

Zen and Culture

by Yasuda Joshu Dainen roshi
Hakukaze-ji, 1976

[published in Zanmai 8]

Question: *It is often said, for example in Daisetz Suzuki's works and in all of the books of his many imitators and admirers, that Japanese culture has been shaped by Zen. All of the various arts that we associate with Japanese culture such as flower arrangement, tea ceremony and so on, stem from Zen. What do you think about this?*

Joshu Roshi: It is very hard for me to comment on things like Japanese culture. I am Japanese. So things like chado (tea ceremony) and so on, these are things I almost cannot speak about because they are so much a part of my culture. My feeling is so deep. I could try to show you though.

If you brought me a tea bowl, one of those fine, very very expensive tea bowls... You know that most of them have names? Like people's children or pets, they have names... If you brought me one of those tea bowls then I could show you my feeling. I would first have to drink some water. Yes, very much water. And then I would pick up the tea bowl and look at it from every angle. I would sit in seiza before it and admire it, how much it cost. And then I would piss in it. And then I would drink more and more water and piss in it again and again. I would have to drink the Pacific ocean and the Atlantic ocean to be able to truly show you my feelings about Japanese culture and what it has to do with Zen.

Some people think that Japanese culture is the same as Zen and that Zen is a Japanese thing. These people understand nothing. Zen is originally Indian. It is also Chinese. And then it was practised in Japan when Dogen zenji opened Kannon-dori-in. There is also Korean Zen. Now Zen is in Canada, America, Europe. Zen is about the art of being human, not any culture. Mind and body have no culture. Zen has no place because all places, all lands, nations, mountains and rivers are in the Mind of the Buddhas and this Mind is Zen.

Zen and Japanese culture have become all mixed together. Japan was held hostage for hundreds of years by crazy army people, dictators called samurai and shogun. When I was younger, Japan was still being held hostage by the army and there was a big war. This is craziness. These army people and rich people, lords and ladies and emperors wanted to play with Zen. Some lazy monks played with them and painted pictures for them, taught them how to eat and drink tea. But the army people and the lazy monks made a big game out of tasting tea. They sat around making moon faces and doe eyes about "simplicity" in little tea huts. These tea huts were built especially for them to sit around like that. This cost a lot of money, being "simple" like that.

In Zen sodo (monks hall) we eat oryoki. Careful, careful. Clear and calm. Just eating. Taking care of the bowls, the cloths, the food, each other. In the mornings the monks share tea with the teacher. From this style of doing things, came things like tea ceremony.

Tea ceremony can be beautiful. Can be wonderful. Meditation while moving, but not real zazen because you cannot look deep with insight. I do chado, hai? Sometimes. Sometimes.

And Zen brush, Zen sho is beautiful. Stark. Very clear practice.

But Zen arts are only Zen arts if you do zazen and study with a teacher. Then they will help to make your practice round and full.

Zen arts without Zen study is just cultural junk.