

Tricycle Talks

“Awakening in Every Moment”

Episode #104 with Kazuaki Tanahashi

June 12, 2024



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Kazuaki Tanahashi: Awakening can be viewed in different ways, but I think of Dogen's words, “Miracles are practiced three thousand times in the morning and eight hundred times in the evening.” Each moment is a miracle, and of course you can miss it. We can think about something else, or we can be sleepy, or we can miss it, but we may be still experiencing somewhere deep in our being the miracles of each moment that are not my own miracles but everyone's miracles, even the miracle of the rock and flowers and trees and streams.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Kazuaki Tanahashi. Kaz is an artist, translator, calligrapher, and environmental activist and peaceworker. In his new book, *Gardens of Awakening: A Guide to the Aesthetics, History, and Spirituality of Kyoto's Zen Landscapes*, he explores the contemplative art form of Zen gardening and discusses why he believes gardens are an essential instrument of awakening. In my conversation with Kaz, we talk about what first drew him to calligraphy and translation, the relationship between his art and his activism, why he believes the qualities of Zen aesthetics are manifestations of awakening, and how we can appreciate the miracle of each moment. So here's my conversation with Kaz Tanahashi.

James Shaheen: So I'm here with artist, translator, and calligrapher Kaz Tanahashi. Hi, Kaz. It's great to be with you. I think the last time I saw you was perhaps 30 years ago. It's nice to see you again. We both look a little bit different, I'm sure.

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Nice to see you.



James Shaheen: So Kaz, we're here to talk about your new book, *Gardens of Awakening*. But first, I'd like to ask you a bit about your background. To start, how did you first come to Buddhism?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: When I was 23 or so, I was looking for inspiration for being an artist. I was a beginning artist. I went to existentialism, and then I realized that to be a good existentialist artist, you have to be either deeply in despair or bored. That didn't work, so I looked around and I ran into Zen Master Dogen's poems and essays. I really fell in love with his writings. They were so difficult to me, and I didn't fully understand, but I suspected something profound in his writings. And then I met Zen Master Soichi Nakamura and asked him if he would translate Dogen's *Shobogenzo*, *Treasury of the True Dharma Eye*, into modern Japanese, and he said, “I would if you work with me.” So I started translating Dogen into modern Japanese. I had some background in Buddhist philosophy but not so much, so I had to study Buddhist thinking, Zen terms, Zen thinking, and then Dogen and Sanskrit. But eventually, we completed the first complete modern Japanese translation of Dogen, published in four volumes with one dictionary of terms. I started when I was 27 and completed it when I was 35 or so. So that was my introduction to Buddhism and Zen meditation and literature.

James Shaheen: So also at a young age, you studied with Morihei Ueshiba, the founder of aikido.

Kazuaki Tanahashi: That was very early. I was 13 years old, right after World War II, and then nobody was any more interested in martial anything. My father, who was a military officer, studied with Morihei Ueshiba and then started trying to avoid Pearl Harbor. They worked together. My mother and father were separated, but my mother and three of her sons were invited to live in a small town right next to the dojo of Iwama. That's where he was farming. But he was teaching village kids every night. It was kind of illegal at that time. That was the only class of Aikido that time.



James Shaheen: Yeah, you say that you would watch Morihei move effortlessly, and you had no idea how this short man with a white beard could do such miraculous things. I wonder if your training in aikido in any way laid the groundwork for your study of Buddhism. Was there any relationship between the two at all?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: His work was highly spiritual. We did Shinto meditation. There is some connection in how to move your body in the most efficient and effective way, in a way, I think, that complemented the Buddhist way of being free from accomplishment. But I think to be more effective, you have to slow down the opponent. So, there is no way not to accomplish anything. To be more effective, often, in Buddhism, we don't talk about it. So in a way, it was kind of complimentary.

James Shaheen: Right. In Aikido, the idea is that you defend yourself without harming your opponent. Is that right?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: That's right. To protect the opponent. So in a way, it's like in Buddhism. It's kind of a nonduality. Actually, there is no enemy. Your enemy is a friend you need to protect. So in a way, I think there's some kind of a connection.

James Shaheen: So how did you become a calligrapher?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I began as a painter and calligrapher because my handwriting was very bad. It was important at that time to be able to apply for a job or to write letters. You needed to have a good hand because people judge your personality through handwriting. So I started penmanship calligraphy, but realized that it is a profound art. So I started studying classical Chinese masterpieces, which is the right way to study calligraphy of East Asian style.

