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SIGHT AND INSIGHT

– CREATING SPACE FOR RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

WIDZENIE A POSTRZEGANIE

– TWORZENIE PRZESTRZENI DLA PRAKTYK RELIGIJNYCH

Abstract

The paper reviews some recent attempts that describe the meaning of dry gardens that can be found in Zen Buddhist monasteries in Japan. When researchers try to figure out the meaning of the visual elements, its structure or the placement of the stones, they usually stay on the level of understanding. However, the daily meditational practice among these walls near the dry garden provides a different point of view. The purpose of this study is to show the importance of attention regarding the daily use of dry gardens on the way to enlightenment.

Keywords: dry garden, Buddhism, Zen, practice, attention

Streszczenie

Praca przedstawia bieżące próby przedstawienia znaczenia ogrodów skalnych obecnych w buddyjskich klasztorach zen w Japonii. Podejmując próbę dotarcia do znaczenia elementów wizualnych, struktury ogrodu i ułożenia skał, naukowcy zazwyczaj pozostają na poziomie zrozumienia. Jednak codzienna medytacja w tym otoczeniu pozwala na rozwinięcie innego punktu widzenia. Celem niniejszego badania jest ukazanie, jak ważną rolę pełni uważność w kontekście regularnego korzystania z ogrodów skalnych na drodze do oświecenia.

Słowa kluczowe: ogród skalny, buddyzm, zen, praktykowanie, uważność

1. Introduction

This study discusses some recent attempts that describe the meaning of dry gardens that can be found in Zen Buddhist monasteries in Japan. These gardens are religious sites where monks strive to reach enlightenment by intense meditational practice. When researchers try to figure out the meaning of the visual elements, its structure or the placement of the stones, they usually stay on the level of understanding.

However, the daily meditational practice among these walls near the dry garden provides a different point of view. During a Buddhist meditation, the subject of the beginner's attention is breathing. If thinking or imagination arise besides breathing, then the practitioner realizes it and the attention returns to breathing. As it seems, it is the attention and not its subject that has a significant role from the beginning of the practice.

The purpose of this study is to show the importance of attention regarding the daily use of dry gardens on the way to enlightenment.

2. The emergence of karesansui gardens

In the following section, the emergence of karesansui gardens will be presented through some examples by investigating ancient historical texts from the eighth century, showing the influence of Buddhism regarding the relation to the world, reviewing the philological aspects and explaining the stories and images connected to these gardens.

2.1. Historical texts

A Paekche king sent an image of Buddha to a Japanese emperor along with Buddhist texts written in Chinese characters and perhaps a Buddhist monk by the middle of the sixth century [1, p. 10]. At that time, Japan had no written language, no written history and no written culture. Through the introduction of Buddhism, they received an almost a thousand-year-old written, religious, philosophical system.

The oldest written book about the history of Japan is the *Kojiki*, also known as *Records of Ancient Matters*. A few years later, a much more elaborated and detailed book was written called the *Nihonshoki - Chronicles of Japan*. In these literatures, several uses of stone have been mentioned to demonstrate the relation between the people and the world. The first example from the *Kojiki* shows a religious aspect of this connection from the 2nd century:

“The emperor was playing the cither, and the OPO-OMI TAKESI-UTI-NÖ-SUKUNE abode in the ceremonial place in order to seek the divine will” [2].

The ceremonial place is a garden with sand or grit according to Japanese version of this text. Before the appearance of Buddhism and before the introduction of literature, the Japanese had an oral tradition called Shinto. White sand or gravel was used in Shinto to symbolize purity, and it was used around shrines, temples, and palaces. Shinto had started building shrines near or even on sites that had been worshipped for centuries before [3, p. 20]. These

sites are called iwakura, a formation of rocks to which a kami is invited to descend for worship, which are considered to be holy ground [4].

The second example from the *Nihonshoki* demonstrates a specific use of stone to create a scenery of a landscape at the beginning of the seventh century: “Moreover, I have a small talent. I can make the figures of hills and mountains. If you kept me and made use of me, it would be to the advantage of the country” [5].

