

Observations from Kyoto – July 2025

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Welcome to *Observations from Kyoto*. Each month, *Observations* will contain a variety of short essays and articles, primarily related to Japanese history, literature, and contemporary issues, with a focus on Kyoto and the Kansai area. We also plan to include reflections about the craft of being a writer and the challenges of getting your work published.

We appreciate your feedback, especially any requests you might have for a discussion of specific topics. Send your feedback via email to kyoto_observed@shimenawa.org.

Doko Iku? (Where are you going?)

Last month, I discussed the idea that playfulness is one of the hallmarks of spiritual development. After receiving several questions related to this notion, I’ve decided to provide a concrete example of what I’ve been talking about. After publication of this issue of Observations, the article has since been posted on the Writers in Kyoto website:
<https://writersinkyoto.com/2025/07/31/nonfiction/doko-iku-where-are-you-going/>

The year was 1978. The month was late August or early September. The place was Ryoan-ji, site of the best-known rock garden in Japan. I was well into the last month of my Luce Scholarship year in Kyoto, not to return for at least six years. So it was time for farewells – farewell to my dorm mates in Yamashina, and farewells especially to the places I had come to know and love in Kyoto. Ryoan-ji was one of those.

The rock garden of Ryoan-ji is in some sense the “queen of all rock gardens”, the quintessential exemplar against which all others are measured. If you were to open a book on Japanese rock gardens, you’d only see it as one among many, perhaps not even the most attractive. But open any other book on Japan, Japanese culture, Japanese Buddhism, or what have you, and flip through the book until you come to a picture of a rock garden. I’d wager

the odds will be heavily in favor of discovering a picture of Ryoan-ji.

What accounts for the respect accorded to this rock garden? Could it be a sort of “branding effect”? Once anointed the queen of all rock gardens, photographs abound and time-pressured content creators have simply gravitated toward the most accessible source?

Could it be that this garden’s very simplicity and abundance of negative space lends itself to modern photography in a way that others do not – whether the photographer wishes to focus on a single formation, or create the illusion of sweeping vistas in a space that, once seen up close, appears remarkably confined?

Or could it be that Ryoan-ji hits some sort of sweet spot between the representational and the non-representational, call it “almost representational” if you will, capable of becoming a sort of *tabula rasa* on which the viewer is invited (or even tempted) to assign representations that fascinate because they are deeply personal?

During my scholarship year, I developed just such a fascination. One of the abiding advantages of Ryoan-ji is the gallery of bleacher seats, situated slightly above the garden, from which the visitor can sit for a while and contemplate an unimpeded view of the entire space.

So here I was, sitting on the lowest level of the gallery bleachers, quietly contemplating the rocks, hoping this time to fathom their mysterious significance, since it might be a long time before I would have the opportunity to do so again.

As I sat there surveying the scene, I began to hear some discussions going on behind me. The conversation was in Japanese, and conducted quietly. In those days, most of the tourists were themselves Japanese, and not prone to loud commentaries so much as quiet expressions like *eh...* or *so desu ne*.

Listening more closely, the dialog was taking the form of a question and answer session, the questions being posed by an older, deeper voice, and the answers given by small groups, likely families.

The question seemed to repeat itself over and over – *doku iku?* Where are you going? Each time the question was asked, it was answered by a litany of several of the more famous tourist spots in Kyoto – Kinkaku-ji, Nanzen-ji, Kiyomizu, Fushimi Inari, punctuated by the older voice interjecting with an *ahh . . .* or a *naruhodo*, as appropriate.

An odd conversation, to be sure. Or rather, an odd sequence of conversations. Almost like I was listening to a quiz show, waiting for the contestant who could come up with the prize-winning answer. But no, the questions went on and on, the contestants came and went.

Finally my curiosity got the better of me, and I twisted my upper body around to get a better sense of what was going on. Back behind the gallery, in the flat strip that opened into a hall of temple rooms, I saw a Zen monk, fully robed, speaking with a Japanese tourist family. He asked the question, they provided the answers. He would nod sagely, mutter his *aahh . . .* or *naruhodo*, and move on.

On closer scrutiny, it became clear that the monk was having a very good time of it. As he moved from family to family, his sage and earnest face would dissolve into an impish grin. The grin lasted only a moment – then the sage was back, stalking his next quarry.

