

**On Eric Cunningham's "Cultivating Enlightenment: The Manifold Meaning of Japanese Zen Gardens" from winter 2016**

From Todd Lewis, The College of the Holy Cross

*I write to critique the author's use of terms. I have been researching, teaching, and trying to fund a campus Japanese garden/tea building for twenty-five years, and having visited dozens of gardens in Japan, and all major gardens in North America, and worked with scholars and designers in the field of Japanese gardens, I feel that one must object to the author (and classroom teachers as a result) purveying the usage "Zen gardens" to refer to either dry gardens or tea gardens in this tradition. While it is true that Zen Buddhism was part of the cultural matrix that inspired their development, there were other factors as well. (This is discussed in Marc Keane's Japanese Garden Design and many other sources.) It is also not the case that these gardens are found predominantly exclusively on Zen monastic precincts—far from it, as many exist in residences, hotels, public parks, museums, restaurants, etc. that are certainly not affiliated with Zen. The style of gardens discussed in the article might be better referred to generally as "sukiya gardens" or more precisely identified as stroll or viewing gardens so as to highlight the diversity of forms and functions. Precision of adopting the most apt terminology is the best practice when doing cross-cultural work. "Zen Gardens" invites historical misunderstanding.*

**We asked the author of the article, Eric Cunningham, for a response.**

Dear Editors of EAA,  
Thank you for forwarding Dr. Lewis's critique on my piece on Zen gardens. Upon reading, it occurs to me there is nothing in it that really demands a response, as Dr. Lewis has not formulated a counterargument to anything I wrote, nor does he provide any proof that I made any statements in error. He merely "objects" to my use of certain terms, none of which are even controversial. He also makes some unwarranted conclusions regarding my limited understanding of the use and applicability of Asian gardens and then implies that these transgressions, in the aggregate, pose some threat to the well-being of students and the educational process.

Because I believe that the greatest threat to educational process is academic laziness, lack of clarity, and hazy, emotive "objections" to people with whom we disagree, I will indeed respond. For the sake of good pedagogy, let me examine Dr. Lewis's arguments from top to bottom:

He writes: "I feel that one must object . . . to the author . . . purveying the usage 'Zen gardens' to refer either to dry gardens or tea gardens in [the Japanese] tradition."

If I were the first person to make the radical claim that the dry gardens and tea gardens that have been cultivated on Zen monasteries for centuries are "Zen gardens," then I would have a greater stake in defending this particular turf. As it is, there has never been any reason to question the association between Zen monastic institutions and these specific gardens. It is difficult to determine whether Professor Lewis is defending the integrity of Zen as a classifier or the integrity of Asian gardening as a domain of activity

that has been unfairly claimed by Zen. In any event, he has not provided me with any grounds to change my terminology. If Professor Lewis had been asked to write or speak on the topic of "Zen gardens," would he have excluded dry gardens or tea gardens from his discussion?

The term that Lewis would propose as a substitute, "sukiya," refers to an architectural style (*sukiya zukuri*) that seeks to integrate what is commonly understood to be the Zen garden aesthetic into living and working spaces. If one examines the history of the term *sukiya*, one will find that it postdates the arrival of Zen in Japan and seems to be an outgrowth of a preexisting monastic aesthetic, not the wellspring of the aesthetic itself. This brings me to the next objection.

He writes: "While it is true that Zen Buddhism was part of the cultural matrix that inspired [the gardens'] development, there were other factors as well. (This is discussed in Marc Keane's *Japanese Garden Design* and many other sources.)"

My article traces the history of the East Asian garden tradition back to pre-Buddhist Chinese estates, so I don't think this is a valid or even very well-thought-out critique. I never said nor would I presume to argue that Asian landscaping techniques originate in Zen Buddhism, but any consideration of the "cultural matrix" to which Professor Lewis refers must include the reality of historical development. The arrival of Buddhism in Japan in the sixth century, to say nothing of the planting of the Zen sect in the late twelfth century, reinvented the gardening tradition in terms of an undeniable Buddhist aesthetic. Moreover, it is also undeniable that the Zen monasteries were the primary sites of the production and preservation of this aesthetic. This is not to say that monasteries were the "only" sites, but again, the article was about Zen gardens. Accordingly, I discussed the various types of gardens that are, in fact, associated with the Zen tradition. This brings me to the last "argument."

He writes: "Precision of adopting the most apt terminology is the best practice when doing cross-cultural work. 'Zen Gardens' invites historical misunderstanding."

Regarding the first sentence, I couldn't agree more, which is why I am as precise as I can be in all my terminology. Regarding the second sentence, I would submit that my article, read in its entirety, explains precisely how and why the Zen tradition influenced preexisting Asian gardening techniques to the extent that the term "Zen garden" has become a widely understood historical concept. It is certainly not a neologism of my own. The gesture of reducing the Zen garden to (or worse, renaming it as) merely a species of *sukiya zukuri* would be equivalent to saying that Catholic Gothic cathedrals would be better classified as "houses of worship." The assignment of such terms as Zen actually contributes to the precision of understanding, historically and aesthetically. I hope that the teachers reading *EAA* will grasp this more readily than Professor Lewis has. ■

Eric Cunningham  
Professor of History, Gonzaga University