



Why Are Foreign Celebrities Hooked on Zen?: A monk who has traveled the world as a Zen teacher asks, “What is troubling these privileged people?”

Masuno Shunmyo, Head Priest of Kenkohji Temple



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Increasingly, I feel that “Zen” is now an international word like judo and karate.

Twelve years ago, I wrote a book in Japanese called *Zen, shinpuru seikatsu no susume* (Zen, Recommendations for a Simple Life) (Mikasa Shobo). Then in 2019, the major UK publisher Penguin released an English translation called *Zen: The Art of Simple Living*. There was a huge response and I hear that the Penguin Group has already received requests to translate the book into around 30 languages. Things have happened so quickly that I’m surprised too.

What underlies this overseas focus on Zen is increased interest in mental issues. More and more people are now thinking, “Surely living each day with a peaceful heart is the greatest happiness?”

Zen means addressing a question for yourself. How can I live so that in my final days I think I’ve lived a good life? It is very close to philosophy.

But a fundamental difference is that philosophy is an academic discipline and must be based on logic. Zen is something you yourself put into practice and realize. It is not “academic learning” but “training,” which

means accumulating small enlightenments through practical experience. You could say that daily life itself is the training. And to master how to live, we place importance not on material wealth, but on spiritual wealth.

The twentieth century world pursued material wealth. Led by the United States, the formula was to acquire wealth through mass production and mass consumption. But as soon as one thing was acquired, desire for the next arose. People were never satisfied, their minds constantly wracked with thoughts of “more and more.” It was endless. What’s more, the result of chasing after that wealth was that CO₂ and waste emissions worsened environmental problems. More people in developed nations began to feel that we can’t go on as we are.

It was Eastern values that brought light to these times. And among these, Japanese Zen was noticed for how it appears to have stressed the importance of spiritual wealth for hundreds of years. From a Western perspective, Japanese people are interesting for reasons of health; for example, because they

live a long time and because few Japanese people are extremely fat. And Westerners say they'd like to know about Japanese people's underlying beliefs.

My personal feeling is that many intellectuals are included among Westerners with an interest in Zen. And also those people we commonly call "celebrities." Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I was often invited overseas to give speeches. Those "people who have everything" unanimously said that, in the end, they arrived at the thinking of Zen.

Recently, people of Chinese descent in Singapore, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places also aspire towards Zen, believing there is something in Zen that they have lost.

Requests from the global super-rich



"Yu-sui-En" is the Japanese Garden for Berlin Marzahn Erholungspark [Recreation park] in Berlin, Germany) designed by Masuno Shunmyo in 2003.
Photo: Courtesy of Kenkohji Temple

As well as “Head Priest” of a temple, my other title is “Landscape Designer.” I deal with garden design and spacial-modeling design based on Zen thought. I get frequent requests from celebrities interested in Zen, and sometimes I visit their homes.

For example, the guest house belonging to a Singaporean bank owner of Chinese descent was decorated with paintings by famous artists. It looked just like an art gallery.

One evening, I was invited to that guest house. Just through the hall was a living room-like space where I first received a welcome drink. After that, I crossed a pond within the building to the dining area.

That lifestyle seemed like the zenith of material wealth, where all things desired had been acquired. However, the client said to me, “I want a space where I can relax. I want to spend peaceful time in that place.” Jokingly, I said back, “In that case, wouldn’t it be better not to have anything in your house?”

It’s not just him; my celebrity clients also have a strong feeling that they can’t acquire spiritual wealth. What’s more, on a conceptual level, they understand that it’s not something they can buy with money.

In the process of groping around for a solution, they become interested in Zen. They make repeated visits to Kyoto Zen temples, fascinated by the simple gardens.

Next, they decide they’d like to have a Zen garden close to them. They search the internet and, if they find books of garden design I have published in English or Chinese, they contact me.

