

**ZEN AND SHADOWS**  
**INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND AESTHETICS**  
**IN TANIZAKI'S "IN PRAISE OF SHADOWS"**

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## INTRODUCTION

One's spiritual viewpoint leads them to a particular understanding of the way that the world seems to function. An affinity towards experiencing that world in a particular way comes with this understanding. To pursue the aesthetically pleasing and to impart beauty on one's surroundings is to shape one's preference as to how to experience the physical world. Aesthetics can be understood as intimately linked with spirituality, and the appreciation of beauty can be seen as a spiritual experience.

A number of factors influence the way that we perceive our surroundings. On the most basic physical level we take in information through our outward senses, discerning color, sound, and shape to determine the identity of an object. The information gathered at this stage is considered largely objective. When it is sent to our brains for further evaluation, however, certain idiosyncrasies come into play. How does one determine whether or not an object is aesthetically pleasing, or beautiful? The many lenses established by personal experience and culture play a role in this evaluation. An aesthetic property such as beauty is subject to a great deal of interpretation and opinion. Its definition is influenced by established modes of thought; from personal preferences that differ between individuals to cultural norms governed by society, exposure to media, and values about the way that the world works.

In his "Reading Against Culture," David Pollack defines an aesthetic object as "an emblem of a group's sense of itself in the world which summarizes the story of its relations with those others against whom the group defines itself" (Pollack 94). A cultural group generates this sense through many methods, all of which come into play in building this concept of aestheticism so important to the formation of an ideal image of the world. The construct of spirituality exists as a combination of internalized values and beliefs garnered from society. The

culturally influenced religious beliefs and practices of a collection of individuals play a role in establishing a societal norm of aesthetics. It is also important to note that although this aesthetic is influenced by spirituality, its effect is not confined to religious individuals in a society. Instead, the effect described is one of culture, in which spirituality plays a part in defining a background of principles which then have an effect on aesthetic values.

The goal of this paper is to explore the ways in which such aesthetic values can develop out of a set of spiritual concepts. Zen Buddhism in Japan will serve as a particular example of this phenomenon. The choice of Zen as a spiritual path through which to explore this theory is not an accidental one. Numerous aesthetic ideals can be derived from the philosophy of Zen. Zen also is unique in certain ways when compared to other religious traditions. The spiritual path's central values are philosophies of life and the nature of the world. This contrasts with many other religious traditions, rife with precise rituals and elaborate ceremonies. An aesthetic mindset can be deduced straightforwardly by examining this set of philosophies because they, rather than formal procedures, are the elements at the Zen tradition's forefront.

The essay "In Praise of Shadows" by Japanese novelist Junichiro Tanizaki argues the presence of a culturally based aesthetic in Japan. Tanizaki explores this aesthetic by way of a series of anecdotes from his experiences in Japan and from experiences of friends in Western cities. Through these anecdotes he discusses works of art and architecture, foods, and traditions. Based on his experiences he has come to the conclusion that there is a fundamental difference in the way that the Japanese as a people perceive beauty and aesthetic appeal as compared to the ways those in the West construe these ideas.

By deriving aesthetic principles from the philosophies of Zen and finding the ways in which they manifest in Tanizaki's piece, I will be able to pinpoint the spiritual influences acting

upon this cultural aesthetic. Through these influences, I will explore the intersection between spiritual ideals and aesthetic ones.

### ZEN AND ART

In order to examine Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows" through the lens of Zen Buddhism we must first establish a background in Zen philosophy itself and its applications in the formation of an aesthetic. By taking apart some of the attributes that comprise Zen we will be able to discern the ways in which its philosophies create an ideal image of the aesthetic world. With these tools in hand we will then be able to analyze Tanizaki's work and determine where Zen ideals manifest in his portrayal of the Japanese aesthetic.

To examine Buddhism in its full breadth or even Zen in particular would be far outside the scope of this paper. Instead, this section will focus particularly on certain key aspects of the philosophy. We can infer a set of aesthetic ideals appropriate for a Zen mode of thought from these aspects. These are the ideals that will then be applied to the concepts of beauty and art in Tanizaki's piece. Some of these points are ways in which Zen differs from other schools of Buddhism, and others are details of Buddhist philosophy that remain integral to the Zen mode of thought.

Buddhism depicts the world's true nature as one of interconnectivity, or co-arising. We consider the people and objects that we come into contact with based on identities, creating a list of qualities to define what we are and are not. Defining myself as a student examining the connection between spirituality and aesthetics, for instance, instantly cuts me off from those who are not students examining the connection between spirituality and aesthetics. Although this is a simple example, it gets to the heart of the concern, that this separation is what causes suffering in

the world. According to Buddhist thought, in actuality these identities are false, and once we are able to establish that truth we will be able to recognize that all of existence is in fact interconnected. It is a belief system that holds the dissolution of the preconceived notions of self as separate from all being as one of its highest philosophical goals.

As all beings and aspects of existence are non-separate, the propensity for enlightenment is within all people and in that way all people are Buddha already. “One of the most important doctrines of Zen Buddhism is its thoroughgoing egalitarianism concerning the Buddha nature (understood roughly as the ultimate reality), which makes no value discrimination between various objects and activities” (Saito 381). This differs from a typical or non-Zen way of perceiving the world. Ordinarily, one takes in their environment from their own viewpoint with little consideration about the consequences of or meaning behind this action. In fact, however, the privilege one grants to this singular perspective is merely an artifact of the perceptual system and has little basis in truth. A person locked into their own viewpoint in this way would tend to have appreciation mainly for things that are optimally useful to them, things that achieve the human model of flawlessness, things that are whole and functional, symmetrical and complete. Such an aesthetic position exacts a perfecting influence on the world and would tend towards the desire to embellish or mend; to consciously work on a piece until it reaches this imagined ideal point.

