



## Back to the Garden

***Gardens of Awakening:***  
***A Guide to the Aesthetics, History,***  
***and Spirituality of Kyoto's Zen***  
***Landscapes*** by Kazuaki Tanahashi,  
photography by Mitsui Nagase. Boulder,  
CO: Shambhala, ¥4,622 (cloth).

“Some people wake up with mountains and waters [a “garden” in this case], easing boredom, and use them to help their practice of the way. This is precious, as it is different from those who merely love mountains and water,” tantalizes author Kaz Tanahashi in the first chapter of *Gardens of Awakening*. Using examples of well-known Kyoto temple gardens, he invites visitors and readers to understand how these living, man-made environments reflect Zen Buddhist practice, prompting one to reconsider: “What exactly am I looking at?”

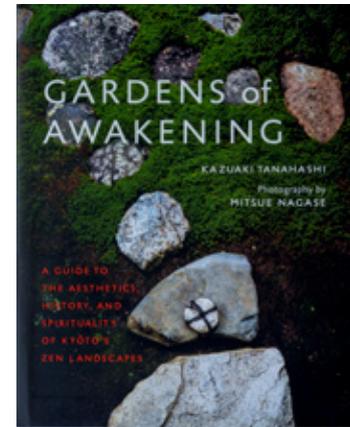
Case in point: when photographing the gardens for the book, Mitsui Nagase experienced the grains of sand at Kennin-ji “dancing” in the “gentle yellow wash of the day’s last rays of sunlight.” Trained in Miksang contemplative photography, the images she captures reflect this “quieting of the mind.”

Like many other fine books (listed in the appendix), *Gardens of Awakening* covers the historical backgrounds, functions and aesthetic principles of Kyoto’s Zen landscapes. The book details how Japanese gardens are living legacies that have benefited not only from their original designs but also careful conservation and maintenance begun centuries ago.

Its unique voice, however, encourages the reader to reconsider the purpose of these constructed spaces within a monastic or temple complex: How does a framed composition of stones, pebbles, moss, trees, water (and in some cases borrowed vistas of distant mountains) enhance one’s experience of the ambience of “silence, stillness, isolation, plainness, austerity, sternness, purity, and emptiness?” Who and what inspired the creation and the conservation of these always-growing spaces adjacent to always-deteriorating buildings?

A respected Buddhist practitioner, scholar, and translator of Zen teachings, as well as superlative calligrapher, USA-based Tanahashi distinguishes seven prominent qualities of Zen art. It is: “direct, ordinary, vigorous, gleaming, pivotal, nondual, and inexhaustible.” Each of these ideas is presented with translations of poems by Japanese and Chinese masters, and analyses of several select temple gardens which are also depicted in Nagase’s color photography. Tanahashi’s text informs our examination of the unique features of each selected landscape, giving a bit of background on temple founders and garden designers.

He details, for example, the contributions of Zen “National Teacher” Muso Soseki, credited with designing the landscape at Tenryu-ji in Arashiyama, anchoring the tradition but goes forward to contemporary caretakers and visitors. He covers principles of



stone works, as well as the features and functions of a garden adjacent to a room for tea ceremony.

The author’s narrative voice is informal and informative when he guides us through the nuances of different Zen lineages. I especially found interesting his explanation of how the Chinese “Five Mountains” system of ranking Zen monasteries was adopted, first in 1299 by Japanese monks with patronage from the Kamakura shogunal government, and later, in 1333, when the central power shifted to Kyoto. Thus, one can consider how Japanese garden designs supported and reflected evolving social behaviors as well as aesthetics over the centuries.

I found Tanahashi’s guidance offered helpful in recontextualizing memories of the gardens I visited not long ago that are still freshly lodged within my imagination. Even for someone who has yet to venture through a temple gate, this volume can be enjoyed as a silent partner with whom to wander through these iconic landscapes and thereby to renew one’s spirit.

The appendices include historiographic listings of masters quoted, translations (with Joan Halifax Roshi, Ph.D., founder and abbot of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe New Mexico) of two key Buddhist chants, a map, bibliography and an ample index.

— Lauren W. Deutsch