

Zen garden

Life



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Nature is an important element for the Zen Buddhist as it is said to aid with meditation that can achieve enlightenment. The ultimate place for this mediation is a Zen garden. These gardens are a Buddhist art expression that focuses on nature. However, the garden is almost entirely made of stone and gravel, with almost no plant life at all. In this essay I will discuss a brief history of the role of nature in Buddhism, explain why the stones and gravel in the Zen Garden are so important and describe, in detail, the finest Zen Garden example that is Ryoanji Dry Garden in Japan.

I have personally visited Ryoanji three times. Introduced to Japan in the mid-sixth century, Buddhism advanced various attitudes towards the natural world. The ideals of many Buddhists evinced a religiously based concern for nature. Buddhists in China and then Japan had long debated whether non-sentient beings such as trees and rocks could actually attain Buddha-hood. Saicho (766-822) the founder of Tendai school, was one of the first to voice his opinion in an affirmative way, he declared that “ trees and rocks have Buddha-nature” (Masao, 1989: 186).

Later, Ryogen (912-985) a member of the Tendai School claimed that plants, trees and rocks desire Enlightenment, discipline themselves and attain Buddha-hood. Buddhist temples aesthetically enhanced the environment. These temples were surrounded by nature and were often built in forests and on the sides of mountains. Rock gardens, vegetable gardens as well as cherry and plum orchards were common features involved in the setting of temples.

These features helped to improve the local environment and aid as a means of meditation through the natural beauty on a spiritual level in search of Nirvana which means to “ put out the flame” in this world and escape to the otherworld. Zen Buddhist in Particular saw enlightenment as an experience to be had through nature. Dogen (1200-1253), founder of the Soto school of Zen Buddhism, declared that “ the ocean speaks and mountains have tongues - that is the everyday speech of Buddha... If you can speak and hear such words you will be one who truly comprehends the entire universe. ” (Shaner 1989: 114).

The Zen Buddhists believed that nature could help them achieve a status of mindfulness in order to ultimately achieve enlightenment. They began to create the ultimate garden for meditation, known as the Zen Garden or “ Dry Garden”. Both by creating and meditating in these gardens aided to the understanding of the Buddhist religion. Karesansui, or the “ dry-landscape” style of Japanese gardens have been in existence for centuries, but the Zen Buddhists developed a smaller, more compact garden style that focussed on observing it from a distance as opposed to walking through it; “ There was a shift back to an emphasis on looking rather than using.

These gardens were used specifically as aids to a deeper understanding of Zen concepts...these gardens were not an end in themselves...but a trigger to contemplation and meditation” (Davidson 1983: 22). In these Zen Gardens large natural stones, in particular, are arranged in ways that allude to the spiritual problems and solutions of the Zen faith. In fact, with in the walls of the gardens there are really only two or three elements used, stones, gravel or sand, and sometimes unintentionally moss.

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Both the stones and gravel are arranged to create “ simple abstractions of nature” (Kincaid 1966: 65). In order for the Buddhists to meditate and achieve enlightenment the garden “ relies on understatement, simplicity, suggestion and implication...leaving room for the imagination by providing a starting point” (Davidson 1983: 23). The Buddhists believe that the stones are more than just inanimate objects, they are thought to have a soul and are considered to be the realistic part of the garden; “ We treat natural stones as materials which have vital factors.

That is because we feel life and soul in the natural stones which are frequently used as an idealistic and also as a realistic representation” (Tono1958: 38). The stones are surrounded by gravel that has been intentionally raked into patterns to represent flowing water. The moss that is sometimes found on and around the stones is usually the only plant life found in a Dry Garden and is formed and left as a natural occurrence.

All of the elements in nature used in a Dry Garden have a purpose, however they often take a symbolic form and represent something entirely different to what western eyes may see. Stones are often looked upon as something much greater than just a simple stone; “ They have an intrinsic beauty of their own, and on the other hand, can represent something altogether larger and more universal” (Davidson 1983: 38). Stones can symbolize many things depending on their shape, colour and texture.