James Shaheen: You're considered a pioneer of one-stroke painting. So what is one-stroke painting?



Kazuaki Tanahashi: One-stroke painting moves a brush from one side of the paper or canvas to the other, not doing so much, but maybe using larger brushes and doing some multiple movements, even in one stroke, you create a landscape that is very complex. So you could do that with black on white. But also colors too.

James Shaheen: You said that one-stroke painting requires that the calligrapher be fearless. What do you mean by that?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: The idea is that in East Asian calligraphy, each stroke, you need high concentration and relaxation. So in a way, each stroke maybe represents your state of mind, state of your body, and then your life. So maybe each brush stroke is essential. So if we develop this idea, maybe we can paint an entire painting with one large stroke. So that's the idea.

James Shaheen: So it requires a certain amount of confidence because you've got to get it right the first and only time. Is that right?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: You can throw out your failed pieces, so you have a lot of chances, but the more you get used to big canvas pieces, it's much to prepare, and also expensive, so you need to develop some kind of skill and confidence.

James Shaheen: You know, you've also worked extensively as a translator. In fact, the first time I read Dogen was your *Moon in a Dewdrop* that we had in the office. And you translated many of Dogen's writings from medieval Japanese to English. I hadn't realized that you had translated them from medieval Japanese to modern Japanese, but I did know that you translated them into English. What inspired you to translate these teachings into English?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I just wanted to have Dogen available to modern Japanese readers, but also modern English readers, too. Robert Aitken and I translated one of the chapters of *Genjokoan* into English. That was 1965 in Honolulu. But I really wanted to work with advanced Zen practitioners and native speakers of English to translate Dogen into English. So I asked Baker



Roshi, who was the abbot of San Francisco Zen Center, to invite me to the Zen Center. And eventually he invited me in 1975, and I started serving San Francisco Zen Center in 1977 as a scholar in residence. For each essay, I had a partner, so I was doing rough translation, and then we worked together to refine the translation.

James Shaheen: So in addition to your work as an author, translator, calligrapher, you're also an activist, and you founded an organization called A World Without Armies: Practical Steps Toward a World Without War. Could you tell us a bit about that organization and what inspired it?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I've done different types of peacework trying to reverse the nuclear arms race and trying to stop two Gulf Wars and so forth. Eventually, I started working with Rodrigo Carazo Odio, the former president of Costa Rica. Costa Rica demilitarized itself in 1949 and then became a world leader of the happiness of citizens and protections of the environment. So maybe Costa Rica can be a model to all nations to be free from having military forces. Then maybe use these resources for welfare reasons and protecting the environment and so forth. So first the idea was a Costa Rica project, asking citizens and the government to follow the example of Costa Rica. That was the idea.

James Shaheen: You also, with artist Mayumi Oda, cofounded an organization called Inochi that aims to address the climate crisis by planting trees in the Amazon rainforest. Could you tell us about Inochi?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Originally, Inochi was founded trying to stop Japan's electric generation by using plutonium in the breeder reactors. So it was like a dream energy. Theoretically, You burn plutonium in breeder reactors, so it breeds itself, so it creates more plutonium. It seems to be an ideal kind of energy source, but it was so dangerous. It can cause a meltdown that can make a large area inhabitable. It's a heavy metal, so it's very heavy, but it's safe to carry, so it creates a



coarse nuclear weapon. The US gave up this project, Germany gave up, but the UK and France are still doing that. And Japan was pursuing it, and nobody in Japan could stop it.

We were asked, Mayumi and then seven of us Japanese people living in the San Francisco Bay Area to stop it. So we started this Don Quixote-like project to stop Japan's priority number one national project. For some reason, we could stop it. We did all kinds of things. So, and then we wanted to expand the work to not only antinuclear, but protecting the environment. So Mayumi and some of us started the Inochi project. And then later, I think last year, I worked with Brazilian people in trying to plant trees in the Amazon rainforest. So this is the second year.

James Shaheen: Oh, good. So, how do you view the relationship between your art and your activism? I take it it's all of a piece for you, is that right? Or do you see them separately?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Maybe the world is my canvas, in a way. And it can be everyone's canvas. Art, in a way, helps imagine something different from the current situation. So imagination is artwork. We can create anything seemingly impossible, right? And then we have some kind of vision, and then we try to follow our vision.