According to the text, Suiko empress had him build the Mount Sumeru and a Wu-bridge at the southern courtyard. The stones started to symbolize the central Buddhist image of Mount Sumeru, known as Shumisen in Japanese. Shumisen is the legendary central mountain in Buddhist cosmology; eight lower mountains and an equal number of seas encircle it. This idea was easily adopted, because it was familiar to the previously used sacred area called iwakura [6, p. 17].

2.2. Influence of Buddhism

Buddhism began to spread throughout Japan during the Heian period (794-1185). In these times, two types of gardens were built, the residences of aristocrats and the temples of Buddhist sects [7, p. 20]. The designers of lay gardens were mainly aristocrats, who conduct the building of their own garden and gave advices to others. They were garden masters of their age, described in *Sakuteiki*¹ as the “skilled ones of old”. Later, there were Buddhist priests who participated in garden building, known as *ishitatesō*, literally stone-setting priests [8]. The stones became symbols of Buddhism and tools for the scenic arrangement of the nature.

At that time, Buddhist monks visited China to seek greater truth, to learn from highly trained Chinese masters. Myōan Eisai was the first Japanese, who not only practiced in Chan² Buddhist monasteries, but became the master of the so-called Linji-school. Later, he introduced Chan Buddhism to Japan and established several monasteries. With the arrival of Zen Buddhism in the Kamakura period (1185–1333), the focus changed to the inner workings of the mind. The quest was to penetrate to the truth hidden beneath the surface reality of life and nature. This drive toward inner truth led to gardens replicate the inner essence of nature rather than its outer forms [3, pp. 24–26].

According to a historical text from the fourteenth century, the three main purposes of dry gardens were to provide the places for *zazen*³, poem writing, and enjoying the landscapes of seasons [9].

¹ *Sakuteiki*: a gardening manual from the mid-Heian period, describes in detail the technique and theory of garden design.

² Chan in China, Zen in Japan, Son in Korean, and Thien in Vietnam. Those names correspond to the pronunciation of the Sanskrit word *dhyana* (“meditation”).

³ *Zazen* is a meditative discipline that is typically the primary practice of Zen Buddhism. It can be regarded as a means of insight into the nature of existence.

2.3. Concepts behind karesansui

From the middle of the Heian period, a new garden style was introduced called karesansui gardens. The Sakuteiki describes it as a garden without ponds and streams [8]. It literally means “dry mountain water”.

According to Sakuteiki, the word used for nature is *shōtoku no senzui*, which means “innate disposition of mountain-water”. The *senzui* not only refers to mountain and waters, but it can also imply a landscape appearing not in the *shinden*-style garden of aristocrats, but in Buddhist temples as well. It also means “nature” [10, p. 17].

There is another word *karagu*, from which the term *karesansui* can be originated. Since the *kara* was written using several variants of characters, it can be assumed that the original meaning was not „dry”, as we think today, but „to reveal”. The placement of the stones without any watercourse, so that the bottom part of the river would be hidden by water, was visible [11, p. 119].

2.4. Stories and images

a) Dragon’s gate waterfall

The Sōgenchi Garden, located behind Tenryū-ji, is one of the oldest landscape gardens in Japan, retaining the same form as when it was designed in the fourteenth century by Musō Soseki. In the back of the garden, dynamic arrangements of large stones against the hillside are representing the scenery of a mountain ravine. The central feature is the Ryūmon-no-taki, a composition of standing boulders representing a waterfall [12]. In China, there was a legendary river with a powerful three-tiered waterfall. If a fish proved strong and determined enough to swim to the top, the fish would be transformed into a dragon. Historically, the dragon was the symbol of the emperor of China, and the dragon gate was a metaphor for passing the very hard examinations required for imperial administrators [13, p. 59]. In Japan, it is allegorical to Zen study and enlightenment through intensive self-training and meditation [6, p. 63].