Someone of the Zen mindset, however, would be struck by the beauty of an object without finding the need to polish it out themselves, instead appreciating the ways in which the world has already exacted its influence upon it. Such an appreciation for objects in their natural state is one integral aspect of Zen aesthetics.

When we subtract these sets of identities away, the illusory boundaries between self and others are dissolved. The core of existence is revealed to be nonexistence, the “essence” of all things non-essence or nothingness. The recognition and acceptance of the truth of this nothingness is essential to the ability to attain enlightenment. If recognition of the empty nature of all things is a principle tenet of Zen, this view must have some effect on the ways in which practitioners of Zen perceive the world around them. Certain aesthetic qualities would be found appealing to someone who is striving to embrace emptiness. Clutter and embellishments would be less attractive to a person who sees the void as ideal. Instead, a Zen mode of thought would lead to the appreciation of empty spaces and simplicity. It follows that another aspect of the Zen aesthetic may find beauty in unfilled space.

Transience is an element that plays a dual role in Zen aesthetic ideals. First, it is important to remember that since all things are at their core equal in their nothingness, the passage of time, while appearing to enact change upon objects, in fact has no effect on this nature. Zen holds that through physical changes an object’s true nature as nothingness remains unaffected. Because of this, in spite of any decay or effects of aging, an object will remain at its core the same, and thus an aged object will be considered equally useful and have equal potential for beauty as a new one. “The aesthetically worthwhile objects and activities are not limited to what is normally considered to be noble and elegant” (Saito, 382). Since all things are inherently equal, the effects of time or damage do not belittle a piece in the eyes of Zen.

Objects depicting the effects of transience also provide a plainly evident display of the Zen principle that possessions are fleeting in nature. Because of this, not only are aged objects considered on equal footing as new ones, they can in fact be seen as more desirable. The concept of transience plays a role in the Zen aspiration to cut ties with possessions and to recognize that

things, both ideas and objects, are not actually ours to hold. As time enacts its effects on people and possessions this truth becomes more and more apparent; all things decay and fall out of the physical space. If one tries to cling to such possessions one will always be met with sorrow. As their familiar physical manifestations are impossible to grasp, they cannot be owned in any true way. If one becomes enamored with a leaf on a tree in the summer, brilliant green and full of life, and wishes to hold that image of the leaf forever, one will be disappointed. With the coming of autumn, the leaf will change in color, and in the winter it will fall. The material of the leaf will soon decay and turn to dust. Representations of transience have an important part in the Zen mode of thought. An example such as this serves as a stark reminder that the substance of things is no-substance, there is no lasting truth in the physical nature of individual objects. Because of this, portrayals of transience such as fading, aging, decay, or brokenness play a role in the aesthetic of Zen.

Aesthetic principles can also be drawn from the method of reaching the acceptance of these tenets of Zen philosophy. While some schools of Buddhism place a great deal of importance on examining and meditating on scriptures, Zen claims that enlightenment cannot be achieved solely by following an established prescribed sequence of actions. Although a master in a Zen monastery passes down methods and teachings to his students, no person will reach enlightenment by attending solely to such outwardly gained ideals. In essence, the teaching of Zen presents a paradox, for it can only provide some measure of the means but can never bring to fruition the end (enlightenment) in its own right. There is no one route, no linear path to bring about this goal. A student attempting to achieve enlightenment by sticking his head in a book of scriptures would be akin to someone looking at a finger that was pointing to the moon. Moving

one's eyes the final inch to gaze upon the moon itself or delving deeply into one's own self in meditation is that ultimate step which is dependent only on the self.

Indifference towards established iconography, traditional symbols, and stylistic methods is one aesthetic principle drawn from this set of values. While Zen aesthetic works may utilize any of these methods, none of them are integral to defining the aesthetic. Instead of dependence on pre-ordained techniques, what defines the aesthetically pleasing is a work's ability to evoke a meditative mindset on principles such as the appreciation of nature, emptiness or non-essence, and transience. Although Zen artworks may contain representational forms, or be carried out in particular styles, none of these attributes are what define the aesthetic itself. Outward influences in the way of ideological imports from external cultures are seen as extraneous at best. Attempting to adhere to an externally imposed style at the detriment of internally understood principles would go against this aesthetic.

These Zen spiritual notions are not merely philosophies to be pondered over, they are meant to affect one's method of taking in the world. Because of this, aesthetic tendencies can be drawn forth from them. Zen differs from other schools of Buddhism in the importance it places on personal introspection over use of scriptures and external teachings as a necessity for enlightenment. This conception would lead to an internally based aesthetic with an indifference or distaste towards externally established symbology, icons, or stylistic methods. Zen does not make value distinctions; in the eyes of Zen, all is non-separate in nature. This renders unnecessary the human tendency to exact a perfecting influence, as all things are by essence one and the same. Aesthetically this would lead to an appreciation of things in their natural state, undermining the need to alter or adorn. This sameness stems from the Zen precept that at its core all in existence is nonentity, nothingness. Because of this, simplicity and empty space in

particular will be seen as pleasing to the Zen aesthetic. Finally, transience is a part of Zen thought in two central ways, both of which have aesthetic consequences. The fact that all things are equal in their non-essence means that the changes that are enacted upon a person or object as a result of time have no true effect on them by nature. In this way, a shimmering new object and a tarnished old one must be viewed as equally perfect, as they are of the same material. Additionally, transience provides a very apparent reminder of the unreliability of existence and the contradictory nature of possessions.

“In Praise of Shadows” contains numerous references to these four principles of reverence towards nature, emptiness, transience, and nonadherence to externally established styles. Throughout his work, Tanizaki stresses that the aesthetic ideals he identifies are elemental aspects of the Japanese mode of thought. However, he fails to qualify what aspect or aspects of Japanese culture lead to the development of this set of ideals. This thesis will demonstrate the prevalence of these Zen principle based aesthetic qualities in the piece, which suggests a connection between the Zen mode of thought and the set of aesthetics Tanizaki defines as integral to the Japanese culture.