James Shaheen: Yeah, I guess you anticipate my final question before we get to your garden book. What can activist movements learn from artists? I suppose it's using the imagination to envision a different possible future. Anything else?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think artist work is trying to solve questions, to create a vision of how to solve technical issues of the canvas, the paint, stretching, presentations. I think everybody, business people, poets, journalists, everybody faces problems. And then maybe artists try to solve problems, maybe in artists' own ways and so forth. So it could be a part of the process of peacework or environmental work.

James Shaheen: So now we can get to your book. You've been very patient answering all my questions. I just wanted to ask. I've known of you and I met you once many years ago, but I



never had a chance to ask you these questions. But your most recent project is *Gardens of Awakening: A Guide to Aesthetics, History, and Spirituality of Kyoto's Zen Landscapes*. Can you tell us a bit about the book, what inspired you to write it, and what's unique about it?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: It came from a collaboration with Mitsue Nagase, the photographer from Japan, who has lived in Canada and the US for some time. She was doing photo documentation of my art activities for about ten years. So, we have worked together. And then also, Mitsue was helping people at Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe to be the guide for our pilgrimage to Japan led by Roshi Joan Halifax and myself several times, and then one time Mitsue and her then fiance, now husband, I talked about aesthetics of Zing gardens and so forth and they said, “This can be a good book. Will you write a book on the gardens?” And I said, “Yeah, that's maybe a good idea. How about you take photographs? I know you're a good photographer.” And then she said eventually, “Yes, that'd be really wonderful.” So that's about four years ago.

So the idea is the new book presents inside views of Zen gardens. Other books may emphasize the outside beauty of the gardens, but this book, our book, starts with the state of Zen meditation, also discussing the evolution of Japanese Zen gardens and in particular issues of Zen art.

Sand and rocks are central to Zen gardens. Muso Soseki, a 13th- to 14th-century monk, designed the garden at Saihoji Monastery in Kyoto. It's nowadays known as Kokedera or Moss Temple. A waterfall is important for Zen gardens as legend says that a carp goes upstream a waterfall and turns into a dragon. It's a metaphor of an ordinary meditation practitioner becoming an outstanding one. But there was no high mountain near Saihoji Monastery, so no waterfall was possible. Muso Soseki then had a breakthrough idea of building a dry waterfall with only rocks and white sand without a water stream. This came to be an inspiration for building other rock gardens after that.

James Shaheen: In the book, you describe Zen practice as a pursuit of inner reality not bound by outer forms. Yet, the environment for such practice can include a number of forms, including that



of a garden. Can you say a bit about the relationship between form and formlessness in the context of Zen art?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: In Zen monasteries and Zen centers, we daily chant the *Heart Sutra*: “Form is emptiness. Emptiness is form.” Roshi John Halifax and I translated it as “Form is boundlessness. Boundlessness is form.” Boundlessness is beyond distinction, like small and large, plain, and then colorful, going beyond distinctions. *Shunya* means zero. *Shunyata* means zeroness. So what is zero? This is duality, the distinction between the opposite. So that is why we call it boundlessness.

James Shaheen: To me, it rings more of potential when you put it that way. So you say that gardens are an essential instrument of awakening. What do you mean by this?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Often practitioners practiced in mountains in nature. Nature was an inspiration. And then to meet the needs of city dwellers, monasteries and temples were built in cities, but within the compound of the temples, they needed to have nature. Rocks can represent mountains, trees can represent forests, and streams can represent waters, rivers, and the sand area can represent oceans. There is some kind of microcosm of nature within the temple compound.

James Shaheen: You also write that Zen gardens reflect the state of meditation, much like many Zen art forms. Could you say more about this? How does the garden depict a meditative state?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Of course, through serenity, unworldliness, naturalness, and quietude, but also it requires maintenance. Weeding, watering, raking the sand, sweeping—everything is part of work in Zen monastic schedules. But in a way, creating the Zen garden is also polishing everyone's mind. So that is part of the essential practice of Zen.

James Shaheen: So how did Zen gardens shape the development of other Zen arts? Did it?



Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think Zen gardens came first because people needed buildings, and then buildings need gardens. And then later came tea ceremony. Tea ceremony requires tea rooms, tea houses, and tea gardens, on a much smaller scale but with the same purpose to create oceans and mountains in a Small Space. And also Noh play came from this, and also poetry. Poetry has this sense of *yugen*, profound and subtle beauty. And also haiku came. And then *wabi*, which is very refined, universal loneliness, and *sabi*, which is more the beauty of aging. Paintings and calligraphy also were inspired by Zen gardens and tea ceremony too. So in that way, Zen art has something common, maybe common aesthetic influencing one another.