b) Tigress crossing the river with her cubs

The dry garden at Ryōan-ji was called the garden of the Tiger Cubs Crossing the River in the late eighteenth century. This was a very conventional way of describing gardens at the end of the Edo period. A tigress gave birth to three cubs, but one was a panther. If the mother tiger was not constantly on guard, the panther cub would eat the other cubs. The tigress and cubs had to cross a river, but the mother tiger could only carry one cub at time. How was the mother tiger going to carry the three cubs across the river so that the panther cub would not eat the two tiger cubs? It has another meaning, in which a Chinese governor was assigned to an area to solve a situation caused by a rampaging tiger [14, pp. 107–108]. Both stories use an attitude, which easily can be connected to Buddhist practice: be on guard, to be very attentive.

c) Strokes of the Japanese character for the heart or the mind

At the end of fourteenth century, a pond style called Shinji-chi appeared at Kitatoji-ji temple, which was the family temple of Ashikaga shoguns. The shape of the pond was a cursive

rendering of a kanji character for heart (or mind) [15, p. 467]. Besides the relation of the heart to the Zen Buddhist teachings, ponds often were shaped to the form written characters for esoteric reasons [16, pp. 136–138]. In this case, the pattern of the stones draws the character of the heart.

d) Waves of the ocean and sacred mountains

The raked sand or gravel recalling waves or the rippling ocean. The symbolism came from Shinto, where a white sand area symbolized a sacred ground where a kami can appear. Regarding its maintenance, it has a practical function because a dry garden requires intensive daily care [13, pp. 82–87], which is also a meditational practice.

The image of a sacred mountains refers to Mount Sumeru of Buddhist cosmology, a Taoist mountain with eternal life called Hōrai or a holy place such as Mount Fuji, where gods reside [13, pp. 54–58].

3. Approaches on the level of understanding

The following studies use scientific methods of anthropology, psychology, psychotherapy, and philosophy to find answers in relation to the creation and use of dry gardens in order to understand their structures, or their meaningful appearance. The common concept of these studies is a hidden feature, a tool for a better understanding of our place in the garden that must be revealed.

a) Unconscious perception of unexpected structural features

The researchers used medial-axis transformation on the layout of the dry garden of the Ryōan-ji temple in Kyoto. It is a shape representation scheme that is applied widely in image processing and in studies of biological vision. The purpose of this study is to draw attention to the unconscious visual sensitivity to axial-symmetry skeletons of stimulus shapes. The resulting image is a simple, dichotomously branched tree that converges on the primary garden-viewing area - the balcony. The pattern of this image is a self-similar tree, with the mean branch length decreasing monotonically from the trunk to the tertiary level [17].

b) Scene Perception and Visual Segmentation

The four major aesthetic ideals displayed by dry gardens are asymmetry, tranquility, simplicity and naturalness. In this work, the researchers applied Gestalt⁴ principles of visual grouping to understand and reconstruct the karesansui design structure in order to achieve these aesthetic qualities. The process of visual segmentation into figure and ground may lead to naturalness and avoid excessive local “pop-out” by careful choice and controlled use of various design elements [18].

⁴ Gestalt psychology is a philosophy of mind of the Berlin School of experimental psychology. It is an attempt to understand the laws behind the ability to acquire and maintain meaningful perceptions in an apparently chaotic world.

c) A Phenomenological-Anthropological Approach

When paying attention to the details of the garden, instead of merely reducing them to ideas to be extracted, it becomes apparent that seeing is not necessarily authoritative in the perceptual order. Audition and tactileness are as relevant as vision. The actuality of the garden is felt and sensed as much as it is there to be read as a text with the eyes. Openness to sensory engagement and the felt actuality reveals the ways in which a meaning is given, communicated to, and becomes part of the visitors' experience. Exploring the visitors' sensory perceptions also raises the complex question of how humans form and constitute their reality [19].

d) The Garden as a kōan⁵ of Perception

This approach demonstrates a firsthand experience to find out a working method to see and understand the hidden, invisible feature of the garden. The conceptual problem that was found during the course of the research was related to the act of taking the mountain that is physically outside and bringing it into the garden and to its viewers, and how to bring the viewers to the mountain and the nature that exists beyond the garden wall. This problem has a practical aspect - how can a designer present the mountain in a manner which will provide it with a frame and thus excise it from its everyday context; on the other hand, how can he present the mountain "as it is", simply as a mountain [20].

