

# Shinshoji Zen Museum and Gardens

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The dry landscape garden at Shinshoji

## International Zen Training Hall at Shinshoji Temple in Tokyo

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The first time I participated in Zen meditation, at a 1980s retreat for foreigners at a temple



outside Tokyo, I could hardly breathe. I feared that the monk wielding a wooden stick and gliding stealthily among us would catch me fidgeting and give my back a good whack.

But a few months ago, at an overnight Zen retreat at the International Zen Training Hall at Shinshoji Temple, in Hiroshima Prefecture, I actually asked for it.

My old back was aching, and so I gave the signal by bowing slightly with my palms together, crossing my arms in front of my chest, and bending forward. Whack! My mind jolted to the here and now, my aches temporarily forgotten.



And so I was able to concentrate anew, hopelessly I might add, on not concentrating. No wonder it's sometimes called the "encouragement stick."

On subsequent sessions of *zazen* (seated meditation), I didn't hesitate to ask for a bit of encouragement whenever my mind or body wandered.

## Escaping the crowds at Shinshoji Zen Museum and Gardens

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With Japan experiencing a boom in overseas visitors and an over-abundance of crowds in popular destinations like Kyoto and Tokyo, Shinshoji Zen Museum and Gardens seems far off the beaten path. It lies secluded in woods, surrounded by the sounds of birds and insects.

Yet it's easily accessible, just a 30-minute bus ride from Fukuyama Station, a stop on the Shinkansen bullet train racing between Osaka and Hiroshima.

Perhaps one reason Shinshoji lies off the sightseeing circuit is that it's relatively new. Barely 60 years old, it's in stark contrast to Japanese temples with centuries of history. Not that you can tell by looking at it.



The sprawling complex contains structures from the Edo Period (1603-1868) that were relocated here, like the main gate, which once stood on the grounds of Kyoto Imperial Palace. There are also faithful replicas, including tea ceremony rooms designed by famous tea masters centuries ago.

## History of Shinshoji Zen Museum and Gardens

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Shinshoji was established in 1965 as a temple of the Rinzai sect, Kennin-ji school. It was founded by Hideo Kambara, then president of a shipping company, who wished to memorialize and comfort the spirits of shipping employees who had lost their lives in accidents. He also wanted to create a Zen training monastery for Japanese and foreign visitors, where they could experience Zen for a few months and, if desired, go on to pursue the priesthood.



With few takers, however, Shinshoji expanded its offerings in 2016 to reach a wider audience. Whereas most Japanese temples are inscrutable, closed to casual visitors except for their main halls and perhaps a treasure museum or a garden, Shinshoji offers itself as a destination, where you can lose yourself for a few hours or a day. What sets it apart is that there's plenty of information in English.

## Touching the spirit of Zen through mundane activities

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Shinshoji's overriding philosophy is that the spirit of Zen can be found not only through meditation but also through life's mundane activities. Thus, while you can certainly sign up for zazen, sutra copying, a one-day Zen experience, or the overnight retreat, you can also find Zen sipping *matcha* (green tea) with a view of a garden, savoring a lunch of *udon* (noodles) similar to that served to monks, or cleansing the mind and body with a hot bath.



Maybe you'll be touched by the spirit of Zen gazing upon artwork both medieval and strikingly contemporary. But no one will blame you if you get no farther than the Garden of the Appreciating Heart. Of course, none of these activities seem very mundane to me.

The first thing you notice upon entering Shinshoji is its exquisite Garden of the Appreciating Heart, said to represent the universe with its islets, boulders, lotus, stunted pines, moss, brightly colored koi, and flowering plants and trees.

Among its many features are the landing where boats depart for the islands of gods and immortals (one of which is said to hold a miraculous medicine for agelessness and immortality), stones symbolizing Mt. Fuji and other famous mountains, and the Dragon

Flower Waterfall, whose sound is said to help visitors acquire a Buddha-mind.

Because I stayed overnight, I had time to enjoy tea with views of the garden at Gankuin, constructed in 1377 and rebuilt in 1647, as well as at the more secluded Shoruken. Using historical records for guidance, Shoruken is a replica of tea rooms that were designed by later generations of famous tea master Sen no Rikyu and destroyed in a 1788 fire.

Don't miss the udon lunch at Gokando, a simple dining room with a view of a brook and greenery. Its meal is the same one served to monks, consisting of thick noodles and five bowls containing condiments like shaved ginger and pickled vegetables.

I learned during my Zen retreat that monks dine in silence, except during days ending in a four or a nine, when udon is served and noisy slurping is allowed. You'll eat with the customary oversized chopsticks, which double as clappers when monks chant sutras before meals.