James Shaheen: Drawing from the writings of early Zen masters, you outline seven characteristics of Zen aesthetics: direct, ordinary, vigorous, gleaming, pivotal, nondual, and inexhaustible. First, how did you arrive at these characteristics?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: About fifty-five years ago, I was studying Zen art in different ways, and already there was some kind of characterization of Zen art, which was something like asymmetry, simplicity, natural, and unworldliness. And it is very true, these are all characteristics of Zen. But I wanted to find terms actually used in Zen literature that characterize Zen aesthetics.

I came up with these seven characteristics, but English translation of these terms is limited, so I used in our book photographs of Zen gardens, quotations from Zen masters and artists of different genres, such as tea ceremony and Noh play, in a more complex way, using also Chinese, Japanese, Zen terms, to try to explain the complexity of each term. Like direct, in English, it has its own meaning, but in Zen, it's more like a beyond intellectual understanding and explanations. It's more intimate. That means there's nothing in between. So you paint spring without painting flowers and willows. So each term needs some explanations.

James Shaheen: I think you're getting at that there is no separation between viewer and viewed. Is that fair to say?



Kazuaki Tanahashi: That's right. Exactly.

James Shaheen: We'll come back to the qualities, which we're going to have you elucidate, but you describe those qualities or the qualities of Zen aesthetics as manifestations of awakening, and you say that awakening is “to realize the infinite value of each moment of your own life. as well as others, including things, then to continue to act accordingly.” Can you say more about this understanding of awakening? How can understanding these qualities support us on the path to awakening?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Awakening can be viewed in different ways, but I think of Dogen's words, “Miracles are practiced three thousand times in the morning and eight hundred times in the evening.” Each moment is a miracle, and of course you can miss it. We can think about something else, or we can be sleepy, or we can miss it, but we may be still experiencing somewhere deep in our being the miracles of each moment that are not my own miracles but everyone's miracles, even the miracle of the rock and flowers and trees and streams.

James Shaheen: So you mentioned miracles or the miraculous quality of our momentary reality. So let's talk about the ordinary because it's the second quality after direct, ordinary or nothing in particular. And you say that the ordinary is, once again, a miracle. So how can Zen help us appreciate the miraculous in the everyday?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think paradox is the essential difference between Zen and other schools of Buddhism. Zen Favors paradoxes. A monk asked Master Zhaozhou, “What is the meaning of Bodhidharma coming from India?” The master replied, “A cypress tree in the garden.” It doesn't make sense.

Practitioners of Zen in later times struggled with Zhaozhou's essential teachings, which is beyond logic. This became a koan, which is an essential question to break through dualistic thinking and limitations. This is a paradox Zen practitioners search for. Living with paradox



often becomes more important than studying scriptures. Zen is full of paradoxes. By following highly formulated rigorous practice, there is ultimate freedom. Simplicity embodies complexity. In a limited space of vast landscape,

The ordinary is miraculous. It's a paradox. It's a contradiction. If you look at something very simple like a dipper on the water basin, waiting for the guests to come and then use it, it's just an everyday thing, in a way. But also, in a way, it is very unique because this is a particular occasion for a tea ceremony that can only happen once in a lifetime, never the same gathering to be repeated, so it is also very rare. And then there is some kind of temperature, colors, the light, everything is particular. It is ordinary, but also it's particular at each moment. And to realize that, that is realizing part of Zen aesthetics.

James Shaheen: You also explore the quality of vigorousness. So what does it mean for Zen art to be vigorous?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Very exciting in a way. Even sand and rocks, in how they are together, maybe something unusual, something high contrast, black stones, and then white sand. Some kind of design element can be unusual and unique. Maybe that is vigorous. It's not moving a lot. It can be still, but it can be vigorous.

James Shaheen: So the next quality is gleaming, which you say represents quietness, serenity, and nirvana. Can you say more about the relationship between quietness and nirvana? How can this quality help us see things as they are?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think often in tea rooms it should not be too bright. It should be more shady. So the quality of shade, you can see things better. It's paradoxical, because if you have more light, you can see the detail. But meditation halls should be a little bit darker so that you can see clearly what you are experiencing in your meditation. So again, it's a paradox that in less light, in a shady place, you can see more clearly.



