese Sumi-e painting from the Muromachi (1392-1573) and Edo Periods (1615-1868), provided in Figures 12, 13, and 14 below, one immediately recognizes the simple, unrefined, and spare style that has come to be associated with this genre. Emphasis upon nature is prevalent in figure 12, with the brush strokes conveying a sense of fragility and impermanence through the depiction of orchids flowing upward while being grounded momentarily upon a rock. In viewing this painting one is reminded of the Zen teaching about Buddha-mind being present in all things; perhaps especially in the transient image of a flower as well as that of a stone. Dogen taught that “all mind is sentient being: sentient beings are all Buddha-nature. Grass and trees, states and land, are mind. Because they are mind they are sentient beings. Because they are sentient beings, they are being Buddha nature” (Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism, 80). In recognizing the Buddha-nature present in all beings symbolically represented by this painting, the viewer is thus brought closer to an experience of awakening. Regarding this philosophy Sherman Lee reminds us that in Japanese ink-brush art “Nothing was too insignificant to be the bearer of enlightenment” (255).

Figures 13 and 14 depict the stylized forms of well-known Zen personages. Their features are blurry, suggesting emphasis upon the Buddhist belief in *Anatman* or no self. When one’s identity is constantly changing and cannot be said to contain substantial existence, there is no need to represent individualized form in such

paintings. The stories referred to in each painting would have been well known among medieval Zen practitioners through liturgy, thus it was not necessary for the artist to provide more than passing reference to human form, physical locale and identifiable surroundings in these images. Each of the paintings mentioned here acted as symbolic referents for Zen Buddhist philosophy and were thus part of the symbol system generated by medieval Japanese Zen.



Figure 12. "Orchids and Rock" Muromachi Period (1392-1573). Japan. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.





Figure 13. "Su Shi (Dongpo) in a Bamboo Hat and Clogs" Muromachi Period (1392-1573). Before 1460. Japanese.. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.

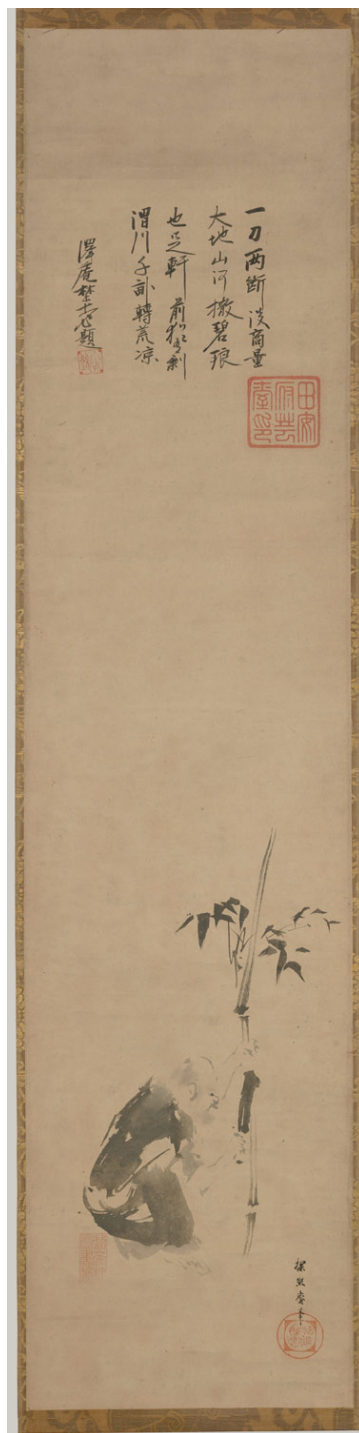


Figure 14. "The Sixth Patriarch of Zen at the moment of enlightenment". Edo Period (1615-1868) Japan. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.