It's said that the Rinzai sect custom of eating noodles is tied to the Kyoto Rinzai sect headquarters at Tofukuji Temple, whose founder brought flour milling techniques back from China in 1241. That's a very long time.

## **Leading to a Pagoda**

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Pathways through Shinshoji's extensive grounds lead to a pagoda, a bathhouse with views of a bamboo grove, bell towers, and subsidiary buildings where people pray for such things as a harmonious life, good health, safety on land and sea, and a painless death without long suffering.

## **Experiencing Zen through art**

Shinshoji's Hondo, or main hall, stands at the top of 160 stairs, along with an impressive dry landscape garden. The garden's gravel is meticulously raked in patterns that resemble "waves" lapping against "islands" of boulders and bushes, which always leaves me wondering how it's accomplished without leaving footprints. There aren't even any dead leaves or twigs lying about to mar the effect.

But the main attraction at the Hondo is Shogondo, an art gallery with one of the best collections by Hakuin (1686–1769), a famous Rinzai sect monk, artist, and calligrapher. Hakuin drew most of the collection's some 200 black-ink and color paintings and one-line calligraphies when he was in his 60s through 80s, which, according to Shinshoji's pamphlet, was when the artist was in his prime. Inspiration for the rest of us.

Timed entry is required for the KOHTEI art pavilion, which lies off on its own and looks all the world like a floating celestial object. This contemporary installation, by sculptor Kohei Nawa and the architectural team Sandwich, is designed as a bridge between Zen and art, the past

and future.

But mostly it's an experience, where you ascend a pathway through a rocky landscape and enter the pavilion through a small entryway. Then you sit in darkness, until an ever-so-gradual light appears far away. Gradually it reveals itself as an ocean of possibility, with mesmerizing ripples reflecting glimmers of light, inviting you to contemplate and meditate.

## **My overnight retreat at Shinshoji's International Zen Training Hall**

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Just a Japanese couple from Hiroshima City and I signed up for our overnight retreat. It's offered on a Thursday or Friday one to four times a month, depending on the number of reservations and availability of an English-/Japanese-speaking visiting monk, Jirai Mehl, who leads participants in zazen, chanting, sutra copying, meal etiquette, and the basic concepts of Zen.

Originally from Germany, Mehl came to Japan in 2001 for an intended two-year stay studying Zen. That wasn't long enough, he said, so he's still here, which naturally made my overnight quest seem downright silly.

"Use your time here just for the experience, not to make interpretations," Mehl advised. "Zen is to be in the moment, a singlemindedness, to concentrate on what you're doing and forget everything else."

Not that we had much time to interpret. From our 3pm check-in to our 9:30am departure the next day, we were constantly kept busy. We had five sessions of zazen alone, which, for me, was the biggest challenge to living in the moment.

Mehl said the purpose of zazen is not, as I had erroneously believed, to completely erase thinking. ("You'd be dead," he pointed out.)

Rather, we were told to concentrate on our breathing and to focus, through half-closed eyes, on a spot about five feet in front of us. If we needed help concentrating, we could always ask for encouragement from the stick. For me, the 6am zazen was the easiest. My mind is void of just about any thought that early in the morning.

Sutra copying, too, in which we traced characters on a sheet of paper, was a spiritual lesson in living in the moment, as was the sutra chanting and our morning chores sweeping and wiping down wooden railings and steps (yep, cleanup is part of monastic training).

Meals brought whole new rituals, forcing us to concentrate on the business at hand. There was sutra chanting before and after meals, and an order to how we lined up our bowls and how we ate. We cleaned our bowls using a leftover pickled vegetable to wipe out any residue (no water needed), after which we folded a cloth over our bowls and oversized chopsticks, ready for our next meal. Except for instructions from Mehl, meals were eaten in silence.

“There’s a big misunderstanding in the West,” Mehl said. “People think Zen training is a nice time and comfortable. But it’s like boot camp, stressy and pushy.”



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## A Zen takeaway

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The biggest takeaway from my overnight Zen retreat is that I’m not cut out to be a monk. I like talking during meals. Daydreaming is a favorite pastime. Does writing constitute living in the moment, or is it an indulgence, following my thoughts to all kinds of places before settling on the right words and nuance?

But it did reawaken my desire to live more in the moment (raise your hand if you, too, read *Be Here Now* by Ram Dass back in the day). I learned that many activities can fill us with the spirit of Zen, whether it’s gardening, cooking, brushing our teeth, or cleaning, and many people incorporate zazen into their daily lives.

“With Zen you concentrate on what you are actually doing,” Mehl said, “so there’s no difference between the holy and mundane. You can practice Zen in daily life.”