4. Attitudes toward enlightenment

A practical method will be presented using the core teachings of Zen Buddhism. It will be emphasized that religious approach through formal, daily practice could change not just the attitudes, but the perception as well.

It should be noticed that the majority of English books on Buddhism use the term "enlightenment" to translate the term bodhi, while the original meaning is much more expressive: the root budh, from which both bodhi (awakening) and Buddha (awakened) are derived, means "to wake up" or "to recover consciousness" [21, p. 1].

4.1. The quintessence of Zen

Bodhidharma was a Buddhist monk who lived during the fifth or sixth century. He is traditionally credited as the transmitter of Chan Buddhism to China and regarded as its first Chinese patriarch. According to Chinese legend, he also began the physical training of the monks of Shaolin Monastery, which led to the creation of Shaolin kungfu. In Japan, he is known as Daruma [22].

⁵ A kōan is a story, dialogue, question, or statement, which is used in Zen-practice to provoke the „great doubt“, and test a student's progress in Zen practice.

Bodhidharma is traditionally seen as introducing dhyāna-practice (meditation) in China. According to the tradition, one of the fundamental Chan texts attributed to Bodhidharma is a four-line stanza whose first two verses echo the Lankāvatāra Sūtra's disdain for words and whose second two verses stress the importance of the insight into reality achieved through "self-realization" [23, p. 85].

*A special transmission outside the scriptures;
Not dependent on language and texts;
Pointing directly to Mind;
See your true nature and become Buddha.*

Finding one's own true nature is not dependent on explanation, Sutras, or academic knowledge. No concept can ever express it. Zen teaching points directly to one's own mind. If someone wants to become Buddha, even understanding the Buddha's own speech cannot help to achieve it. Using intellectual understanding to find one's own true nature is like expecting a hungry man to satisfy his agonizing hunger with a picture of a banana. Zen teaching says, "Open your mouth. Here is a banana. Now eat!" [24, p. 210].

The other important term from the last line goes back to the method of awakening. The time-honored Chan/Zen expression for enlightenment is "seeing the nature". To "see" one's own original, true nature is to discover and experience the universal Buddha-nature, which is inherent in all beings whether they are enlightened or not [25, pp. 88–89].

4.2. Living by vow

Many Buddhists are familiar with the Four Great Bodhisattva Vows. Some people seem to have the impression that this is an almost exclusively Zen thing, but most of the Japanese traditions recite the Vows, along with Korean and Chinese schools. The Bodhisattva vow is taken by Mahayana Buddhists to liberate all sentient beings.

*Sentient beings are numberless; I vow to save them.
Desires are inexhaustible; I vow to put an end to them.
The dharmas are boundless; I vow to master them.
The Buddha's Way is unsurpassable; I vow to attain it.*

Each of these vows is a wonderfully large and impossible proposition when set against our limited human means [26, pp. 30–32]. This means that the practice is endless and that one cannot completely fulfill the four vows.

However, "vow" is not a suitable term to express the meaning of the Sanskrit pranidhāna. Pranidhāna, which is a strong wish, aspiration, prayer, or an inflexible determination to carry out one's will even through an infinite series of rebirths" [27, p. 307].



In daily life, the mind is running uncontrolled; the attention is jumping from one idea to another, without an ability to exert any control over it. Without taking any clear decision to prevent some things and foster some other things, it is rather difficult to keep in mind these vows in different situations during daily life, and secondly, it is difficult to apply them. But if the practitioners formalize their decision by making a vow every day after meditation, during practice or ceremonies, then it will surely leave a strong imprint on themselves. It will be a constant attitude changer, a long-term determination on the path of compassion and wisdom. For this reason, a bodhisattva is a person who lives by vow instead of by karma. Karma means habit, preferences, or a ready-made system of values. As we grow up, we learn a system of values from the culture around us, which we use to evaluate the world and choose actions. This is karma, and living by karma. In contrast, a bodhisattva lives by vow. Vow is like a compass that shows the direction toward the Buddha [28, p. 15].