## Zazen

Although consisting of many ritual and symbolic actions related to its observance, Zen has traditionally and primarily concerned itself with the practice of sitting meditation called *zazen*. Zen adherents claim theirs is the true meditation style taught by Bodhidharma in sixth century China. While this fact is difficult to analyze due to a scarcity of historical sources about Bodhidharma, *zazen* is certainly the meditation style emphasized by Dogen (1200-1253), the founder of Soto Zen in Japan. Considered the master of *zazen*, Dogen devoted his time almost exclusively to this practice, wrote extensively about it in his work the *Fukanzazengi*, and taught *zazen* techniques to his disciples. As Dumoulin tells us, Dogen “saw in *zazen* the realization and fulfillment of the whole law of Buddha...this approach is called the religion of “*zazen* only” ...and is regarded as the return to the pure tradition of Buddha and the patriarchs” (159). Dumoulin emphasizes that *zazen* as Dogen taught it was significantly different from other forms of Indian and Buddhist meditation. Focusing upon an upright body posture and full awareness of the breath, in particular, rather than eradicating awareness of the breath from one’s consciousness as taught by other Mahayana schools, *zazen* practitioners aimed to attain an equilibrium of one’s entire being. For *zazen*, focus upon the breath coupled with a goal to “think not thinking” provided ample opportunity to experience moments of *satori* or enlightenment. *Zazen* was in fact considered to be what Dogen called practice-enlightenment. As author Dan Leighton explains with regard to Dogen’s teachings on *zazen* “his activity (*zazen*) is not an activity prior to the realization of enlightenment but its natural expression” (Dan Leighton, *Zazen as*

an Enactment Ritual, 172). Examined from this perspective zazen “has been seen not as a means to attaining some result, but as a ritual enactment and ceremonial expression of awakened awareness” (167). Largely through Dogen’s exhaustive efforts in this domain, zazen became a deeply symbolic act arguably unique to Zen practice, originating in the Ch’an monasteries of China certainly, but finding fullest expression among Japanese Zen monks in the twelfth century onward.

Figures 15 and 16 pictured below provide excellent visual reference for the act of sitting zazen. Representing sculpted portraits of Zen masters from the Kamakura (1185-1333) and Muromachi (1392-1573) periods these figures reveal the emphasis upon upright posture, centered body mechanics, folded hands, and calm mind manifested during zazen practice. When observing these exceptionally



**Figure 15. "Portrait of a Zen Master". Muromachi Period (1392-1573). Lacquer on wood. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.**



Figure 16. "Portrait of Hotto Enmyo Kokushi" Kamakura Period (1185-1333). Cleveland Museum of Art.

realistic and therefore very moving "portraits", the words of Dogen regarding zazen immediately come to mind:

Practicing Zen is zazen...set aside all involvements and let the myriad things rest. Zazen is not thinking of good, not thinking of bad. It is not a conscious endeavor. It is not introspection...when sitting zazen...sit either in the full lotus position or the half lotus position...place the right hand on the left foot and the left hand on the right hand, lightly touching the ends of the thumbs together. With the hands in this position, place them next to the body so that the joined thumb tips are at the navel...straighten the body and sit erect. Do not lean to the left or right; do not bend forward or backwards. Your ears should be in line with your shoulders, and your nose in line with your navel. Solidly sit in Samadhi and think not-thinking...zazen is not learning to do concentration. It is the dharma-gate of great ease and joy. It is

undefiled practice-enlightenment (Kazuaki Tanahashi, Moon In a Dewdrop, 29-30).

When looking at these sculptures one gets a sense that the men portrayed fully understood Dogen's instructions and had adopted a lifestyle including rigorous practice of zazen. The austere serenity found in their facial expression seems especially notable, as does the deeply individualistic portrayal of personality. Contrasted with centuries of highly stylized statues from other cultures depicting the Buddha sitting in meditation, these Zen portraits reveal the practice of actual men seeking and experiencing attainment of the Way through zazen.



Figure 17. "Great Buddha" (Daibutsu), Kamakura Japan. Bronze. 1252 CE. [www.muza-chan.net](http://www.muza-chan.net)

