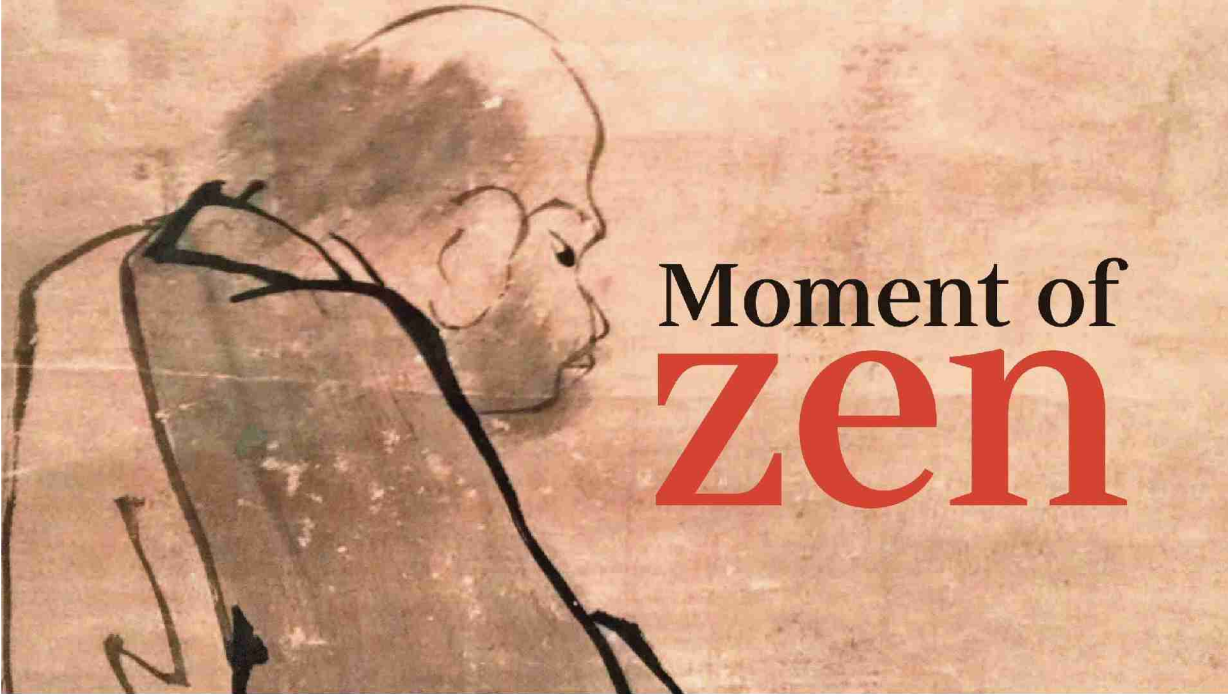


## Better Living



### Moment of **zen**

Unkoku Toeki inked this hanging scroll of Monk Tokuzan during the Edo Period (1615–1868). JIM BECKERMAN/THE RECORD

## Newark Museum exhibit eyes Japanese Buddhism

**Jim Beckerman** North Jersey Record  
USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

Zen comes to us from Japan.

But its influence extends as far as outer space. That is, if you count the Jedi master Yoda, who taught young Luke Skywalker such Zen-flavored maxims as: “Do or do not. There is no ‘try.’”

“Star Wars” is just one example of how Zen Buddhism — unique among Eastern religions — has made the leap into Western pop culture. It’s become a kind of shorthand for peace, tranquility, mystic wisdom.

“I think Zen is a very popular word nowadays, which has come to mean a lot of things, and actually doesn’t even refer to the actual religion anymore,” says Midori Oka, guest curator of the new art exhibit “Beyond Zen: Japanese Buddhism Revealed,” at the Newark Museum through Jan. 5.

As the title suggests, “Beyond Zen” aims to put Zen in a larger context — as one of

three major schools of Japanese Buddhism. Which, in turn, is just one branch of the global religion founded around 500 B.C.E. in India by prince Siddhartha Gautama — The Buddha, the Enlightened One — and from there spread throughout the East.

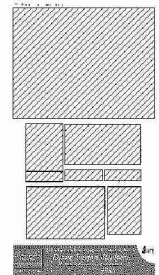
Statues, jewelry, scrolls, mandalas, portable shrines, ritual implements, images of all kinds — 50 pieces in all, from the collection the Newark Museum has been amassing since 1909 — help flesh out the culture of Japanese Buddhism in its several incarnations. The oldest of the pieces dates from the 14th century.

“There are different types of Buddhism,”

### See EXHIBIT, Page 3BL

says Oka, a Westchester resident. “But in Zen Buddhism, there is a heavy emphasis on meditation, which is a lot of hard work. Trying to think about nothing is a hard thing to do.”

