

San-En?



Sacred Stable of the Toshogu Shrine, Nikko, Japan

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“*How Did It Begin: A fascinating study of the superstitions, customs, and strange habits that influence our daily lives*,” R. Brash, 1969, Pocket Book, New York

San-En, literally “three monkeys,” represents the three virtues to ‘not see, not hear, not say,’ - **Mizaru** (blind), **Kikazaru** (deaf) and **Iwazaru** (mute). Because *zaru* can be interpreted as “monkey” as well as “not” in Japanese, the three monkeys have traditionally represented “speak no evil, hear no evil, see no evil.” The first phrase, *mizaru*, can also be translated to three (*mi*) monkeys (*saru/zaru*). I must admit that having known this proverb in English most of my life, I didn’t recognize their Japanese origins until I visited the temple in Nikko. The trio of monkeys is depicted with one having its hands over its mouth, another having its hands over its ears, and the third having its hands over its eyes. Known as the Three Monkeys, they are a tradition in Japanese culture.

“The origin of the proverb is unknown. The proverb is often represented by three monkeys covering their eyes, ears, and mouth respectively with their hands. The seventeenth century legend related to “The Three Wise Monkeys” is said to have read, “Hear no evil, see no evil, speak no evil.” The saying [depiction] was carved over the door of [the] Sacred Stable, Nikko, Japan...”

From “Random House Dictionary of Popular Proverbs and Sayings,” Gregory Y. Titelman, 1996, Random House, New York

Beginning in the late Muromachi period (1333-1568), it became customary to carve these figures on *koshinto*, stone pillars. According to the *Kiyu Shoran*, an early 19th century reference work, the Three Monkeys may also be related to the *Sanno* belief complex, wherein monkeys play the role of divine messengers. The Three Monkeys are also said to represent the *Santai* (Three Truths) advocated in the *Tendai* sect of Buddhism. The Tendai founder, Saicho,

is said to have carved a representation of this ideal in the form of monkeys. A famous carving of the Three Monkeys (shown) is on the sacred stable in the Toshogu Shrine in Nikko, Japan. Carvings of monkeys in traditional Japanese culture were believed to prevent diseases in horses.

“It is a fallacy that the Three Wise Monkeys, who hear no evil, see no evil and speak no evil, are indigenously Japanese. It is true that they have had their domicile there for many centuries. But originally they came from China and were introduced into Japan by a Buddhist monk of the Tendai sect, probably in the 8th century A.D. The monkeys were at first always associated with the blue-faced deity Vajra, a fearsome god with three eyes and numerous hands. Their characteristic gestures of covering their ears, eyes and mouths with their paws were a dramatic pictorial way of conveying the command of the god. This shows an early realization of the psychological fact that a striking picture is more impressive and lasting more than a spoken message. Nevertheless, the story has been told in various traditions in prose and poetry. It dates back to at least the 7th century and is part of the teaching of the Vajra cult that if we do not hear, see or talk evil, we ourselves shall be spared all evil. In the folk etymology and by a play on words the very names of the three monkeys – Mizaru, Kikazaru and Iwazaru – express their three gestures and thus anyone by merely referring to them immediately proclaims their message.”

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