

# Zen

ぜん  
禅  
zen  
Zen

えん そう  
円相  
ensō

calligraphic circle

めい そう  
瞑想

meisō  
meditation

さと  
悟り

satori  
enlightenment

しょ どう  
書道

shodō  
calligraphy

## The Historical Buddha and beginnings of Zen

Zen Buddhism is said to have begun in India in the sixth century BC with what is known as the 'flower sermon'. One day, according to legend, the historical Buddha did not give his regular spoken sermon, but simply held up a white flower in his hand. A disciple named Kāśyapa realised the true meaning of this silent message: the true path to enlightenment is not within scriptures but through silent transmission. The philosophy of our existence is everything and yet nothing. The universe is empty and yet full. Truth is found beyond the meaning of words in silence.

Kāśyapa became known as the second patriarch of this silent transmission known as Zen. It was not until approximately 1000 years later, during the sixth century that the twenty-eighth patriarch, the Indian monk Bodhidharma (known in Japan as Daruma) travelled from India to China with Zen philosophies. Bodhidharma was said to have sat facing a cave wall near Shaolin temple in central China in meditation for nine years. Through this he achieved *satori* (total enlightenment). He selected a disciple and began the mind-to-mind transmission of Zen principles in China that finally spread eastward to the islands of Japan, where it has established its most profound and long lasting influence.

## Zen Practice

Unlike other Buddhist sects with a large array of deities to assist the faithful to attain enlightenment or rebirth in paradise, Zen followers achieve enlightenment through meditation on their own. In this sense, Zen can be seen as the simplest form of Buddhism and perhaps closest to the historical Buddha's philosophy in which desires and materialistic thought are illusionary and a clouding over of our true nature.

## Zen Art

With long years of practice, Zen monks developed a highly tuned control of brush, ink and paper for self expression in a free and unaffected manner. They found the creation of paintings, illustrated proverbs and calligraphy both a meditative experience and an ideal teaching tool for a philosophy that after all, is considered 'beyond verbal explanation'. In the process of pouring water onto the ink stone and grinding ink from sticks, a monk could have time to contemplate before setting brush to paper and making the final expression with spontaneous freedom. A flexible brush, which was held in the fingertips, responded to every movement of the hand, wrist, elbow and shoulder, and once ink had touched the paper there could be no corrections made. Since brush strokes were considered a direct expression of personal character the works held a spiritual intensity and clarity of thought that represented each individual monk.

Nakahara Nantenbo (1839–1925) was a Japanese Zen monk. A disciplined teacher and prolific painter, Nantenbo used painting and calligraphy to express the Zen spirit that lies beyond words. In the painting *Ensō with a poem*, the circle (*ensō*), accomplished in one long brushstroke, is accompanied by a poem written in calligraphy: 'If that moon falls, I will give it to you. Now try to take it.' Such verses are known as *kōen*; a story, dialogue, question, or statement that cannot be understood by rational thinking but may be accessible through intuition, thus leading us to the realm of inner silence and the essence of Zen. This style of painting descends from the practice of Chinese Zen masters, who were known for drawing a circle in the air to suggest more than words could explain. This practice progressed to monks who would produce an ink painting of a circle (*ensō*) for their pupils to meditate on. It would seem that nothing could be simpler than a circle produced with one brush stroke. However, like Zen philosophy, emptiness is the entire universe and a void is the embodiment of enlightenment and an object of deep contemplation.

## Zen influence beyond the monastery

The Zen concept of emptiness representing our true reality can also be found in the work of contemporary artists. In this photograph by Hiroshi Sugimoto we see a blank white movie screen of a drive-in theatre. In this series of works Sugimoto has travelled throughout America photographing movie theatres, but not in the conventional photographic manner of capturing a split second in time. He placed his camera on a tripod at the back of the theatre and instead of using a flash to illuminate the darkness he opened the shutter of the camera for the entire length of the movie. This process softly illuminated the surrounding landscape of the drive-in but more interestingly took a single photograph of the entire story of the film. In this reality, the entirety of the film becomes nothing. Two hours of information becomes a simple silence for us to contemplate its true meaning and, even more profoundly, the true essence of our own complex lives.

NAKAHARA Nantenbo 中原南天樺  
Japanese 1839–1925  
*Ensō with a poem* 円相 (1922–23) Japan  
ink on paper  
32.8 x 58.7 cm (image and sheet)  
Lillian Ernestine Lobb Bequest, 2003  
(2003.268)

Hiroshi SUGIMOTO 杉本博司  
Japanese 1948–, worked in  
United States 1972–  
*Winnetka Drive-In, Paramount* 1993  
gelatin silver photograph, ed. 8/25  
42.3 x 54.1 cm (image), 47.5 x 60.1 cm  
(sheet)  
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Contemporary Photography, 2009  
(2009.565)  
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