

Introduction to Zen Buddhism for Educators

Material Related to Japan Society Gallery Exhibition *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan*

In This Exhibition

The exhibition *Awakenings: Zen Figure Painting in Medieval Japan* features both Japanese and Chinese Zen paintings executed from the 12th through the 16th centuries. The exhibition seeks to explore ways in which we may come to understand more about Zen communities through this lesser-known subject matter of Zen figural painting. Figural works, such as these, are an integral theme in that they served to historically legitimize and bind devotees. It is also important to note, though, that while those who painted these works were closely associated with Zen, this artwork also represents the continuation of a narrative artistic tradition in China and Japan.

Zen and Popular Culture

Zen is a term that is often encountered today in Western popular culture, though it has been divorced from its precise spiritual denotations as a result of its historical trajectory in the West. Zen Buddhism was exported to the United States after the close of World War II, and was readily adopted by the counterculture movement in Post-War America, where the term “Zen” became both generalized and decontextualized. In these circumstances, Zen became somewhat romanticized and came to refer to a psychological state of oneness or emptiness.

While acknowledging this history of the term “Zen” in the West, it is also important to recognize that this is not the nature of Zen Buddhism as it is expressed in the present exhibition. It is difficult to view Zen art, particularly of the Medieval Period, without a more precise understanding of the context of its cultural practice in East Asia, a very general treatment of which follows.

Zen Buddhism in Contrast with other Sects

Zen (as it is known in Japan; in China it is referred to as Chan) is a sect of Buddhism that was introduced to China from India during the 6th century, and then transmitted from China to Japan in the early 12th century. Zen comes out of a long-established Buddhist tradition, and shares major deities with other forms of Buddhism. Its followers believe in overarching principles such as the **Four Noble Truths** and the **Eightfold Path**, and it maintains the liturgy and ceremonies common to other sects.

However, within Zen, there was also a strong resistance toward scholarly learning and the reliance on ready-made texts. Paradoxically, Zen produced a large body of literature and images. However, the insights presented in Zen images were not a part of the religious credo, and it was clear that the focus of monks should be spiritual training, rather than artistic practice.

Zen practitioners also deliberately differentiated themselves from the followers of other sects by adhering to practices that diverge from other contemporaneously popular forms of Buddhism. One of these chief distinguishing factors was a belief that an individual could attain Enlightenment (receive the **dharmā**) through a combination of personal experience, the practice of **zazen** (sitting in meditation), and contemplating **koan** (enigmatic statements). This path to Enlightenment stands in contrast with that specified by Pure Land Buddhism, in which devotees may simply pray to the Buddha to achieve **Nirvana**, or Esoteric Buddhism, in which followers must carefully study the **sutras** (written scripture).

The Basic Practice of Zen

In seeking Enlightenment, serious Zen Buddhist devotees in Japan followed the model set out by the Chinese. These disciples joined monasteries where they observed strict regimens of labor, spent hours in meditation, and continually studied under the temple abbot, particularly practicing *koan*, issues or questions given to monks for the purpose of awakening one's mind. Monks during the Medieval Period in Japan (1185-1600) would travel between and among monasteries within their own country, as well as abroad in China, in pursuit of Enlightenment. It was important to these individuals to study under the discipline of several masters within their lifetime, and to communicate who one had studied under to certify transmission of knowledge. This emphasis led to the custom of Zen masters authorizing portrait paintings of themselves, which were conferred upon monks as they departed one monastery for another.

Zen and Painting

Within the context of Buddhist sects other than Zen, painted and sculpted images served most often as icons and focuses of worship. In contrast, Zen followers ostensibly denied the use of images, and instead produced and employed them, like the ones in the current exhibition, to serve as catalysts to the attainment of Enlightenment. Paintings created by Zen monks in China and Japan during the Medieval period were executed to transmit core components of Zen teachings, while also serving to establish and reaffirm the legitimacy of the sect by tracing its transmission back to Siddhartha Gautama (who later became the Buddha) himself.

Within Zen Buddhist figural painting, there is centrally an emphasis on the transmission of ideas through two modes. The first mode is the official lineage of Zen, expressed through the transmission of the sect itself through portraits of patriarchs. The second mode is a more personal transmission of artistic style, through the continuation of manners of calligraphy and painting, evidencing study with individual masters, and, in this way, Zen appropriated many existing modes of painting.

Official Zen Lineage

The Zen school is one of only a few traditional Buddhism that has survived into the modern world with an unbroken tradition of recording lineage. Paintings included in the current exhibition reflect the importance of the portrayal of deities, quasi-deities, and historical figures within Zen Buddhism during the Medieval Period, even despite a self-proclaimed proscription of figural images. These individuals include gods shared by other Buddhist sects such as the Buddha himself, and the various *bodhisattvas*. Also included in the Zen Buddhist pantheon are other individuals unique to Zen, and often shared or co-opted from local religious traditions. This includes a set of eccentric saints, as well as the lineage of Patriarchs. The Patriarchs were a particularly important subject within the genre of Medieval Zen portraiture, because their depiction very clearly served to legitimize the transmission of the dharma from the Shakyamuni Buddha. Such portraits were often possessed by monks and hung in their private quarters for personal contemplation, rather than devotional prayer.

Simplified Timeline of Major Patriarchs:

27 Indian patriarchs succeeding from Siddhartha Gautama

Bodhidharma – travels from India to China and becomes the first Chinese Patriarch (440-528)

Bodhidharma is succeeded by 5 other Chinese patriarchs:

Huike 487 - 593

Sengcan ? - 606

Daoxin 580 - 651

Hongren 601 - 674

Huineng 638 - 713

Books for Students

Demi. *Buddha*. New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996.

A book for upper-elementary-age children with lush illustrations and clear language covering the major events in the life of Siddhartha Gautama's (563 BCE – 483 BCE), the man who would become the Buddha.

Hewitt, Catherine. *Buddhism*. New York: Raintree Steck-Vaughn, 1995.

An engaging survey of Buddhism including clearly organized topical discussions and relevant photographs. Suggested for upper elementary, middle and younger high school students.

Books for Educators

Brinker, Helmut. *Zen in the Art of Painting*. New York: Penguin, 1988.

Discussion by one of the foremost Western scholars on the topic of the relationship between painting in China and Japan within the context of Zen Buddhism.

de Bary, William Theodore. *The Buddhist Tradition in India, China & Japan*.

New York: Vintage Books, 1990.

A comprehensive discussion of the intercultural traditions of Buddhism and its transmission across Asia.