In contrast to the Zen portraits discussed above, the statue shown in figure 17 depicts the Great Buddha of Kamakura (Kamakura Daibutsu), representing Amida Buddha, from the Pure Land (Jodo) Buddhist sect in Japan. This school, or sect, of Buddhism became especially popular during Japan's Kamakura Period (1185-1333)

and was widely practiced by the lower classes. Created in 1252 this statue may be considered contemporaneously with the Zen meditation portraits already mentioned. The Amida Buddha represented here is practicing a meditation style that appears to differ somewhat physically from that of zazen in the placement of this Buddha's hands during meditation. This Buddha is utilizing a mudra style that represents a clear departure from that advised by Dogen in his treatise on zazen. Containing additional stylistic elements, such as drapery and ornamentation, that distinguish it as belonging to a school other than Zen, this statue seems to suggest that zazen was not being practiced by other Buddhist sects at the time. Although difficult to determine what particular thought process the statue is meant to represent, it seems from reviewing relevant literature on the topic that zazen meditation style may have been unique to Zen by the fourteenth century. Thus zazen as practiced in Japan should be considered a sacred symbol belonging to Zen.

### Haiku

Haiku is a form of poetic verse originating in seventeenth century Japan containing seventeen syllables within three lines. Haiku began as the first part of a longer verse form called a *renga* which author Robert Haas describes as being "a form of collaborative poetry, usually written by three or more poets, that was created by giving the *tanka*, the five-line poem of the classical anthologies, a sort of call-and-response form" (Robert Haas, The Essential Haiku: Versions of Basho, Buson, and Issa, 299). The earliest example of *Renga* verses, found in the *Man'yoshu*, dates from the Nara Period (710-794). Over time, *Renga* became codified into a form containing strict rules as to subject matter, story line, mood, etc.

In response to such restrictions, a more spontaneous and playful *Renga* style evolved containing just thirty-six lines. This style was called *haikai no renga*. The three-line verse that began the *haikai no renga*, Haas tells us, was called a *hokku*. Occasionally considered separately from the body of the *renga*, the *hokku* subsequently developed into an independent form and became what we identify as being haiku today.

Although historically *hokku/haiku* clearly occupied a place in secular Japanese society, its practice became closely linked with that of late-medieval Zen. Regarding the influence of Zen philosophy upon haiku, author R. H. Blyth says “I consider Zen and poetry to be synonymous...the life of haiku, the mood in which they are written and in which they are to be read, is the same as that of Rōshi, the same as that of the Diamond Sutra and the verses of *Hekiganroku*” (*Haiku*, v). Haiku, as Blyth asserts, should be viewed in two different senses “in the plural, meaning the poems themselves... (and) in the singular, signifying the poetical attitude of mind of the haiku poets, their way of life, their religion” (iii). Blyth continues to explain that haiku

does not, like *waka*, aim at beauty. Like the music of Bach, it aims at significance, and some special kind of beauty is found hovering near. The real nature of each thing, and more so of all things, is a poetical one...haiku show us what we knew all the time but did not know that we knew...here again is the connection between Zen and haiku...the essential simplicity of haiku and Zen must never be forgotten. The sun shines, snow falls, mountains rise and valleys sink, night deepens



and pales into day...when we are grasping the inexpressible meaning of these things, this is life, this is living. To do this twenty-four hours a day is the way of haiku" (x-xi).

By asserting that haiku seeks to show us the real nature of each thing, Blyth appears to be referring to the Zen belief in Buddha-Nature which emphasizes the unchanging Buddha-mind that exists in all living beings. At the same time, Blyth references the ever changing reality of life as expressed through nature. This appears to be linked to Zen belief in *anatman* or no self, which stresses the constantly changing reality of all elements. Additionally, by describing the ability of haiku to help us grasp the inexpressible meaning of life and to show us what we knew all the time but did not know we knew Blyth is clearly suggesting his belief in a link between haiku and the Zen experience of satori, or enlightenment. Indeed in the passage above Blyth seems to be asserting that Japanese haiku embodied Zen philosophy through highly symbolic mediums to link both composer and receiver to culturally understood versions of reality.