### **JUNICHIRO TANIZAKI**

I must preface my analysis of Junichiro Tanizaki’s essay “In Praise of Shadows” with some measure of introduction of the author himself. Although my focus is on the ways in which spirituality leads to aesthetic ideals, an individual author has a nexus of forces working upon him at all times, and at the very least aspects of this background must be acknowledged as another possible point of influence.

Junichiro Tanizaki was born in 1886 in Nihonbashi in Tokyo to a merchant class family. His grandfather had businesses in printing as well as lamp lighting, both of which he passed down to Junichiro's father. Although the lamp lighting firm proved to be too much for his father, who suffered from ill health, they retained the printing business for some time. In his autobiography, "Childhood Years," Tanizaki muses as to whether some measure of his desire to become a novelist stemmed from these early days around the printing presses. The family did suffer from financial difficulties, however, and Tanizaki's spoiled childhood did not lend itself well to preparing him for the economic hardships his family faced later in life.

Tanizaki was exceptionally close to his mother. He found her to be an outstandingly beautiful woman, and his writing is filled with references to her, some more Oedipal than others. The infusion of these and other perverse themes are one reason that Tanizaki is a controversial author even in Japan. "In a culture as meticulous in its definitions of acceptable social behavior as uncomfortable with deviations as Japan's, the extremes that take center stage in Tanizaki's writings are bound to raise eyebrows and blood pressure levels" (Gessel, 69).

Although the sexuality imbued in many of Tanizaki's references to mother is undeniable, she also forms the center of a nexus of nostalgic longing that permeates Tanizaki's works. "Much of the 'tradition' in Tanizaki's works is closely linked to the author's nostalgic memories of early childhood...Every writer indulges on occasion in sentiment; Tanizaki, however, made a career of it" (Fowler, 479). "In Praise of Shadows" is no exception to this rule. Tanizaki's perpetual yearning for days past has a great deal of influence on "In Praise of Shadows," which presents the Japan of ancient times as compared to the changing Japan of today as one of its main dichotomies. He looks longingly upon a past Japan with minimal outside influence and makes great criticisms toward the intrusion of Western stylistic methods in Japan.

Apart from his childhood beside the printing press, other experiences in Tanizaki's early life built his interest in the arts and provided material for his later study of aesthetics. In his autobiography "Childhood Years," Tanizaki speaks at length about his experiences at traditional Japanese theater performances. His time spent at the theater was one of the things that led him to an appreciation of beauty and, as he discusses within "In Praise of Shadows," also showed him how setting and circumstance can hold a great effect on the appearance of things. As he saw men take stage and transform into women with femininity rivaling any female he encountered in the real world, he would remain struck by this strange effect of appearances, how setting could transform "the hands of the man on the stage [into something] indescribably beautiful, while those on [his] knees were but ordinary hands" (Tanizaki, 25).

Although spiritual themes can be found in his works, Tanizaki himself was not a particularly religious man. Few references to religious practices can be found in his autobiography, and these events mainly serve as a backdrop for incidents that drew his greater attention. This fact makes Tanizaki's work ideal for this study. If he was a deeply spiritual person who consistently wrote pieces with religious themes, the presence of aspects of spirituality in his work would say little about the intersection between spirituality and the aesthetic. Instead, Tanizaki is an example of a person who was infused with spirituality by way of his cultural environment; rather than actively pursuing religious modes of thought his personal mode of thought has a strand of the spiritual woven in through the deeper level of his unconscious.

This thesis uses a translated version of "In Praise of Shadows" as its primary source and, as such, my discussions center around the English version of the text. However, at this point I must also acknowledge certain discrepancies that exist between the two versions. Tanizaki

makes several more direct references to Zen ideals in the original Japanese text, references that were not carried over to the English translation. However, “In Praise of Shadows” is not a piece that actively seeks to describe aesthetics as they relate to Zen. In fact, I argue that Tanizaki’s intermittent use of these elements of Zen vocabulary further supports the culturally coded aesthetic values present in him as a member of the Japanese community. Through Tanizaki’s invocation of Zen principles it will be possible to show how this spiritual viewpoint makes itself known unintentionally. This provides a much more convincing argument for a deeper level of interaction between spirituality and aesthetics than the writings of a devout person deliberately expounding upon topics of a religious nature.

Although I have chosen Tanizaki’s piece as an ideal medium through which to explore the interaction between spirituality and aesthetics, we must keep certain criticisms of the essay itself in mind. “In Praise of Shadows” goes beyond portraying Japanese aesthetics as distinctive. There is a strict dichotomy in which the Japanese and Western conceptions of beauty are pitted against each other as irreconcilable cultural differences, and the Japanese point of view is often presented as superior. It is when it comes to explaining the source and nature of these differences that Tanizaki’s narrative falls short. His depiction is one of some innate “Japanese-ness” unable to be explained to or understood by anyone outside the culture. Tanizaki may indeed believe his thesis to be self-explanatory, he may view these aesthetic ideals as elementally derived from the Japanese culture; however he does not carry this belief much farther. Instead, he cites an amalgamation of cultural standpoints, such as a tendency to accept things in their natural state, as well as certain elements intrinsic to the Japanese as a people, such as their skin tone. However, he neglects to mention why the Japanese people have this unique mindset. Stating that a difference exists is not enough- if a difference exists, it must have a source (or constellation of

sources) in the culture. I argue that one way of analyzing these origins is through the lens of spirituality. By examining the manifestations of spiritually related ideals in the piece, this thesis will attempt to fill this gap and provide a way of understanding the meaning behind the aesthetic that Tanizaki describes.