Was it a hobby? Was it a sport? Was he trying to teach a lesson? If so, just what exactly was the lesson? Pondering this question over the years, I've come to the conclusion that "lesson" comes the closest, but it was not an immediate lesson he was aiming for. Rather, it was a sort of deferred lesson, one intended to lie latent in the soul, ready to spring into bloom at the appropriate time.

The question itself can be asked on many levels. In its most quotidian sense, it is roughly equivalent to "What do you plan to do next?", which is the way most of the tourists he talked to chose to interpret the question. But of course, there are many other dimensions. Where are you going to school? Where are you going in your career? Where are you going in your life?

To those who search for universals among the world's manifold spiritual paths, the deepest sense of this question – *Where am I going?* – ranks as one of the three questions that drive every spiritual search, the others being *Who am I?* and *Where did I come from?*

Its surface simplicity masks the fact that it is the most trenchant of the three, the one that demands an answer right now – an answer in the form of action. It is immediately recognizable as the "Quo vadis?" of the Western tradition¹. These four simple words (just two in Japanese) burn themselves into our soul, hounding us for an answer. And not just any answer – an answer that speaks to the heart of who we are.

This deeper meaning represents what I believe were the monk's true intentions. Acting as a

kind of spiritual Johnny Appleseed, planting small seeds of insight and self-realization that he would not see germinate – that would reach fruition in some unknown time, in some unknown place, in a parent or a child. A time and place where the question “Where are you going?” might emerge from the depths of the unconscious with irresistible urgency.

I like to imagine a young boy or girl, aged 6 or 7 at that time, listening to the question and not realizing that a seed has been planted. Perhaps some 20 years later, the full impact of these two Japanese words comes into view, compelling this young person to embark on a serious search for a suitable answer.

Our monk at Ryoan-ji was certainly playful. But was this a sustainable playfulness, or was he simply in a good mood that day? To put it differently, what would happen if we tried to knock the monk off balance with a question of our own that he could not answer? Or an insult, or an accusation? How would we evaluate his response?

The literature of Zen is full of stories that illustrate what we might expect. But in the end, we would each have to make up our own minds as to what qualifies as evidence of sustainability. I’ve tried a number of thought experiments to determine my own criteria, and I usually get to the same place.

Let’s say somebody walks up to the monk, gets in his face, and says something like “You know, you really are a fraud. Walking around with that look on your face, like you were Dogen or Eisai². Trying to impress everybody with your faux-erudite question.”

What would we expect him to say, if he were truly the man we hoped him to be? The best answer I’ve come up with is that the monk gets that impish grin again. He does not argue, or even try to refute. He simply says “You’re right! Sometimes I disappoint myself,” shrugs his shoulders and walks away.

But as he moves on, he breathes a silent prayer to Kannon for mercy on that poor guy who seems so much more concerned with the monk’s own soul than he is with his own.

NOTES:

¹ An adaptation of this story for Western readers unfamiliar with Zen can be found at <https://shimenawa.org/tanuki-tales/where-are-you-going/>.

² Dogen (1200 – 1253) was the founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism. Eisai (1141 –

1215) founded the Rinzai school of Zen.

Wish I'd Written That

Every once in a while, someone writes a sentence that just wakes you up. It may not be pretty (this one definitely isn't), but the metaphor is so apt, or the language is so startlingly concrete (or both), that you want to remember it and put it into what Stephen King calls your writing toolbox. Here's one from Peggy Noonan's June 19 opinion piece in the Wall Street Journal --

To make solid decisions at that scale you have to know in your gut that history's an abattoir and the floors are slippery.

https://www.wsj.com/opinion/iraqs-shadow-over-the-iran-debate-19355e17?mod=author_content_page_1_pos_3

Directing a Movie

Yuki Yamauchi (<https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100011627580114>) has unearthed a fascinating film clip from the UCLA archive showing Akira Nobuchi (wearing the hat) directing his debut film *Nagasaki Ryugakusei* (roughly "A student who came to study in Nagasaki"). The plot concerns a student who has come to Nagasaki to study Western military technology in the days shortly before the Meiji Restoration. Amid the trigonometry of Western gunnery, however, he gets involved in a love triangle, or possibly quadrangle, involving the archetypal duality of a young ingenue and a courtesan.