How was this metaphorical feat accomplished? In answer to this question one must examine some of the best representation haiku has to offer, which in this case would be the poetry of Matsuo Basho (1644-1694). Universally considered one of Japan's greatest poets, Basho wrote extensively in the hokku/haiku medium, emerging as the poet who "crystalized the style" (Peter Beilenson, Japanese Haiku, 3). He became a Zen monk in 1679, at which time his poems, as described by author Peter Beilenson, began to "express the rapturous awareness in that mystical philosophy of the identity of life in all its forms. With this awareness, Basho

immersed himself in even the tiniest things, and with religious (Zen) fervor and sure craftsmanship converted them into poetry” (Japanese Haiku, 4). As author David Barnhill asserts, for Basho poetry was “not just an art form but also a spiritual path, a Way” (Basho’s Journey: The Literary Prose of Matsuo Basho, 6). Author Haruo Shirane similarly asserts “ Basho incorporated various aspects of contemporary Neo-Confucian, Taoism...and Buddhist philosophy...into his haikai poetics in an attempt to legitimize haikai...to give it spiritual depth, making it, in some sense, an art of living...but he also stressed such notions as the “ever-changing” ...which ...emphasized its...fleeting character” (Haruo Shirane, Traces of Dreams, 28). Basho’s emphasis upon impermanence in his poetry, coupled with his vision of nature as a universal way of being, cemented his work among a Zen aesthetic.

The following hokku/haiku exemplify elements of Basho’s Zen aesthetic:

Will we meet again  
Here at your flowering grave  
Two white butterflies?

-Basho (as translated by Peter Beilenson, Japanese Haiku, 47)

Clearly a deep sense of the ever-changing reality of all existence is pointed to here, especially with Basho’s use of the term “flowering grave” which symbolically suggests life emerging from death. Invoking the image of two white butterflies also suggests impermanence due to the extremely short and transient life span experienced by those particular insects. I also wonder if Basho meant to suggest that he and the subject of his poem would be re-born as butterflies and then meet again, in that form, at the grave he mentions. This indeed is a provoking

hokku/haiku. In reading it I am reminded of Peter Beilenson's remarks about haiku. He tells his readers "the haiku is not expected to be always a complete or even a clear statement. The reader is supposed to add to the words his own associations and imagery, and thus to become a co-creator of his own pleasure in the poem" (Japanese Haiku, 5).

A second example from Basho reveals similar preoccupation with the Zen belief in impermanence as well as reference to the sentient nature of all beings.

Must springtime fade?  
 Then cry all birds  
 and fishes' cold pale eyes pour tears

-Basho (as translated by Peter Beilenson, Japanese Haiku, 21)

Obviously the fading springtime mentioned in this poem invokes thoughts of impermanence. This image could represent springtime as it occurs seasonally in nature, but also might metaphorically refer to youthfulness in a man's lifetime, which is equally transient. The fact that the birds are crying and fishes' eyes are filled with tears clearly suggests belief in the sentient nature of all things. Thus the birds and fish in this poem would therefore certainly have possessed Buddha-mind or Buddha-nature. The use of such imagery to invoke awareness of impermanence as well as the Buddha-nature present in all beings therefore makes this a very Zen hokku/haiku.

Additional examples from Basho and subsequent poets such as Buson (1715-1783) and Issa (1763-1827) reveal hokku/haiku to have been an extremely popular and effective literary medium in late-medieval Japan. Perhaps as a result of its

accessibility to all classes of Japanese society, as well as the highly symbolic use of language utilized by Zen practitioners such as Basho to convey traditional Zen philosophy, hokku/haiku came to act as a symbol system for Zen by synthesizing cultural perceptions of reality. Hokku/haiku remains extremely popular as a literary form to the present day, and through the influence of North American poets such as Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997) and Gary Snyder it retains strong association with Zen philosophy. Thus hokku/haiku can certainly be said to have effectively altered the ethos and world-view of entire segments of not only medieval Japanese society but the Western world as well. In this way, hokku/haiku may be identified as a sacred symbol system belonging to, or at least strongly shaped by, Zen as that religion took root in medieval Japan.

Having examined Zen Buddhism from both historic and symbolic perspectives in this chapter we find Zen arriving in Japan sometime in the seventh and eighth centuries CE, falling out of favor due to political reasons in the ninth century CE, and remaining dormant in Japanese society for the next three hundred years. In the Kamakura (1185-1333) Zen experienced a profound renewal largely due to the efforts of Eisai (1141-1215), the founder of Rinzai Zen, and Dogen (1200-1253), the founder of Soto Zen. Resulting from the efforts of both Eisai and Dogen, this iteration of Zen took root in Japanese culture and quickly flourished. As a result, Zen monasteries became centers of cultural symbol system formation by introducing or providing new meaning for tea ritual, Sume-i painting styles, zazen meditation practices and later appropriated poetic use of metaphor through hokku/haiku. These practices as taught by Zen monks altered the ethos and world-view of large

segments of medieval Japanese society in powerful and pervasive manners. Thus they should be considered sacred symbol systems capable of synthesizing cultural perceptions of reality as mediated by Zen.