James Shaheen: You also say that Zen art is pivotal, meaning that something seemingly worthless can change someone's life. So how can the subtle details of Zen artwork help awaken the viewer to something more profound?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: The original character is a great function. So great function is something seemingly unimportant. Maybe something unimportant like calligraphy in the tea room or any kind of flowers, only a few flowers in a vase in a tea room. That could change people's lives. So that's a great function. That is the greatest function: to change our lives, to change our perspectives, to change our culture. That is no small matter.

James Shaheen: Right. Zen art is also nondual, or not two. You write that a brush-drawn circle is beyond perfect and imperfect. It is whole and complete. Could you say more about the nonduality here?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Yeah, I think nonduality is important in Mahayana Buddhism. It's a kind of prajnaparamita, practicing wisdom beyond wisdom. So that is to go beyond distinctions, large and small. So within something small, you can create something large, or something large, you can see something small.

James Shaheen: How do you see the difference between wholeness and perfection?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think perfection is kind of conceptual. We think about, OK, this is perfect beauty, and then perfection can be seen as a lack of imperfection. And so the Zen circle is not like a clock circle or a perfect circle. There may be some opening, there may be some missed part, there may be some extra dots. To embody perfection and imperfection is more like a Zen circle. In a way, it's perfect because it reflects the state of the artist. In a way, it's imperfect because there are a lot of problems you can see.

James Shaheen: Can we call it perfectly imperfect?

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Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think so. Yes.

James Shaheen: I should mention, Kaz, that we've used your *ensos*, your Zen circles on the cover of the magazine a few times, so thank you for that.

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Thank you so much.

James Shaheen: So the last quality you explore is the inexhaustibility of Zen art, and you say that one brush line embodies the life of the artist and one dewdrop embodies the vastness of awakening. So how does this principle guide your own approach to calligraphy and zen art?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think we could maybe try to perfect it, catch up, and then create something that satisfies our judgment, or make it open, let the brush draw something, and let it be, and then that can have more potential, immeasurable potential within there because our own judgment and designing is limited, but when we let go of our own limited designing, it can be inexhaustible.

James Shaheen: So, Kaz, you're now 90 years old, and you recently released a short film called “Can We Appreciate Death?” In the film, you say, “If we are given three months or three weeks, we can try to complete our life. I don't have a terminal illness, but I plan to complete my life by the end of 2023. I'm signing all my paintings and throwing away what I don't need.” Kaz, it's now 2024. Do you feel like you've completed your life?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: I think so, yeah. However limited, however small my life might be, this was my life. I completed it. The rest of my life is like a bonus. Maybe I should use it for serving others.

James Shaheen: Ah, so you have wrapped things up and the bonus is what we're interviewing right now, right?

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Kazuaki Tanahashi: That's right.

James Shaheen: You've also said that you view death as a beautiful friend. Could you elaborate on that?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Death is always beside us. Our partner or spouse can say, “OK, you're free. You can go. You can be with someone else, do whatever you can do.” They may say so. But death never says that. Death is always faithfully with you. Now, death can be viewed as bad luck, pollution, destruction, or a kind of demon. But also maybe we can see death as a friend, and a beautiful friend, and then just enjoy being with a beautiful friend and say, “Hello, how are you? I'm OK too.” I think maybe we can reconcile with the fact that we'll die sooner or later. Why don't we say this could be a beautiful event for myself? We can die with gratitude, appreciation, and love. We can do that. Death is telling us how to live our life with gratitude, love, and enjoyment.

James Shaheen: You know, I guess I never thought of it this way, but I suppose you could say that death is a friend that will never abandon you. Death will be with you to the very end, right?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: Right.

James Shaheen: You're currently working on a book called *De-Age: The Art of Feeling Fresh and Young*. So what does it mean to de-age, and how are you staying fresh and young?

Kazuaki Tanahashi: It's now written already. Now its title is *Fresh: The Art of De-Aging and Joyful Living*. I think aging has different elements. This may be calendar aging, but also biological aging, but also experiential aging. So that's what I'm talking about. Even when we are very tired or we are sick, maybe close to dying, we can feel fresh after sleeping or resting, doing something exciting, joyous, singing, dancing, thinking about singing and dancing. We can be

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fresh and young. It's all up to us whether we want to be depressed, down, and exhausted or feel fresh and young. Each moment we have a choice.

James Shaheen: You've been fresh and young throughout the interview, so I appreciate that. So, Kaz Tanahashi, thanks so much for joining us. It's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *Gardens of Awakening*, available now. Thanks again, Kaz.

Kazuaki Tanahashi: You ask very nice questions. Thank you so much.

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