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# ZEN AND THE ART OF TRAVEL DREAMING

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11 DEC 2017: What is the sound of one hand clapping? When I was 10 years of age, my Mom would play a comedy record on which this question was posed, to the delight of the audience. It took me a few years (until November 2017) to understand that this was an example of "Satori"

which, according to Zen teachings, means "seeing into one's true nature".



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There is no specific answer to the rhetorical question. It would be asked by a Zen master "to reach the mind", as the famous Zen author, D.T. Suzuki explained.

A visit to the Suzuki Museum in Kanazawa, Japan, was really an exercise in appreciating space. There was a meditation room overlooking a pool that perfectly reflected the deep blue sky and the colourful Autumn leaves. There were exhibits on the life of Suzuki but most exhibits had no explanation attached, as the belief is that each person's first impression is the most important thing. The museum visitors, of all ages, quietly looked at books in the library, sat by the outdoor pool and obviously enjoyed the down-time.

The next day near the castle-town of Ono, we turned down a Cedar-lined road. Cedar trees grow tall and straight and are seen as symbolically linking the heavens to the earth. In Japan, a row of

Cedar trees indicates that you are approaching a Shrine or a Temple.



In this case it was Houkai-ji, the Good Treasure Temple, where one of the monks was waiting to lead a Zen workshop. He began by pointing to a sign that read, "Those who visit this temple are welcome to see the Mountain in Blue". He explained that Blue means the truth; the mountain is life. We were told to sit comfortably (or in the lotus position for those who could put their right foot on their left thigh and their left foot on their right thigh (at the same time)) and sit tall as though our heads were supporting the ceiling. He instructed us to place our hands in the Zen meditation position (mudra) and then he said "Just as the clouds drift in the sky, let your thoughts drift away".

One person asked if Zen and Buddhism always went together and the answer was no. Zen can be stand-alone or it can be tied to a belief or a way of life. Case in point, as I was trying to allow my thoughts to drift away, I kept thinking about travel and destinations and those drifting clouds. Even when I closed my eyes (and was reminded that you are supposed to keep your eyes open), I envisioned blissful, calm travel experiences where, sometimes just for a moment, I was able to tune out of my daily routine and escape from the issues that were weighing on me.

I thought of Marimi Gampo, a self-proclaimed house-wife on the island of Oshima, who led us on a short bird watching expedition. When I asked how she became interested in birds she thought for a moment and then without answering, asked "what about you?" I explained that when I saw a Hawk-like Tombi, one of those graceful black-eared kites floating in the sky, it took me away from all my stress. And when I saw those yellow white-eyed birds (mejiro) nattering in the berry trees, I was carried away to a state of tranquility. Marimi laughingly said, "yes, me too" and that was the end of our Q & A session!



I thought of the tunnel at Zenkoji Shrine in the city of Nagano. The Temple, founded in the 7th century, is one of the most beautiful in Japan. In the Main Hall there is a 45 meter long tunnel that runs under the alter. It's pitch dark inside but somewhere on the wall, on the right hand side, there is a piece of metal that represents the key to paradise and if you find it then your wishes will be fulfilled.

They say that walking through the tunnel is symbolic of going through the body of the Buddha with the eventual light at the end, representing re-birth. We entered the darkness with our right hands feeling the wall and at some point, someone excitedly whispered, "I found the key". There was a mixture of amusement, joy, relief and hope in her

voice. It was one of those experiences that no selfie could possibly capture.

I thought of other travel experiences that took me to a different plane. In Kanazawa I ate Gold! Actually it was an ice cream that sold for 891 Yen (\$10). One of the counter staff at Hakuichi happily poured the ice cream into a cone and then delicately wrapped a sheet of gold leaf around it. It looked like something that King Midas would have enjoyed as a snack. (The store also sold gold leaf chocolate cake, candies and even Sake with gold flakes in the bottle). And the taste? Well, at a thickness of 1/10,000 of a millimeter, it really wasn't about the flavour but just the idea of eating gold and thankfully I didn't get addicted.

I'm sure the Zen monk detected that my rebellious thoughts were not emptying out of my mind as they should, especially when I stared to think specifically about clouds, which aside from reminding me of the song 'Both Sides Now' that Judy Collins sang in the late '60's, they also reminded me of the mounds of daikon radish used as garnish at my favourite Izakayas in Tokyo! My thoughts keyed in to the assorted sashimi at Wasuke, presented as an eye-catching, mouth-watering artistic masterpiece, the tuna belly at Sushi Darihan, so fresh it dissolves in your mouth, the grilled oyster at Uosan that turns food into a religious experience, and the wasabi meshi at Tsuzuku, which despite the hellish heat of the dish, is nothing short of heavenly.

Later we chatted with the Zen monk, and after he showed us how to walk in Zen fashion and sit on the Zafu, the sitting cushion, we said our goodbyes and walked back along the Cedar Tree-lined road. I reflected on the experience with two thoughts in mind.

First, travellers are seeking experiences these days where they want their thoughts to drift as clouds ... and they thrill to the fact that there are so many different kinds of clouds in the sky. Each cloud represents an adventure - active or passive - that holds the possibility of pure escapism for that person. Such is the joy of travel.



Second, just as students depend on the guidance of a Zen master, travellers depend on the skills of trained travel professionals who have "been there and done that". You have the power to help your clients escape - and the size of the planet is your only limitation.

During the holiday season, give yourself a mental pat on the back for the good work you do. In true Zen fashion, use one hand and listen for the sound. If that sound is "ahhhhhh" then you are on the right path!

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Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.

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