## Conclusion

Studying Zen Buddhism from a post-modern perspective by identifying and observing emergent sacred symbol system formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of Zen, this thesis investigated a particular set of complex symbolic languages whose purpose was to mediate an understanding of sacred reality as shaped by Zen. These “languages” should be considered symbolic in nature in that they express in oblique and figurative manners that which cannot be expressed literally. As objects, acts, events, qualities, or relations that served as tangible formulations of abstractions from experience, such symbols served to synthesize cultural perceptions of reality in medieval Japan. By utilizing such symbolic elements to express otherwise inexpressible experiences deriving from a Zen cosmology, the symbol systems discussed in this thesis had a profound and long-lasting impact upon medieval Japanese society.

In order to explore the contribution made by Zen to sacred symbol formation in medieval Japan we first delineated what exactly was meant by the term Zen. From a linguistic perspective Zen was determined to be the Japanese translation of the Chinese word Ch’an, which in turn derives from the Sanskrit word *dhanya*, signifying meditation or a meditative state. From a historic perspective Ch’an/Zen was defined as a product of Chinese thought arising after China was introduced to

Indian Buddhism in the first centuries CE. Transplanted to China by a legendary monk named Bodhidharma, who is recognized as being the first Chinese Zen Patriarch, Ch'an/Zen attracted followers and blended with and became part of the cultural expression of the T'ang Dynasty (618-907). Surviving persecution in the later part of the T'ang with its monasteries, practices, and philosophies relatively intact, Ch'an subsequently flourished during the Sung Dynasty (960-1279) when it migrated to Japan and became formally established as Zen in that country.

Having provided a brief exploration of the linguistic and historic foundations for Zen this thesis then turned to a study of its philosophical roots. Although difficult if not impossible to grasp from a purely academic point of view we took a quick look at traditional Mahayana Buddhist concepts such as sudden enlightenment (*satori*), practice enlightenment (*zazen*), emptiness (*sunyata*), and Buddha Nature (*tathagatagarbha*). Examining these concept-experiences through the works of scholars such as Heinrich Dumoulin, David Loy, Peter Hershock, Sallie B. King, Toshihiko Izutzu, Kazuaki Tanahashi, and others we arrived at a basic understanding of the central philosophical contributions made to Zen by Mahayana Buddhism. Taoism was also acknowledged as playing a significant role in shaping Ch'an/Zen. Considering this diverse background, Zen was thus identified as being a fluid amalgam of various influences evolving over centuries. These influences naturally provided a wealth of symbol system opportunity within both early Chinese, and later within medieval Japanese, culture.

After establishing philosophical grounding for Zen principles and practices among Mahayana Buddhism as well as Chinese Taoism, we then explored what

happened when Ch'an/Zen was introduced to Japan. Interestingly, Zen appears to have first been imported to Japanese soil in the seventh and eight centuries CE when it enjoyed brief popularity before falling into disfavor in the ninth century CE and disappearing from formal practice for the next three hundred years. In the Kamakura (1185-1333) period Zen worship experienced a powerful renewal in Japanese culture, largely due to the efforts of Eisai (1141-1215) and Dogen (1200-1253), two influential Japanese Buddhist monks who founded the Rinzai Zen and Soto Zen sects respectively. Resulting from the efforts of both Eisai and Dogen, this iteration of Zen took firm root in Japanese soil and quickly flourished. At this time Zen introduced, or provided new meaning for, symbolic acts such as tea ceremony, Sume-i brush-ink painting styles, and zazen meditation practices, and later appropriated poetic use of metaphor through hokku/haiku for expression in pre-modern Japanese society. In doing so Zen became a catalyst for emerging sacred symbol formation.