Hard or not, Zen remains, for many



Westerners, attractive.

Ever since U.S. servicemen discovered it during World War II, and professor D.T. Suzuki popularized it among Americans, Zen has become a fad, a catchphrase, a cliché.

There are books called “Zen in the Art of Archery,” and “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.” There are bands called Nirvana, and Zen for Primates. People keep Zen gardens, follow Zen wellness programs, attend Zen corporate seminars. In the 1960s, LSD was known as “instant Zen.”

Zen has pretty much become a synonym for “mellow.” Which is why some of this art, from other schools of Buddhism, may surprise you.

There is a long scroll that depicts, graphically, the torments of hell: from the old lady Datsue-ba who weighs your garments to see how heavy your sins are, to horned devils, souls enveloped in flames, and sinners climbing mountains of needles.

“There is a beautiful maiden above, but once they reach her, of course, she disappears, and they have to start this all over,” Oka says.

Other images depict, in dazzling detail, the delights of heaven: bejeweled trees, flowers, musical instruments, dancers.

“This is an image that shows Amida (celestial) Buddha, welcoming the person that’s about to be deceased into the Western paradise that he presides over,” Oka says.

## Zen and the art of enlightenment

“Esoteric” Buddhism and “Pure Land” Buddhism — two of the three types with deep roots in Japan — are less familiar to Westerners. But Zen, brought to the far east by the Indian monk Bodhidharma in the sixth century C.E., was an ideal export.

For one thing, it was aimed at the common man, more than an elite class of scholars and monks. For another, it was all about instinct.

Enlightenment, Zen teaches, can happen in an instant. Anyone can have an “aha!” moment when ego and the problems of ego — pain, fear, anger, envy, sorrow — drop away like an old

cloak, and you find yourself connected to every living being, to the past, present and future.

“You lose yourself, and find you’re connected to the whole universe,” Oka says.

But you can’t think yourself there. In fact, logic, rationality, can get in the way.

That’s why the most famous Zen creations are the parables and riddles — “koans” — that are meant to break the mind of logic. Many sound crazy — irrational.

“What is the sound of one hand clapping?” is the most famous.

Zen may be the only world religion that is funny. Or at any rate, witty.

“What is The Way?” a student asks a Zen master.

“What a fine mountain this is,” the master replies.

“I’m not asking you about the mountain, but about The Way,” the student says.

“So long as you cannot go beyond the mountain, you cannot reach The Way,” the master replies.

Zen masters themselves were sometimes eccentric, colorful. Yoda doesn’t have a patch on Kensu, seen in a black-and-white brushstroke drawing, with a shrimp at his feet.

“He was known as an eccentric fellow who used to meander around the river banks,” Oka says. “The story is he reached enlightenment one day while eating a shrimp.”

Zen, Oka points out, was and is a serious discipline, for all its quirky humor. But the disdain for rationality struck a chord in the 1950s and ‘60s. If logic had brought us the atom bomb, then perhaps it was time to look elsewhere for wisdom.

“I think we just need to fight the demons in our head all the time,” Oka says. “I don’t know about others, but I certainly find life that way. I had a friend who said, ‘It’s like being a dog. You just be.’”

But Zen is not only big picture. It’s also a great everyday philosophy, Oka says. Which is why people have found it helpful for everything from gardening to — yes — motorcycle maintenance.

“You don’t want too much, you don’t



want too little, you want the middle way,” Oka says.

“The Zen abbot I knew would do small pieces of calligraphy. We got to choose one and take it home,” she recalls. “The one I chose, he wrote — in translation — something like, ‘Take three steps forward, take three steps backward.’ I think that’s a beautiful way to think about life. It’s like, ‘You win some, you lose some.’ I think something like that is very practical.”

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**“You lose yourself, and find you’re connected to the whole universe.”**

**Midori Oka**  
discussing enlightenment

## **Beyond Zen: Japanese Buddhism Revealed**

**When:** Noon to 5 p.m., Wednesdays through Sundays, through Jan. 5

**Where:** [Newark Museum](#), 49 Washington St., Newark

**Tickets:** Free with museum admission (\$15, \$8 for children, seniors, veterans teachers and students with valid IDs

**Info:** 973 596-6550 or [newarkmuseum.org](http://newarkmuseum.org)



**Womb World Mandala silk hanging scroll.** NEWARK MUSEUM



**Portable Shrine with the Wisdom King of Passion. Painted on the doors and back wall, from right to left: Monk Kukai, Eleven-headed Kannon, Dainichi, Fudo, and Bishamonten, Guardian of the North.** JIM BECKERMAN/THE RECORD



**Midori Oka, guest curator of the "Beyond Zen" exhibit.** JIM BECKERMAN/THE RECORD



Detail of a Buddhist hell. From the "Beyond Zen" exhibit. [NEWARK MUSEUM](#)