The aesthetic ideals of Japan and the West do not obliterate each other on contact. They are not devoid of similarity or context. Instead, it is the conditions under which these ideals were formed in the minds of the people that have led to their distinctions. It is important to reiterate that while this particular thesis focuses on the aesthetics that Tanizaki suggests are by nature Japanese and attempts to discern a source of these ideals within the spiritual context of Buddhism, this method of analysis could just as easily be attributed to American aesthetic ideals and the dominant Judeo-Christian spiritual culture at work in the US. While Tanizaki's discussion centers mainly on the ways in which these so-called Japanese aesthetic ideals are distinct, the argument of this paper is that the distinction is born out of a myriad of factors, one of which is predominant spiritual background of a culture.

### **THE ZEN AESTHETIC IN TRADITIONAL JAPANESE ARCHITECTURE**

"In Praise of Shadows" opens with a discussion of the problem of putting together a home in the traditional Japanese style while including modern amenities. Immediately Tanizaki presents a dichotomy, pitting the traditional, natural elements of "pure Japanese style" and modern technology's intrusion upon this established aesthetic mode against each other. He argues that the visual presence of a modern light fixture, stove, or even toilet would be inexcusably out of place in a traditional Japanese home and that extensive precautions must be taken to rectify this divergence in styles.

Tanizaki introduces several options for the architect or designer hoping to recreate the feel of “traditional” Japan, and discusses the ways in which they fit in or fail to fit in with the ideal Japanese aesthetic mindset. The aspect of the Zen aesthetic that takes pleasure from objects in their pure or natural state quickly becomes apparent in this section. Some designers expend a great deal of time and effort in order to hide away these traces of modernity and yet, Tanizaki argues, “the sight of a naked bulb beneath an ordinary milk glass shade seems simpler and more natural than any gratuitous attempt to hide it” (Tanizaki, 1). Although later in the piece he goes on to detail the many ways in which these contemporary technologies may not fit in with the Japanese ideal, in the end the willingness to accept these objects in their most natural and simplistic state is much more important than going out of one’s way to avoid their intrusions. Although a lamp is not an object of nature, it is so integrated into our daily lives that its image has very much become a natural one. If one is merely to accept the lamp in its most natural form, it will harmonize with the aesthetic with greater ease than if one makes alterations upon it, endeavoring to force it to fit an ideal.

Another solution to this problem that has been proposed is the design of new fixtures in the old Japanese style. Tanizaki ridicules this method, claiming that installing an actual antique fixture would be much more appropriate. This argument fits into the Zen aesthetic in two ways. Tanizaki finds fault with these new fixtures as they are designed expressly to conceal their actual nature. Instead of having functionality or simplicity as their objective, these fixtures are created under the pretense that they can pose as traditionally designed elements. In actuality, however, they are nothing other than brand new appliances made with modern methods to satisfy modern desires. Within a Zen aesthetic that is indifferent towards attempts to fit into established styles, such a fixture would be seen as undesirable. Additionally, the Zen aesthetic element of transience

plays a role in the choice of antique fixtures over newly made ones. The antique fixtures are seen as more desirable than the new ones because the passage of time is evident upon them.

Tanizaki narrows his focus on one specific aspect of the traditional Japanese house with his discussion of the Japanese toilet. The toilet is an often disregarded part of a house, rarely discussed and usually viewed, if at all, with distaste. Tanizaki, however, speaks of the toilet with high esteem, viewing it as a “place of spiritual repose” (Tanizaki, 3). In his eyes it becomes a quintessential example of the differences between Japanese and Western ideals, and he uses this representation to further delineate what he believes to be the essential properties of the Japanese aesthetic. The toilet example is also an important moment of Tanizaki’s piece for the purpose of my exploration of Zen aesthetics.

The traditional Japanese toilet is situated away from the main section of the house and is a place of serenity within nature. This moment of communion with nature is stressed by Tanizaki as a very important aspect of the experience of using a Japanese toilet. It is a moment of stepping away from the concerns of everyday life and into a space of mindful tranquility. It is indeed a mindful moment, as Tanizaki recounts the ways in which the myriad aspects of the natural surroundings come to explicit awareness in this meditative instant. This regard for nature is one way in which this section of “In Praise of Shadows” demonstrates the Zen aesthetic.

Although the toilet is typically seen as perhaps the lowliest part of the house, hardly one to be venerated, Tanizaki describes that through the Japanese aesthetic it rises as a place with as equal a potential for beauty as any other. “Our forebears, making poetry of everything in their lives, transformed what by rights should be the most unsanitary room in the house into a place of unsurpassed elegance, replete with fond associations with the beauties of nature” (Tanizaki, 4). This clearly demonstrates the egalitarianism that is such an essential part of the Zen mindset. It is

merely our perception of the role the toilet fills in our lives that forces it to be seen as an unsavory location. In actuality, however, it does not by nature have to be any less beautiful than any other location. Tanizaki requests a willingness to break down our assumptions about a place such as the toilet and appreciate it plainly for what it is. In the case of the Japanese toilet, this is a restful place quietly nestled within nature's splendor.

Tanizaki claims that throughout a traditional Japanese house "Westerners are amazed at the simplicity of Japanese rooms, perceiving in them no more than ashen walls bereft of ornament" (Tanizaki, 18). The Japanese aesthetic, however, prizes such simple surroundings and indeed finds beauty in an austere environment. This distaste towards embellishment relates to the ideals of nothingness and of allowing an object to remain in its natural state.

Tanizaki describes the rooms in the traditional Japanese house as a play between light and darkness. Upon bare walls sunlight and shadow meet and mix. With the passage of the day and changes in seasons and weather, these reflections of light transform a setting that at first appears quite plain, even dull, into one that is ever-changing. The passage of time is always apparent in this dance of light and dark. This differs from a home lit in the Western style, with lamps obliterating these nuances of shadow into flat brightness. The appearance of such a light-washed wall is perpetually the same; there is no glimpse of the fleeting shadow. When sunlight enters a Japanese room, however, it is dulled by the white paper screens, such that it does not burn with radiance but merely suffuses the area with a misty glow. In a given moment, the plain walls of the Japanese house display a gradation of shadows that will never appear again in the same way. As light and dark combine together upon the walls one can pause and reflect upon this transient nature of the world and of the human life.

