

Zen Buddhism and Temple Arts: An artist's look at path and practice in Buddhism

Content:

A survey of the performative and symbolic meanings of physical expressions of devotion in Buddhist spiritual life; the forms, meanings, and aesthetics they embody. Lectures, visual materials, on-hands practice, and field trips will allow the student to understand what is meant by physical and artistic concerns in form and ritual. As a creative maker I would bring a particular look at the beauty and creativity that is encouraged and included in this practice. An example might be the **form of bowing**: how is it done, why do we do it, what is the history behind it, how is it an act of devotion, what are the aesthetic concerns around practicing it as a ritual, how does it impact social interactions?

Topics to be covered:

1. history of ethical principles. Journey as an artist	
2. sutra copying, brush, enso, zengo work	<i>shodo</i>
3. Japanese garden landscaping	<i>Nihon-teien</i>
4. elements of altar and flower care	<i>kado</i>
5. ritual cloths and eating ; way of tea	<i>oriyoki chado</i>
6. particular imperfect aesthetic	<i>wabi-sabi</i>

Each week we will take up one item on the curriculum list above and thoroughly investigate it. In the years I have been both an artist and a Buddhist practitioner I have developed a body of knowledge around how these two intentions interact and inform each other. As an artist I appreciate and cultivate physical expression of emotion and thought in particular with my photographs; as a Buddhist I appreciate and cultivate where physical expression exists –what it looks like and how it can be incorporated. Some of these practices, such as sutra copying, are not well known in American Buddhist circles even though they are part of ancient history. In recent years, I have actively taught and spoken about bringing these physical expressions more central to study. My original involvement with Buddhism was through gardening at Green Gulch Farm—a gateway that allowed me to get to know and understand through physical practice.

Week 1: Introduction to Japanese Zen and its aesthetic and ethical principles.

A Zen practice that includes manners of expression in the arts. Reviewing a personal perspective and Japanese history of an alignment with ritual arts. Body and mind in physical practice. Visual artists influenced by Zen: Rothco, Sugimoto, Noguchi.

How I came to know this physical expression of practice: what does it look like. BOZ book.

Week 2: Paper to Pen: Sutra copying, enso, zengo work.

Using black sumi ink and brush, we will copy ancient text as prose, poem, or simple phrase. How literacy evolved in Buddhism and what happens when copying occurs in particular with the unforgiving medium of sumi ink.

Week 3: Japanese garden landscaping: creating a place to pause.

The garden of a temple is where monks cultivate an environment to be seen from the window and to be enjoyed in long solitude or as a slow meditative walk. The aesthetics of these gardens is particular and unlike other gardens. Images and a walk through a garden will be part of this week's curriculum.

Week 4: the altar: care and components.

Any devotional practice usually includes a site whether in home or temple. The elements that are required for this site and how it is cared for will be covered. With these elements and garden flowers, we will make altars and learn about the form of Japanese flower arrangements.

Week 5: Way of tea and ritual eating

Bringing the way of tea into the classroom, I (or an invited tea master) will create a small teahouse environment and serve tea. The elements and basics of matcha tea will be covered in this week.

Week 6: The particular imperfect practice of wabi-sabi

In conclusion, the components of wabi-sabi and how it applies to all the covered topics will be discussed. Imperfect is a coveted aesthetic in this practice as well in my own work as an artist.

Additional materials: Hand out week one: a koan, suggested follow up assignments for each week, and reading list. Digital projections of examples of temple arts. Possible site visit near campus—Japanese style garden. Visiting Zen temple or tea practitioner. Readings from literature and sutras.