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TEACHING TUESDAY

THREE WISE MONKEYS

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The “three wise monkeys,” (三猿) also known as the “see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil” monkeys, date back to the Muromachi period of Japan. Popularized by the carvings over the Toshogu shrine in Nikko, Japan, these monkeys are a popular motif and are frequently depicted around the world.

The philosophy behind the three wise monkeys most likely came to Japan during the Nara period, through Buddhist exchanges with China. The Buddhist teachings said that if we do not hear, see or speak evil, we ourselves shall be spared from evil. The monkeys gain prominence through the Japanese folk religion of Koshin. During the Muromachi period, Koshin followers began creating stone monuments, scrolls, and more, eventually culminating in the carvings at Toshogu Shrine in Nikko.

The depiction of three monkeys is actually a play on words. In Japanese, the proverb is mizaru, kikazaru, iwazaru (見ざる, 聞かざる, 言わざる) or “see not, hear not, speak not”. Zaru can also be a modified form of the word for monkey (saru, 猿), so people inserted monkeys into the depictions of the teachings. The monkeys are named according to the original proverb. Mizaru, covers his eyes, seeing no evil; Kikazaru, covers his ears, hearing no evil; and Iwazaru, covers his mouth, speaking no evil.