This transience takes its effect upon our identities, upon our individual lives and the predications we cling to. However, in the interconnected space of co-arising, where true nature is revealed to be empty of such identities, time's tendency to pass so relentlessly is understood as a fallacy. Although time appears to pass and take its toll on the physical world, when the true nature of all things is throughout all time nonentity, even the passage of time itself is revealed to be an illusion.

As one looks into the dark that seems to collect in such copious amounts in the traditional Japanese house, clarity falls away and vagueness takes hold. Tanizaki speaks of time's passage seeming to slow when in such a room. Just as the unique patterns formed by the daily movement of the shadow gradients represent time's transient nature in the realm of identity, here a different sort of Time is referenced, that of the Buddha space. The aesthetic ideal of emptiness is apparent in this section. Individual identities become less and less clear in the realm of dimness, a place Tanizaki refers to as a "world of confusion where dark and light are indistinguishable" (Tanizaki, 22).

In addition to his discussions of general Japanese architecture and interior design, Tanizaki also makes a brief foray into the analysis of Japanese and Western styles of religious architecture. Religious architecture is an interesting topic in the realm of the intersection between spirituality and aesthetics. While all types of art can be argued to be in some way expressions of spirituality, these forms of architecture strive to create an environment that inspires the sacred. There is a more deliberate artistic expression of spiritual beliefs in the architecture of a place of worship when compared to a secular structure. Tanizaki compares the image of a Gothic cathedral with a traditionally constructed Japanese temple, and the contrasts between them

illustrate a distinction in modes of thought about holiness and what makes a place an ideal expression of the divine.

The Gothic cathedral, as Tanizaki depicts, reaches into the sky; “the roof is thrust up and up as so to place its pinnacle as high in the heavens as possible” (Tanizaki, 16). This suggests a spiritual ideal that places the holy apart from one’s daily life. Divinity is present in a “higher place,” above the grasp of those of us standing on earth. The cathedral’s construction suggests this act of reaching up towards a holy place. Its grand architecture also has the effect of dwarfing a human standing beside it, emphasizing humanity’s place as small when compared to the divine. In all its beauty, this is an architecture of separation, making physical the distinction between the everyday and the godly.

Instead of a vast space opening up to draw in air and light from on high, the Japanese temple’s architecture is defined by “the massive roof of tile or thatch and the heavy darkness that hangs beneath the eaves” (Tanizaki, 17). We can draw two points of philosophy from this distinction. First, there is the contrast between the majestic, expansive cathedral and the temple, low to the ground and built in a style in some ways comparable to other Japanese buildings of a less divine persuasion, such as palaces and even commoner’s homes. This represents a principle of non-dualism. The temple is situated close to the earth, as there is no need to elevate architectural forms when in actuality there is nothing less sacred about the very ground that we stand upon. There is no need for a Japanese temple to reach to the heavens, when all that could be called heavenly or divine is present in equal measure in any space on earth.

The inward focus the Japanese temple and other examples of Japanese architecture creates stems from the use of these heavy, low hanging roofs and deep eaves. Tanizaki argues that Japanese architecture developed in the way that it has due to necessities imposed by

environmental factors. Although such factors will always play a role in the way that architectural forms develop, the philosophy of life that lead to dealing with these factors in a particular way provides us with more information about the meaning of these differences. Tanizaki claims that the Japanese too would have found interior spaces that let in more light by way of a larger number of windows and a smaller roof overhang to be convenient, but that these environmental factors made impossible such a construction. Instead of fighting against this impossibility, shadowy interiors were embraced and an aesthetic ideal was in turn shaped by their presence. “The quality that we call beauty, however, must always grow from the realities of life, and our ancestors, forced to live in dark rooms, presently came to discover beauty in shadows, ultimately to guide shadows towards beauty’s ends” (Tanizaki, 18). Tanizaki’s analysis of the reasons for this dichotomy ends here, however. I argue that this distinctive approach is a spiritually influenced one. The aforementioned discussion of the place of shadows as representations and reminders of Zen ideals provides a good explanation for why such dim places, while not entirely convenient, were easily accepted as aesthetically pleasing.

#### **PATINA AND SHINE: CULTURAL MODES OF THE PHYSICAL**

Tanizaki discusses the culturally based differences in objects considered aesthetically pleasing, both artifacts of daily life and works of art. He argues that the way Japan has developed, guided by Western advancements, is not suited to the traditional Japanese aesthetic. In trying to construct a traditional Japanese toilet today, for instance, one would be met with a number of difficulties. These are mainly derived from the necessity of today’s levels of cleanliness coupled with attempts not to disrupt the desired aesthetic. Most modern bathrooms have tile floors and porcelain toilets which are easy to clean, do not absorb dirt, and are resistant

to water damage. Placing a tile floor and porcelain toilet in a bathroom otherwise built in the traditional Japanese style, however, creates an unfavorable clash. This is of course noticeable straight away, as the brilliant white of the porcelain and shining cleanliness of the tile are at odds with the natural colors and textures of the surrounding wood. This split becomes even more unavoidable with the passage of time. The modern fixtures remain largely unaffected by wear and tear; through humidity and grime they appear unchanged. The areas in which traditional style has been adhered to, however, are more subject to these effects of time's passage. As the years go by, they become worn and take on a patina of age.

This discrepancy can be taken as a metaphor for one way in which the Zen mindset differs from other modes of perception. The natural elements used in the bathroom's construction pass through time and decay naturally. The man-made items, these artifacts of "advancement" and "civilization", however, do not experience this transience in the same way. This situation is akin to that of one who is unable to let go of their individual identity as is necessitated by Zen. Such a person does not allow the world to act upon them as it will, instead fighting to retain their distinct self. This self-distinction, however, is a falsity according to Zen. It is an idea that one must let go of if enlightenment is to be reached. The Zen aesthetic ideal of transience displays the importance of letting go of all things and allowing the world to take its effects and progress in its true manner.

