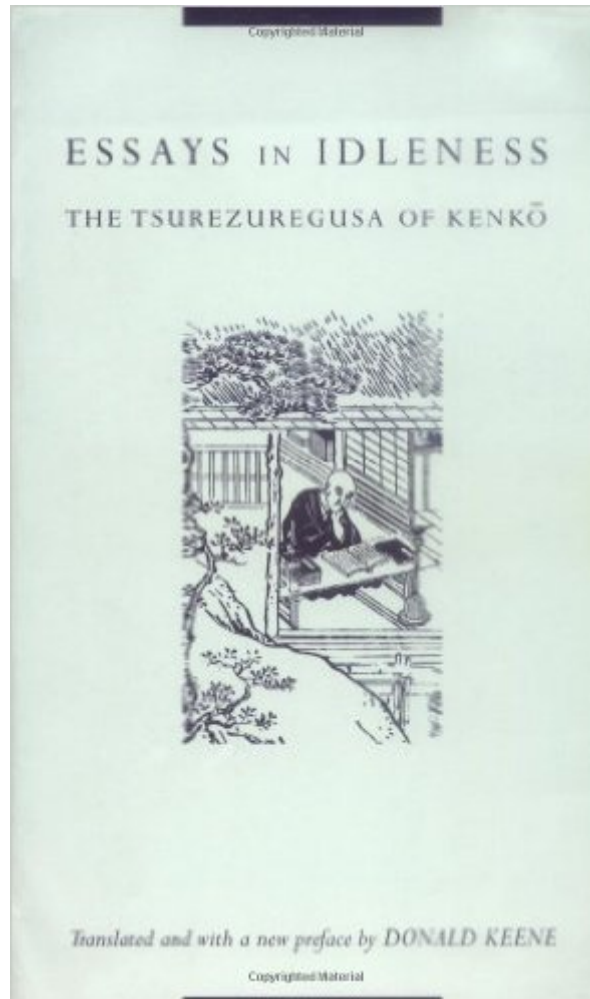


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# Essays In Idleness



## Synopsis

Despite the turbulent times in which he lived, the Buddhist priest Kenko met the world with a measured eye. As Emperor Go-Daigo fended off a challenge from the usurping Hojo family, and Japan stood at the brink of a dark political era, Kenko held fast to his Buddhist beliefs and took refuge in the pleasures of solitude. Written between 1330 and 1332, *Essays in Idleness* reflects the congenial priest's thoughts on a variety of subjects. His brief writings, some no more than a few sentences long and ranging in focus from politics and ethics to nature and mythology, mark the crystallization of a distinct Japanese principle: that beauty is to be celebrated, though it will ultimately perish. Through his appreciation of the world around him and his keen understanding of historical events, Kenko conveys the essence of Buddhist philosophy and its subtle teachings for all readers. Insisting on the uncertainty of this world, Kenko asks that we waste no time in following the way of Buddha. In this fresh edition, Donald Keene's critically acclaimed translation is joined by a new preface, in which Keene himself looks back at the ripples created by Kenko's musings, especially for modern readers.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Anyone interested in or studying Japanese history/literature/culture should read this book. It contains a series of short essays (*zuihitsu*) and reads much like Sei Shonagon's *Pillow Book*. These essays range from Kenko's moral opinions about various aspects of life to his aesthetic tastes and

thoughts about beauty. These essays are Kenko's opinion, yet they can be taken as the opinions of Japan's society at the time of the writing. Therefore there is a great deal of interesting cultural information and meaning behind Kenko's words. So if you are interested in Japanese Buddhism or religion, this book's a must. If you are interested in Japanese aesthetics- aware: the idea that beauty is transient/fleeting, wabi-sabi: by becoming aged and through use, an object's history and experience bestow upon it greater value than an object that is new, the idea that uncertainty/non-uniformity/ and incompleteness can inspire imagination- by all means read this.

The Wordsworth Classics here presents a nice translation by G.B. Sansom of a classic, the *Tsurezuregusa* of Yoshida Kenko, written around 1330 by a Japanese monk. The format of the work is reminiscent of the *Pillow Book* of Sei Shonagon - short observations, bits of memoir, commentary on the manners and morals of people around him. There's a minimum of footnoting and the translator's style is smooth and readable. It's a dipping book which will appeal to modern Buddhists and pensive readers alike. As Kenko himself says: "To sit alone in the lamplight with a book spread out before you, and hold intimate converse with men of unseen generations - such is a pleasure beyond compare."

Much of this little book works as well today as seven hundred years ago, when it was written. The observations on people and their manners sound a little old-fashioned, but still applicable. At another level, this book is credited with the first clear statements of esthetic principles that guide modern Japanese design. The translator's footnotes show how it draws on works from Confucius, Lao Tzu, and other Chinese classics in building a uniquely Japanese text. I believe the translator missed an allusion to Chuang Tzu in essay number 42, but that does not detract from the generally high quality of scholarship in this presentation. This is a remarkable, first-person statement of the sources of Japanese culture. Finally, these essays are uniquely products of their place and time. Kenko's view, as a monk, of the secular world affects nearly every essay. Shonagon's 'Pillow Book' introduced me to traditional Japanese literature. This book, with all its similarities and differences, is a wonderful way to continue that friendship.

I originally studied this book in college and loved it, and bought it this time for a friend. My mistake was not checking who translated this edition, as it is quite different from mine. I prefer the translation by Donald Keene, as it is more whimsical and meant for everyone to understand.

The Kindle edition is a translation by Sansom, not Keene as indicated by the description. Not what I wanted or expected.

Easy to read yet mentally challenging, beautifully written yet familiar in style. The Tsurezuregusa is a classic of Japanese literature. This series of essays written by a 14th-century Buddhist priest and poet in Kyoto has had an enormous impact on Japanese culture, particularly in its elegant discussions about how to best appreciate the beauty of things. Reading the Tsurezuregusa, you are able to make friends with Kenko himself, and Kenko is a good friend indeed. Donald Keene's translation is a literary gem in its own right. You simply must read this book.

If you're interested at all in medieval Japanese aesthetics and social norms/values, then you might find this well worthwhile. Outside that, I'm less certain that this is going to have much interest for a potential reader. If the prospect of a lot of disconnected but developed meditations or reflections on art, culture, and nature from the perspective of classical Japanese thinker seems interesting however then this is definitely worth checking out.

I bought this book for my husband, who asked me to find it for him. He is a retired salesman, sales trainer, life coach and hypnotherapist and has read a LOT of self-help books. He is really enjoying this book and from what he says, the book seems to have a theme of "don't sweat the small stuff" and "it is what it is" to it. For example, if you are unhappy with the way your yard looks in the winter (like we have been), well, it is supposed to look that way. Excellent gift book.

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