This short film from the UCLA archives shows Nobuchi setting up a scene that takes place on a narrow bridge involving a quarrel that involves all three, as well as several takes of the action. The film clip has no soundtrack, although the movie itself did have sound.

https://newsreels.net/v/497c09s?fbclid=IwY2xjawLQy6NleHRuA2FibQlxMQBicmlkETFmS050a1JNMzZlWERKdnp0AR7urDZcmw_vlAB_4aHET792gJbCj_vg5yV2M_HwRwJShiTPQBpgz6OFTO0Jew_aem_7bBYwA9iONq9hAUVPQg_2g

Odds & Ends

We are not alone. Apparently Kyoto is not the only location to be plagued by excessive tourism. A recent article from the AP News details reactions to the phenomenon across Europe, from the closing of the Louvre in an impromptu strike, to water pistol attacks in Barcelona. I guess restrictions on photography in the Gion (geisha) district seem rather tame by comparison.

https://apnews.com/article/louvre-museum-paris-closed-lines-delay-2bbf9be4f49de739fd14dd4d908e4d72?fbclid=IwY2xjawLrpe1leHRuA2FibQIxMQABHIB--fZ0UF1nSP5jD3tSNdR4Yxr3_X0facbV9x5jsWMhujJ5bc3yzTHp1hER_aem_qa4p3QyRfZ3lbwVi10Y_WQ

Upcoming Events

[July 26] Co-opting ChatGPT In the Service of Foreign Language Teaching and Learning. Osaka Gakuin University (Building 2, Floor 3, Room 01) 11am to 1pm. Free and open to the public, but RSVP is required: <https://r.qrqrq.com/L7siTdCH>

Opportunities – Paid Gigs

[No deadline posted] Temple University Japan (Kyoto Campus) is currently looking to recruit a number of adjunct faculty positions for undergraduate classes for Fall 2025 or Spring 2026, with the possibility to continue in subsequent semesters. Instructors for various subjects are sought but particularly so within areas such as Business, Computer Science, and Writing/Composition. <https://www.tuj.ac.jp/joblistings/f-pt-ug-adjunct-faculty-kyoto>.

[No deadline posted] The Department of International Studies, Doshisha Women's College (Kyo Tanabe Campus) is looking for a part-time lecturer to teach the two classes beginning Autumn 2025 – Inbound Tourism and Tourism Studies. Classes are currently scheduled for Mondays at 4th and 5th periods, to be taught in English. However, there is room for negotiation on both counts. Please contact Maria Correa by email for further details or to discuss the position: mcorrea@dwc.doshisha.ac.jp.

Opportunities – Writing and Publishing

[No deadline posted] [Deep Japan](https://deepjapan.org). Deep Japan is a website that offers stories of authentic experiences of Japan from those who have lived here for at least 3 years. In general the posts are quite short, and the photos are exquisite, which make for a quick and rewarding browsing experience [Public FB page, May 12]. To view the site, visit <https://deepjapan.org>. To register as an author, go to <https://deepjapan.org/regist/>.

[Every Month] [Tricycle Magazine Haiku Challenge](https://tricycle.org/haiku/). Each month, the Buddhist journal *Tricycle* sponsors a haiku contest based on a selected seasonal word. Last time I looked, the seasonal word was “autumn wind”, but you should check their website before submitting. The contest ends at 11:59pm US Eastern time on the last day of the month. <https://tricycle.org/haiku/>

Recent Publications

[Seesaw Monster](#). By Kotaro Isaka, acclaimed author of *Bullet Train*. A domineering mother-in-law who is suspected of murder. A wife who moonlights as a secret agent and decides to investigate. A secret courier who delivers confidential information handwritten on paper to elude the dystopian surveillance state. What could possibly go wrong? Overlook Press, 2025. Translated by Sam Malissa.

[Portraits of a Mother](#). A newly discovered collection of stories by Shusaku Endo (1923 – 1996) the renowned author of *Silence*, and a lifelong student of the essential differences of faith and philosophy between East and West. In a novella and five short stories, Endo looks at various perspectives on the feminine and motherly aspects of the Transcendent. Yale University Press, 2025. Translated by Van C. Gessel