According to Tanizaki, the reason why many modern elements look out of place in a Japanese room, such as the porcelain toilet and tile floor, is because they came to be out of such advancements from the West and were therefore designed with the Western aesthetic in mind. Their shine of modernity contrasts sharply with the natural surfaces of the Japanese room.

Tanizaki sees this act of making efforts to adapt to a style that does not suit the most elemental aspects of the Japanese aesthetic sense as detrimental.

In this way, Tanizaki reveals himself as a purist, contending that Japan would be a more aesthetically pleasing place without foreign stylistic influence. In today's global society, it is hard to consider Tanizaki's claim that Japan would be somehow better off if it had been left to develop completely isolated from the rest of the world. The lens of the Zen aesthetic becomes quite useful in bringing a deeper level of meaning to his claim. There are certain parallels that can be drawn between the development of an aesthetic and the introspective quest of an individual. In Zen, the burden of reaching enlightenment rests on the individual, no external force can lead to the desired outcome. The development of one's internal state is all-important. Tanizaki suggests that the external forces that have acted upon the Japanese aesthetic have in fact drawn Japan away from its natural (and therefore ideal) course of development. As a student on the quest for enlightenment could quickly find himself caught up in the crosswinds of influence from various sources of thought and swept away from his goal, Tanizaki describes a Japan diverted by too many external distractions to develop in its unique manner. In spite of the technological advancements Japan as a nation has taken part in thanks to its involvement with other societies, for these reasons Tanizaki sees Japan as "hav[ing] to come off the loser for having borrowed" (Tanizaki, 12).

It is only after completing nearly a third of his essay that Tanizaki begins to explore what is typically the first subject to come to mind in the realm of aesthetics- art. One might wonder why Tanizaki chose to structure his piece in this way when the topic of art is such an integral one to the field in which he is conducting his examination. One possible explanation centers on that very fact- that art is the most easily considered, often the first considered aspect of aesthetics.

However, it is just as important to regard that the ideals governing art also have their effects on the perception of all aspects of the world. Perhaps truer would be the statement that such ideals about perceiving the world in general can be found coalescing upon art. “Even the worst art manifests something of the human spirit, and, if humans are sparks of the divine, such art manifests some degree of spirituality as well” (Coleman, 15). As such, we can expect to find these spiritually guided aesthetic principles apparent in a much higher concentration within the bounds of art. This is because the creation of art is a willful act to bring these aesthetic ideals to life; art condenses the aesthetic model into a physical form.

Tanizaki presents a dichotomy between the luster found so beautiful in the West and the patina of age that is appreciated in Japan. This distinction is present in many stylistic realms and, as can be expected, has a large effect on the attributes that are found visually appealing in each culture. It is not only the difference between the final products of an object with luster as compared to one with patina that is important to consider. One must also recognize the unique processes that lead to this difference, within which Zen principles can be found.

In order for an object to have shine, it must be polished. Few objects in their natural state possess the striking levels of radiance that are found so appealing in metalwork and jewels. According to the aesthetic that Tanizaki attributes to Western cultures, a gemstone found in nature must be cut in a particular manner and thoroughly cleaned before its beauty can be recognized. “The Westerner uses silver and steel and nickel tableware, and polishes it to a fine brilliance” (Tanizaki, 10). The act of polishing, cutting, or shaping is one that rises against an object’s innate being. An artist who engages in these activities is imposing their will on nature in order to appeal to personal and cultural preferences. The artist is making a statement that an

object's natural state is imperfect, is not good enough, must be improved. It is an act of shaping an ideal world, rather than shaping one's ideals to fit a world that already exists.

To acquire patina, an object undergoes a different process. It is only by way of neglect on the part of human influence that an object acquires the patina of age. One may fail to acknowledge an object, forgetting to clean it and allowing dust and grime to collect without noticing. On the other hand, one's neglect may be purposeful, and an object may be kept safe from the disturbance of outside influence, from the "insensitive maid who [would] polish[] away the tarnish so patiently waited for" (Tanizaki, 10). Either way, the progression of time has an effect on the physical nature of any object. It is perhaps most explicitly noticeable, however, on an object that has been created by human hands or that has undergone a certain level of attentive upkeep until a certain point. In such instances, the contrast becomes particularly evident as an object journeys from a form that it has been consciously shaped into back to its naturally dictated state.

The differences between these two aesthetics as to what processes such an object must undergo in order to reach an ideal state of beauty can be related to spiritual paradigms. An item crafted into an object of art by human hands can be compared to a life lived as most are, with the goal of shaping the self in a particular direction. Before deciding to cut ties with identity and predilections, it is not uncommon for one to live life much in the way an artist or craftsman creates their work; with a particular identity or objective held as a goal. The act of appreciating an object in its natural state or allowing it to return to such a state after it has been molded into a particular form is akin to letting go of those identities. In essence, the difference between these aesthetics is comparable to the difference in mindsets between someone trapped in the cage of individuation and someone who is gaining the mindset of Zen.

An object reaches the state of having either shine or patina after it has gone through one of these processes. The differences between these two types of objects do not end with the processes they undergo to reach this state, however. A polished object differs in many ways when compared to one that has been allowed to tarnish naturally. An object's shininess is based upon the way that it reflects light. As light reflects off a freshly polished piece, it creates a sharp beacon at one point, while other areas of the object remain in darkness. This contrast is what creates the image of shine. An object dulled by patina, however, has only a mild glimmer. A gradient of shadows appears as light hits it. There is no longer a sharp distinction between the points at which light reflects and does not. Instead, there is only a smooth transition among a range of shadows. As the enlightenment of Buddhism takes place, all of existence is revealed to be co-arising; without separation in the space of interconnectivity. The murkiness of shadows and their state of non-distinction provides a representation of this idea, and an object that has developed a deep patina becomes a stage upon which these shadows can be displayed.