My “Landscape Designer” title was given to me by an official from the Agency for Cultural Affairs when I won the 1998 New Face Award of the Minister of Education Award for Fine Arts. That person suggested the title and said, “It is different both to a garden designer who makes gardens and to Western landscaping.”

During the flowering of Zen culture that took place in the Kamakura period (1185–1333) and Muromachi Period (1333–1573), there were monks skilled at creating gardens who were called *ishitate-so* (“stone arranging monks”). But at the end of the Edo period (1603–1868) they disappeared.

Right now, I am the only one who calls themselves a landscape designer and does something similar to an *ishitate-so*.

Because of that, I receive many requests from around the world, and I have to turn many down. I also have a temple and a job as a university professor. If I accepted jobs from Europe and America, even just the travel would consume time. So as far as possible I keep to a one-night trip range.

The most distant project I’m engaged in is on the Isle of Man (an island between the UK island of Great Britain and Ireland), but that client comes to collect me in a private jet. Even so, I need to take an extended break from work to visit the location. As a head priest, unless there is some exceptional circumstance, I cannot miss any weekend Buddhist memorial services.

Although I’ve been living in the temple the same way the whole time, these last five years in particular it feels like my name has become like a brand. The majority of private clients are in the top 500 on the Forbes list of global rich. Some have assets of over two trillion yen. These people are extremely skilled at business and have succeeded in their pursuit of money. But they may have come to realize they have neglected spiritual matters.

A barrage of questions at Harvard University

Wearing my “head priest of a Zen temple” and “landscape designer” hats, I’ve been blessed with opportunities to talk about Zen overseas.

In 1990 I gave a lecture at the famous Harvard Graduate School of Design in the United States. I've heard that the university decided to invite me after a Japanese student at the university (someone I'd previously taught landscape design) mentioned me to the Dean.

The topic of my lecture was "Zen and Japanese Gardens." It took place in the Piper Auditorium, where I think there were around 180 seats. It was a success on the day with many people standing to listen.

The lecture began with differences between Western and Japanese values, such as cultural comparisons in architecture and ceramics, or between Japanese and Western arts of flower arranging. After that, I explained how Zen thinking deeply permeates the background of Japanese aesthetics, using gardens I have designed as examples.

What most shocked students were the completely different underpinnings of Western and Japanese design.

Western design is 100% based on the beauty of forms visible to the eye. But in Japan, the formless is valued—such as the aesthetic concepts of *wabi-sabi* and *shousha* (refinement). Particularly in Zen design, there is "design of the heart," where one gives physical form to things one has sensed through training. When I said that, people were surprised and asked, "Don't you design forms?"

The foundation of Western thought is Christianity, in which there is the hierarchy of God, Man created by God, and nature to support Man. Even a single tree that grows in a garden can be used by Man as he wishes. Perhaps there is a relationship of subservience there.

In Buddhism, on the other hand, Man is only one of nature's members. In a Zen garden, plants, stones and humans are equal. We perceive a spirit in trees too, and decide the most suitable position for the tree via a kind of "conversation" with it.

The Q&A after the lecture was tough. The facilitator tried to finish up saying, "This is the last question now" but hands kept going up. Talented students from around the world with serious faces were asking questions such as, "Why do lumps of matter called 'trees' and 'rocks' have souls?"

But once that intense lecture was over, I got the sense that, through landscape design, they had deeply understood the nature of Zen.

The trickiest question I was asked in the United States

Since then, about 70% of the lectures I have given abroad have been about Zen with gardens as the main topic.

There's a very active Q&A each time, but one question in particular was tricky.

An older lady asked the following question during a lecture at a Washington State art gallery.

"I went to Kyoto and saw the World Heritage rock garden at Ryoan-ji temple, but I had no idea what was good about it. What on earth is good about that garden?"

Inside I was thinking, "Now I'm in trouble." But we had the following exchange.

"How long were you there for?"

"About one hour."

"Did you feel that you wanted to sing a song in front of the garden?"

"No, I didn't think that."

"OK. So, what did you do?"