Generally “ stones represent mountains, islands, and waterfalls” (Takakuwa 1973: 120). However, a vertical stone may symbolize the sky, while a horizontal stone may symbolize the earth. They may also be selected and

arranged to represent the essence or spirit of animals or shrubs. The bed of raked gravel surrounding the stones is seen as a body of flowing water and the raked patterns are the ripples and swirls in it. The patterns are said to give energy to the garden and help the meditation process. Figure 1) Ryoanji garden is one of the most famous Zen gardens in the world. It is arguably the highest expression of Zen art and teachings that is perhaps the single greatest masterpiece of Japanese culture. No one knows who exactly designed and arranged this garden, or precisely when, but it is thought to date from the late 1400s. This garden is a karesansui dry-style garden and is relatively small, “ a rectangular area, about twenty-five yards long and ten yards wide” (Holborn 1982: 61).

It consists of 15 stones that rest on a bed of white gravel, surrounded by low walls. (Figure 2) The moss-covered boulders are placed so that, when looking at the garden from any angle, only 14 are visible at one time. In the Buddhist world the number 15 denotes completeness. So you must have a total view of the garden in your mind to make it a whole and meaningful experience, and yet, from any position in the garden it is impossible to view all 15 stones at once making the only way to see all 15 is on a spiritual level.

The gravel around the stones is raked to resemble ripples and swirls, in concentric circles that extend away from the stones, while the remaining surface of the gravel is raked in straight lines, creating a contrast between curved and straight lines. The only “ living” element that lends a sense of depth to the composition is the green moss found covering parts of and around the bases of the stones. The Buddhists have given the garden symbolic levels to serve as illusions, with the gravel around the stones

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powerfully evoking water, and the whole scene appearing to be a miniature seascape with weathered volcanic islands.

The extreme simplicity and powerful balance of the composition have been interpreted by many different people, in many different ways, however its fifteen stones “ are generally believed to represent islands in an ocean, but the composition is called Tora-no-Ko Watashi (Tiger Cubs Crossing a Stretch of Water)” (Takakuwa 1973: 122). As a meditation tool of allusion, the garden takes a dramatic title (Tiger Cubs Crossing a Stretch of Water) and uses it to create an image to capture the essence of tension, while viewing the illusion of a strong idealized image of nature, providing a setting for concentration on the spiritual level. It is only an illusion, because the construction and maintenance of the Dry Garden is not a natural occurrence. The design of the garden and arrangement of the stones is completely artificial and processed by humans. The white gravel lines formed by the rake represent ripples in water or clouds in the sky; however the lines are so neat and precise that they reveal that the garden is regularly groomed by a human hand. (Figure 1&3) This makes the garden an artificial illusion of nature. It has purposely been designed this way to achieve an idealized image of nature.

In Zen Buddhism, enlightenment can be achieved through meditation that can be assisted by creating an illusion of the idealized image of nature. An important focus of this meditation is concerned with the essence of nature and reality. “ Zen art does not try to create the illusion of reality. It abandons true to life perspective, and works with artificial space relations which make

one think beyond reality into the essence of reality. This concept of essence as opposed to illusion is basic to Zen art in all phases". (Lieberman 1997)

The purpose of the garden is not to decide on a particular natural image that the stones and the white gravel are supposed to miniaturize. The driving force behind the design as an illusion is to portray an idealized vision of weathered, enduring and sublime nature. The asymmetrical balance of the stones, when combined with the calming patterns in the gravel turn the mind inward, making it ideal for meditation and allowing the Zen Buddhists to achieve Enlightenment. Whether the stones are representing mountains amongst clouds or islands in the ocean is not important.

What is important is that they capture the essence of both, displaying the characteristics of endurance, austerity, and balance that is so essential to the idealized Zen Buddhist image of nature. Bibliography: Davidson, A. K. 1983, *The art of Zen gardens: a guide to their creation and enjoyment*, J. P. Tarcher, L. A. Holborn, M. 1982, *The ocean in the sand: Japan, from landscape to garden*, Shambhala Publications, Boston. Ito, T. 1972, *The Japanese Garden—An Approach to Nature*. Yale University Press, New Haven. Kimura, K. 1991, *The Self in Medieval Japanese Buddhism: Focusing on Dogen*, University of Hawaii Press.

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