In spite of his appreciation of patina and his preference for such objects over those with shine, Tanizaki is careful to dissolve any romanticism that may exist surrounding such antiques, describing "a sheen produced by the oils that naturally permeate an object over long years of handling- which is to say grime" (Tanizaki, 11). The fact that this is indeed a sheen of grime, however, does not diminish its perceived beauty. This is because the true nature of the object remains the same. Once it becomes apparent that a time-worn object and a new or freshly polished one are at their core one in the same in non-nature, the piece's aesthetic value can be judged by further standards. These standards include the Zen aesthetic ideal of transience, by way of which the object with the patina of age can actually be considered more aesthetically appealing than the clean one. The presence of this patina brings the effects of time and the

temporary nature of physical states to the forefront of perception. Tanizaki's claim that as the Japanese as a people take in art objects they "love the colors and the sheen that call to mind the past that made them" (Tanizaki, 12) evidences the importance of this demonstration of time's passage as a reminder of such transience.

### **THE REALM OF THE HUMAN**

Aesthetics are indispensable from considerations of those elements often considered visually artistic in nature, such as architecture, interior design, and art. However, aesthetics also play a role in people's daily lives; in the way they present themselves and in many other activities that they carry out day to day. many other activities that people carry out day to day.

From a fine meal placed upon an elegant table spread to a quick lunch of instant soup in a styrofoam cup, food takes many forms and settings and yet is always a part of daily life. The Zen aesthetic plays a great role in Tanizaki's exploration of aesthetic differences in tableware and the culinary arts.

Tanizaki discusses lacquerware in particular, and argues that a lacquer object's beauty is brought out to the fullest extent in a dark space, rather than in full light. While in brightness lacquerware appears shiny, even gaudy, when the level of light is diminished, Tanizaki claims, it takes on a new level of appeal. Instead of explicitly revealing all, when viewed in shadow portions of the lacquerware are left undefined; an opportunity to explore the true Buddha nature in which identity is no longer defined and becomes apparent as nonentity. Tanizaki pinpoints a particular experience when using lacquer tableware, "that moment between removing the lid and lifting the bowl to the mouth when one gazes at the still, silent liquid in the dark depths of the

bowl, its color hardly differing from that of the bowl itself” (Tanizaki, 15). Accenting such a moment lays emphasis on a meditative instant in contemplation on emptiness.

The Japanese culinary arts are also described as evoking such a meditative experience. Tanizaki mentions a particular Japanese candy, yokan, and notes that when presented in the right setting, that of a dim room, even the eating of this sweet becomes an act of contemplation. He describes the process of eating yokan “as if the very darkness of the room were melting on your tongue” (Tanizaki, 16). This again reveals a preference for the undefined over straightforward sensory experiences, as such vagaries give rise to deeper reflections. Tanizaki makes similar statements about other foods, such as miso soup and rice, again stressing the importance of experiencing these foods under the right environmental circumstances, akin to experiencing the world in the enlightened frame of mind. Serving foods in a deep lacquer bowl, for instance, creates shadows which in turn generate the ideal meditative mindset. If one serves the same foods “Western style, in a pale, shallow bowl” (Tanizaki, 15), however, such a mindset will not be reached. Revealed with such clarity in the shallow bowl, the food is no longer an object of mystery. Displaying the food in such a way makes the question of its existence very one-dimensional, suggesting that its apparent, observable nature is the same as its true nature. Of course this is not the case, as an item’s observable nature is merely an artifact of the layers of identities heaped upon it. Its true emptiness can only be understood with the removal of these identities.

The line of reasoning in this section takes on a somewhat different form when measured up to Tanizaki’s previous arguments. Rather than comparing types of objects, such as a modern fixture versus a traditional Japanese one, or even physical states of objects as they undergo the effects of time, here he shifts the focus of this contrast away from an object’s material nature and

onto its environment. As one becomes accustomed to the idea that the core of all things is one of non-being, it comes to recognition that such changes in appearance due to environmental shifts are no less “real” than alterations to an object’s corporeal form. Rather, all such changes have no effect on the fact that an object is of non-essence. They can, however, be considered valuable in their ability to evoke a particular mindset.

While food plays a ubiquitous part in the daily lives of all people, Tanizaki also references elements that have been influential in his own life particularly. Experiences watching the traditional Japanese theater of No, Kabuki, and Bunraku had a great impact on Tanizaki from a young age. He has put a significant amount of thought into the different ways that make these theatrical forms aesthetically pleasing. Tanizaki does note, however, that these theatrical forms have not necessarily been preserved in their ideal appearances in modern times. The colorful costumes and makeup of Kabuki particularly are not suited to the bright lights under which it is often performed today. The settings and characters that appeared elegant in the shadow and candlelight of bygone times seem tasteless and showy in such harsh illumination. The aesthetic of Zen would advise against such external influence in styles and norms. By bringing these bright lamps that are found appealing in the West into the space of Kabuki, one is adapting methods incongruous with the internal mode of thought. This is an unfavorable distraction whether this internal mode of thought is personal or cultural.

Tanizaki much prefers the No theater, and his comparisons between the two speak strongly of these Zen aesthetic values. He is careful to note, however, that if the harsh lighting employed in today’s Kabuki performances were to find its way to the No theater, many of the aspects he finds aesthetically favorable would be lost. Although male actors play females, it is

not their manner of makeup or dress that leads their characters to be believable. It is their own ordinary beauty, enhanced by the circumstances of the shadowed stage.