"I just stared at it."

When I suggested *that* might be the answer, she looked surprised and seemed to agree.

I don't know what happened in her heart as she paused in front of the garden. But, the fact is she looked at the garden and asked herself what was good about it.

Zen means continually asking yourself questions about how you think and live. She had unexpectedly done that through the medium of a "Zen garden."

The south wind blows, flowers bloom, and birds come to drink nectar. Thus, nature's providence was the same 100 years ago and will be the same 100 years from now. It goes beyond human planning. In Zen, we call such universal things "truth." As with a Zen garden, when someone stands before nature that reveals this truth, what they feel depends on that person.

How Steve Jobs aspired to a Zen way of living

Zen has spread all around the world, and not just through gardens.

For example, in recent years a branch of Zen has sprouted off the main trunk and is spreading, mainly in the United States. This is the meditation method called "mindfulness."

Around forty years ago, Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical School gave mindfulness a medical rationale. He spent time in *zazen* (sitting meditation) at a Rinzai Zen training place in the United States and, feeling that it could order body and mind, set up a mindfulness center within the university. He began a scientific verification.

As a result of this, benefits were demonstrated: that alpha waves (said to have a positive effect on body and mind) were emitted; and that serotonin (the so-called "happiness hormone") was secreted.

Mindfulness spread as a meditation method for attaining those benefits. However, basing it on results was an extremely "Western" approach. Zen's first emphasis is on mastering how to live, starting with *zazen*. The peace of heart that results is thought to come later.

Someone who deeply perceived this original Zen way of thinking was the founder of Apple, the late Steve Jobs.

From his famous Stanford University graduation ceremony speech, one can clearly see how he aspired to a Zen way of living. Here is a passage from that speech.

"I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?'"

The first character of the Japanese word "*zazen* (坐禅)" (坐) is composed of two component characters meaning "person" (人) over one meaning "earth" (土). At first, people did *zazen* sitting meditation on the bare ground. The character is different to the similar one (座) that includes a roof component over the two people. One of the two people is your present self, and the other is your "original self." It is a you with a soul that is pure and completely spotless.

In other words, the first character in the word "*zazen*" shows the "present you" sitting solidly on the ground and asking the "original you" about how you live now and what comes next.

I think you probably understand now. The way in which Jobs faced the mirror each morning and asked himself questions is precisely the nature of Zen itself.

How Zen created Apple's masterpieces

Jobs was twenty years old when he awakened to Zen. He had dropped out of university and gone back

to his California hometown. Confused and not knowing what to do, finally he arrived at a Zen center. There he met a Soto Zen monk called Otogawa Kobun.

From that time until Otogawa's death, Jobs studied under the monk, learning Zen values and the Zen way to live while doing zazen. At NeXT, the company Jobs set up after being driven out of Apple, Otogawa was appointed Spiritual Director and consulted on everything that happened. Apparently, when Jobs said he wanted to go to Eihei-ji temple in Japan and become a monk, it was Otogawa who stopped him.

Jobs's Zen way of life was also reflected in the company Apple.

When Jobs was in good health Apple was known for not doing market research related to new product development. Jobs's personal theory was that everyone would want those things that he knew he "wanted" after looking into himself. It's a thinking similar to the previous mirror story.

Every one of Apple's products is extremely simple and easy to use. What's more, they are beautiful. The Zen concept of beauty is "subtraction,"; i.e., to cut away the unnecessary as much as possible. In the West and the Japan of recent times, things are "added" during manufacture. Cell phones have too many functions added for convenience and instead they become difficult to use. In Apple's case, they remove everything they possibly can, even buttons. Meanwhile, they pay the greatest attention to the materials and shape. That's probably why Apple products fit the hand so well. Jobs constantly used Zen as a foundation and successfully incorporated Zen in his management.

But there's a Japanese manager who also achieved success through the Zen way of thinking. That's Inamori Kazuo.