4.3. The surrounding space

The monk Myōan Eisai (1141–1215) is regarded as the first to establish a branch of the Linji Chan (Rinzai Zen) lineage in his native Japan. Eisai visited a number of the leading monasteries in Zhejiang on two separate trips to China in the twentieth century. He trained under Chan master who was abbot at the Wannian Monastery on Tiantai Mountain in Taizhou, and then abbot at the Jingde Chan Monastery on Tiantong Mountain in Mingzhou. In the decade following his return to Japan in 1191, Eisai founded Song-style monasteries in Kyūshū (Shōfuku-ji), Kamakura (Jūfuku-ji), and Kyoto (Kennin-ji). The Kennin-ji was an excellent replica of the public monasteries in Zhejiang in the thirteenth century [29, p. 139–142]. At the beginning, the garden of Zen temples looked like Chinese gardens of that time [30, p. 472]. It was not unusual during the importation of Chinese culture to replicate spaces and materials in Japan; however, making an exact copy of the surrounding space in this case could be connected to previous spiritual experience in Song-style monasteries in China. So, for Eisai, the experience might have been related to space and space might have been linked to experience as an inspirational way.

Following the footsteps of Eisai, Dōgen, who went to study at Kennin-ji temple, also visited and trained at major Chan monasteries in China. After he came back to Japan, he devoted his life to replicate and maintain the Song-style monastic training system. He emphasized independence by ascetic meditation in the mountains away from the capitals, bodhisattva-precepts ordinations apart from the Tendai monopoly, and thorough Chan monastic routines. His attitude towards the monastic space shows a direct approach of Zen practice:

“When we make a vow to fund a temple (a sangha or a monastery), we should not be motivated by human sentiment, but we should strengthen our aspiration for the continuous practice of Buddha Dharma.” [28, pp. 43–44].

The previously mentioned dragon gate waterfall at Tenryū-ji temple could be another example for inspiration based on practice. The monks strive with a seemingly impossible task to achieve the top of the waterfall just like fish. The tiger cubs’ image of the stones also reflects the effort to be constantly on guard during the practice.

5. Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that the religious aspect has a significant influence on the outcome of researches on monastic gardens. The interpretations have direction regarding the attention of the researcher, which affects the way of one's relation to the gardens. Scientific methods generate questions like:

- ▶ How was the garden created?
- ▶ What is hidden in its structure?
- ▶ How does it influence our experience?
- ▶ How does it work?

In these cases, the subject of attention is the garden itself, or its influence on the observer. Therefore, the direction of attention is directed from the observer to the subject in order to understand something about it.

On the other hand, the Zen Buddhist perspective clearly states that the direction must be inverse. It shows that the purpose of the structure of the monastic environment has a very distinct role in the life of monks. For this reason, the oral or written historical interpretations of a monastic garden must be seen through a practical eye. As it seems also in the case of vows and commitment, they enforce the Buddhist practice and develop some specific characteristics of our mind. By formalizing the decision and by making a vow every day during the practice, it will surely leave a strong imprint on oneself. By formalizing the space as a vow, seeing the space as a vow is a skillful means of strengthening one's aspiration "to reveal" and see one's true nature. Dōgen demonstrated the way of this practice by the example of establishing a monastery:

"Listen to the sound of raindrops at midnight. The raindrops have the power to pierce not only moss, but also rock."

So, the sitting produces the power to erode a rock as we sit moment by moment, day after day, year after year. When we think of establishing a monastery, it is the same. Our effort is like raindrops; it does not create change in one day, or a few days, or a few years. But if we just keep doing it, when conditions are ripe, it happens [28, pp. 48–49].

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