Tanizaki goes on to claim that even the Bunraku theater, in which characters are played by puppets, has a greater air of realism than the harshly lit Kabuki stage. How could puppets appear more believable as humans than actual people under any circumstance? The dichotomy between light and shadow is again at play here. In the shadow space the false distinctions of identity are dissolved, while under the bright light these distinctions take on all the more importance. In the bright space identity takes center stage, while in the shadows similarities have a greater significance. On the stage of dimness, man, woman, even the suggestion of a human made by way of a puppet all are revealed to be of the same nature and thus become interchangeable.

The pull Tanizaki felt from the traditional Japanese theater perhaps stems from his nostalgia for the Japan of bygone times, free from the glaring light of Western influence. He saw the theater as “a distinct world of shadows which today can be seen only on the stage; but in the past it could not have been far removed from daily life” (Tanizaki, 26). Although in the past the aesthetics of Japan were defined by the philosophical beliefs of the Japanese particularly, today they are influenced by a myriad of other cultures, all coming from different places spiritually. Such theatrical pieces still performed in the traditional manner, however, largely have adherence to custom rather than progression as their inspiration. Because of this, they retain the spiritual motivations of times past, and for Tanizaki, remain a purer representation of the Japanese aesthetic.

After speaking of the aesthetics of women played by men and puppets, Tanizaki moves on to address the beauty of women themselves, and traditional Japanese notions of feminine

allure. The Zen aesthetic idea of nonentity becomes remarkably apparent as an influence on these notions. The fleshier, more physically substantial beauty that Tanizaki claims is appreciated in the West is built to stand up to examination, is constantly revealed under the bright lights of that aesthetic tradition. The beauty of the women of ancient Japan, on the other hand, is derived from the charm of concealment.

In recalling his own mother, Tanizaki calls to mind the elements found beautiful in Japanese women in the time of his childhood. He speaks of his mother's figure as having "no flesh," as "lacking in substance" (Tanizaki, 29). While the Western woman is prized for her physical essence, the Japanese woman is beautiful for her non-essence. A Japanese woman dressed in a layered kimono is barely present apart from her robes; "their substance is made up of layer upon layer of clothing" (Tanizaki, 29). This comment speaks to the Zen ideal of emptiness. The predications that we pile upon ourselves are like these layers of kimono, and when they are removed we are empty of substance. Our substance consists only of these imposed identities, just as the Japanese woman whose substance consists only of kimono.

## CONCLUSIONS

The cultural milieu that permeates Japan helps to define the aesthetic sense of its people, just as the background of beliefs and traditions in any culture converge to form a distinctive set of aesthetics. Spirituality is one of a myriad of influences that take part in shaping aesthetics in Japan. The philosophy of Zen is one with values that influence perception of the physical world. Indifference towards externally established modes, high esteem towards objects in their natural state, a deference to transience and the passage of time, and the representation of the non-essence

nature of existence are all aesthetic ideals born from this Zen mindset. We can see these ideals represented throughout Junichiro Tanizaki's "In Praise of Shadows."

As Tanizaki concludes his piece, he reiterates that the Japanese aesthetic is one of appreciation of the natural state of things, which he compares to the "progressive Westerner [who] is determined always to better his lot" (Tanizaki, 31). In closing, he resigns himself to the passage of time and the Western style technological developments that have taken place in Japan, retaining only a hope that "we may be allowed at least one mansion where we can turn off the electric lights and see what it is like without them" (Tanizaki, 42). While Japan moves forward in the world, away from isolation and into a global future, Tanizaki's hope is that some level of this aesthetic might be retained, if not in daily life than perhaps within art or literature. His own writings create a home for these shadows that, much like the No stage, preserves an aesthetic form that has found itself in a state of flux in the face of time's passing.

In this way, Tanizaki's narrative makes reference to another increasingly important aspect of the study of aesthetics as it relates to culture. With societies meeting and intermingling in global conversation, external influences on culturally based ideals will only continue to increase. The aesthetics of culture will be transformed by way of these encounters. Tanizaki's nostalgia for a Japan of times past sets him against these transformations, but they are as unavoidable as the changing of the seasons.

Because of this, Tanizaki's narrative itself presents a paradox when analyzed through the lens of Zen aesthetics. Has Tanizaki's own Japanese aesthetic become an established form from which the true student of Zen must separate in order to reach a sense of truth? Perhaps the time of shadows has come and gone, and Tanizaki would have done well to embrace the transience that leads to these changes in the realm of Japanese aesthetics.

Unfortunately for any student attempting to make sense of Zen as it relates to the physical realm, this is an unavoidable paradox. One must accept that the idea of analyzing Zen in this way does go against its tenets to some extent. We cannot confine these principles into our language of identity without dangerously limiting their meanings. As scholars attempting to utilize Zen ideals in our work we must be cautious to emphasize this point, that our language is merely representational, that we must be aware of the reality of phenomena existing apart from our conceptualizations.

Tanizaki's narrative details the ways in which he sees Japanese aesthetics as distinct, but does not expound upon why these differences exist. Looking beyond the surface of his words, however, I have been able to point out numerous references to the Zen aesthetic throughout the piece. Through an examination of "In Praise of Shadows," it becomes apparent that a measure of the spiritual setting of Japan within which Tanizaki has done his work has held influence upon him. Although myriad elements lead to the development of a cultural aesthetic, it is clear that spiritual background is one important influence.

"In Praise of Shadows" provides one clear example of a piece in which aesthetics and spirituality intersect and interact. However, there is a great deal more research that could be done in this area. As there are aspects of Tanizaki as a person that make him a unique subject, perhaps to further examine the relation between spirituality and aesthetics in Japan we would do well to explore the works of other authors of varying levels of spiritual or religious awareness. Additionally, the factors discussed throughout this paper show the ways in which Zen is a distinctive example. In order to deepen our understanding of the ways in which a spiritual viewpoint relate to one's method of perceiving aesthetics it would be beneficial to conduct studies that look at other religions, other cultures, and other manifestations of aesthetic ideals.

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