The difference with Jobs, however, is that Inamori became a monk and received a Buddhist name, "Daiwa." While Jobs mainly made use of Zen for product development, Inamori makes full use of Zen thinking in his approach to management.

When Inamori set up Kyocera and DDI Corporation (now KDDI), and when he rebuilt Japan Airlines, he asked questions of himself: "Will this be useful for everyone?" and "Will this make people happy 10 years later or 100 years later?" Nowadays, we often see things like creative corporate accounting or faking product performance. Inamori's approach is the complete opposite to tricking people in that way.

The Japanese word for "management" (経営) was originally a Buddhist term. The Buddha's disciples wrote down the things that he told them and tied them together with thread. This is the Japanese character for "sutra" and also the first character in the word for "management" (経). It means to link "truths" together. The Japanese word for management originally meant to carry out truth.

Inamori managed according to this original meaning.

How about zazen on a chair?

Zen isn't just helpful to global celebrities and intellectuals. In fact, it's my constant prayer that Japanese people take notice of Zen and make use of it in their daily lives.

In this time of the Covid-19 pandemic, we could say that many Japanese people have more need than ever for a wisdom that preserves peace of heart. Every one of us is pressured by unease over an uncertain future and dissatisfaction as a way of life we'd taken for granted is restricted.

Until they were stopped due to the Covid-19 pandemic, the zazen sessions at Kenkohji temple in Yokohama where I am head priest were attended by people of a wide range of ages, from 10- to 20-year-

olds to octogenarians. The participants between 10 and 20 years of age were mostly exam students. The biggest group were in their late 30s or older and dealing with pressure at work. And among both men and women, many were trying to master a particular art, such as dance, tea ceremony or Japanese calligraphy.

For modern people, “a time to empty the heart” such as during *zazen* is the greatest luxury, and I feel it is the time needed most of all right now.

There is a Zen term, *kissa-kippan*. It means that when you drink tea you should concentrate only on drinking tea, and during meals you should devote yourself only to eating. These days there’s too much doing two things at once, like using a smartphone and getting information when eating. We tend to end up in a situation where the information is gathered half-heartedly, so we quickly forget, and we don’t know what we’ve eaten either.

Over the long-term, this kind of multitasking puts a very heavy burden on body and soul. That’s why increasing emphasis is put on including a short period of “emptying the heart” in busy daily lives.

When the heart is tired, work efficiency suffers. But if you reset your heart once or twice during the day, you can feel your concentration improve. You’ll become able to do your work efficiently and quickly, able to tackle it positively with a flexible heart.

The most important part of Zen training is *zazen*. At the time of writing, *zazen* sessions at temples everywhere have been halted.

But there’s an easy way that anyone can feel the same comfort as from traditional *zazen*... and that is *zazen* on a chair. If you search the internet or look at one of my books, you’ll find the method.

It has been scientifically demonstrated how *zazen* has the effect of quietening the frontal lobe (the part of our brains that makes decisions and thinks) while also activating the temporal lobe that governs emotions. It is mostly the frontal lobes that are active during modern people’s daily lives, but by doing *zazen* on a chair you can reset that situation for a while.

How you can “spend time” like celebrities

Alongside a time for “emptying the heart” there’s another important way of spending time during this period.

These days we can’t easily spend time with others, so you might say we’ve acquired time to think about things slowly alone.

That’s right... a time to face your “original self” and ask questions of yourself, like Steve Jobs did. Even if you don’t create a Zen garden like global celebrities, with the right approach you can do it anywhere.

In Zen, negative things are turned around and considered positive ones. The Zen way of thinking is not to say, “I can’t do that because of these restrictions,” but to say, “I can’t do that now because of the restrictions, but thinking about it from the opposite angle, I can do this.”

Particularly for people whose lives to date have been busy, time alone is not a bad thing. Grasp it positively as a time for a fresh look at how you’ll live after Covid-19—a chance to enhance your life. To that end, I want Japanese people in particular to bring Zen into their daily lives.

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