



## **“Access to Japan” series**

### **Part III: “On Zen” lecture**

#### **East Asia Institute, the University of Texas at San Antonio**

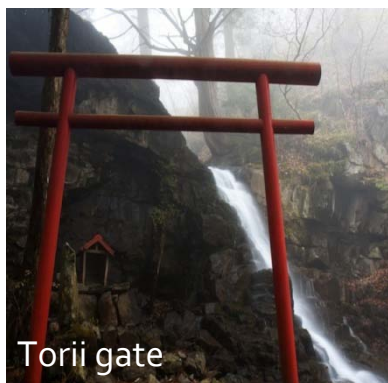
January-March, 2011

On Saturday January 22, 2011 Professor Taeg Nishimoto gave a lecture entitled “On Zen” at the Institute of Texan Cultures. This lecture was part three of the East Asia Institute’s “Access to Japan” series and it was attended by more than 80 people.

Nishimoto is the Associate Dean of the College of Architecture at the University of Texas at San Antonio and was the former president of the Japan America Society of San Antonio. He was born in Osaka, Japan and has worked internationally. He received his bachelor’s degree from Waseda University

and his master’s degree from Cornell University. Nishimoto joined UTSA in 2007 as a professor and Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. His built and un-built works have been widely published and displayed. They have also won many prestigious awards and honors.

Nishimoto explained the concept of Zen through a variety of subjects and he also used extensive examples of how Zen permeates life in Japan.



Torii gate



Horyuji-Temple



道

*To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever.*

## Zen and Religion

During the time of ancient Japan, *Shinto* was the national belief. In the early sixth century, Japan was exposed to Buddhism. The people of Japan combined the two by inserting their *Shinto* deities into Buddhism. Years later, a Japanese Buddhist monk called Eisai travelled to China where he was exposed to the Zen sect of Buddhism.

Eisai created a sect called *Rinzai*. They believed that every chore done in daily life was part of the effort to become enlightened. They also practiced *koan*. *Koan* are puzzles a master would ask his

disciple. The disciple would then consider the question while sweeping or doing other chores. When the disciple could answer the question, he was enlightened.

The monk Dogen created another sect called *Soto*. The focus of this sect was to search one's internal world, which includes sit, meditate, and draw *enso*, a circle, to reveal the state of one's enlightenment.

The core belief, according to Dogen, is as follows:

“To study the Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self

is to be enlightened by all things of the universe. To be enlightened by all things of the universe is to cast off the body and mind of the self as well as those of others. Even the traces of enlightenment are wiped out, and life with traceless enlightenment goes on forever and ever.”



Dogen (1200-1253)



Professor Taeg Nishimoto at the “On Zen” lecture

### Zen and Architecture—The Emergence of the Rock Garden

A Zen Monk named Muso Soseki (1275-1351) was asked to change an aristocratic residence, called *Saiho-ji*, into a Zen Temple. He wanted to create a landscape that was new and radically different from what the aristocrats would normally have seen. For inspiration he looked to Chinese ink paintings.

Around the mossy lake area of the building, he placed rocks. Soseki brought them in from other places, but set them there as if they had always existed in that place. The very act of bringing them in and



Saiho-ji

all the effort involved was considered part of the act of Zen.

Another temple called *Ryoan-ji* also strove for a unique landscape. This temple had walls built around the garden to cut off the outside world. This temple’s garden is what one imagines when thinking of rock gardens. *Ryoan-ji* is famous for having fifteen rocks in the garden, but only fourteen of them are visible at



Ryoan-ji

anytime. There is also a zen term that means “to stand the stone.” When looking at the rocks in the garden, there is no sense of how large they really are. All that is seen is the tip of its existence above the ground.



Noh Masks



Above: Ink painting by Sesshu

Bottom: Tea room

**Zen and Art**

Nishimoto stated that “all the philosophical and spiritual backgrounds of traditional art forms would be placed in their understanding of Zen.”

Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506), a famous ink painting master, tried to capture the landscape in Zen. In one landscape he painted of the snow, he included a nonexistent line. In a defining moment, he began to include things that were not really there. This was the beginning of an idea called *haboku*, in which “there is no desire to show something as anything.” It strives to capture the state of mind from the moment the tip of the brush touches the paper.

*Haboku* is also seen in *Sosho* style calligraphy. The *Sosho* style uses lines in a very expressionistic way.

The tea ceremony also became popular during this time. A man called Murata Juko (1423-1502) was obsessed with it. He stated that the tea ceremony was not about showing off expensive things. Instead, it was about having a completely miniaturized and humble space that made the ceremony more spiritual.

Zen also influenced the theater style, *Noh*, which is based on the idea of “reducement”. All the actors wear masks and their subtle movements condense the emotional world.



*“Zen itself is not a religion or a philosophy. It is a way of thinking and acting. It is the idea of nothingness and casting off the body. To understand you must forget yourself.”*

Professor Taeg Nishimoto  
UTSA

### Zen and Nature

Every season in Japan has a certain characteristic, such as cherry blossoms flowering in the spring, or cicadas chirping during the summer. The changing of seasons can be beautiful and it is possible to feel the passage of time.

Waterfalls are considered sacred places in Japan. There are many mythical stories connected to them. Usually a *torii* gate is built around a shrine near the waterfall. Water itself is very

sacred as well. Without water, there is no rice. Without rice there is no food or money. This relationship created a perception of how land, water, and flat fields come together.

Professor Nishimoto concluded that Zen itself is not a religion or a philosophy. It is a way of thinking and acting. It is the idea of nothingness and casting off the body. To understand you must forget yourself.

Among the 80 people in the audience was UTSA student of art and Japanese studies, Elizabeth Costales. “I think lectures such as this one are important, especially in relation to the World Heritage photos from Japan exhibit,” said Costales. “Nishimoto gave a lot of information that really leads to a better understanding and a deeper appreciation for the photos and the places depicted in them.”

**“Access to Japan”** series is brought to you through the collaboration of UTSA’s East Asia Institute, the Institute of Texan Cultures, Center for Global Partnership, H-E-B, the Japan Foundation and the Japan America Society of San Antonio:

Part I: Essay/Photography contest

Part II: World Heritage Photos from Japan: Two Thousand Years of Legacies

Part III: “On Zen” lecture

Part IV: Family Day on Japanese Culture

For more info see <http://www.utsa.edu/eai>

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