The symbol systems emerging in the wake of Zen served to synthesize cultural perceptions of reality in various ways. Tea-drinking for instance appears to have existed as an activity in Japan since at least 815 CE, when it was utilized primarily for medicinal purposes. However in the twelfth century the ceremonial use of tea became an integral part of Japanese culture in tandem with, and as a result of, the reintroduction of Zen to Medieval Japan. The practice and promotion of tea drinking by Zen monks in their monasteries resulted in the development of ceremonial rubrics for the preparation and consumption of tea. Resulting from this early Zen nurturance, the simple activity of preparing a bowl of tea became a highly symbolic

act whose purpose was to connect practitioners to the wider cosmology of Zen and in doing so, lead them to an experience of *satori*, or enlightenment.

In the realm of painting, we find Zen influence upon art at its highest. As with most cultural expressions related to Zen the sumi-e ink-brush painting style explored in this thesis owes its origins to Chinese influence. Records suggest that Chinese artists influenced by Ch'an philosophy were particularly active in the thirteenth century. Later in the same century a Zen monk is believed to have created a series of brush-ink paintings that were subsequently transported to Japan. Inspired by these paintings, Zen monks in their monasteries strove to produce artwork directly expressing experiences of enlightenment manifested through their brush strokes. This sumi-e painting style became quite popular as a vehicle for conveying a sense of emptiness, fragility, and impermanence using minimalistic, spare means that have come to be associated with the genre. By referring to Zen philosophies through visually identifiable symbolic forms, the sumi-e painting style became part of the symbol system generated by medieval Japanese Zen.

Although consisting of many symbolic acts such as those as mentioned above, Zen has traditionally and primarily concerned itself with the practice of sitting meditation called *zazen*. This thesis identified *zazen* as being significantly different from other forms of Indian and Buddhist meditation, in that it was considered not just a means to attain a result such as relaxation or a calm mind, but was instead a ritual enactment and ceremonial expression of awakened awareness. Indeed, as taught by Dogen, *zazen* took the form of practice-enlightenment. Through Dogen's efforts *zazen* became a deeply symbolic act arguably unique to Zen practice,



originating in the Ch'an monasteries of China certainly, but finding fullest expression among Japanese Zen monks in the twelfth century forward. Available literary sources suggest that zazen was not practiced in other Buddhist monasteries at the time, and was therefore probably unique to Zen by the fourteenth century CE. Thus we argued that zazen as developed and practiced in medieval Japan was a sacred symbol belonging to Zen.

The form of poetic verse known as hokku/haiku was also identified as being a symbolic element for expression employed by medieval Zen. Although historically hokku/haiku clearly originated and occupied a place in secular Japanese society, its practice became closely associated with late-medieval Zen. Indeed, authors such as R. H. Blyth assert that Zen and hokku/haiku poetry should be considered synonymous with each other. By showing us the nature of existence in metaphorical form, hokku/haiku reveals the Zen belief in Buddha-Nature. This feat is often accomplished poetically through emphasizing the unchanging Buddha-Mind that exists in all living beings. Additionally, hokku/haiku often references the ever-changing reality of existence as expressed through nature which thus reminds us of our impermanence. Through brief examination of hokku/haiku from Japan's greatest poet, Matsuo Basho (1644-1694), we found deeply symbolic language employed to link both composer and receiver to culturally understood versions of reality as mediated by Zen. As a result, this thesis firmly identified hokku/haiku as a sacred symbol system belonging to, or at least strongly shaped by, Zen as that religion took root in medieval Japan.

After having examined Zen Buddhism after it was re-introduced to Japan in the twelfth century CE, this thesis concludes that there was indeed a rapid proliferation of new sacred symbol systems which transformed, or gave new meaning to, perceptions of sacred reality in medieval Japanese society in the wake of Zen. By creating or providing new reference points for symbolic acts such as tea ceremony, ink-brush painting styles, zazen meditation, and hokku/haiku in particular, Zen Buddhist monks effectively altered the ethos and world-view of entire segments of Japanese culture in a powerful, long-lasting, and pervasive manner. From a post-modern perspective therefore, Zen Buddhism was indeed acting as a catalyst for sacred symbol formation in medieval Japanese society after the introduction of that society to Zen.

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