

The Zen Garden

Wybe Kuitert,

(This is an abbreviated version of “The Zen Garden” as it was published in [*Themes, Scenes, and Taste in the History of Japanese Garden Art*](#), Gieben, Amsterdam, 1988, and in [*Themes in the History of Japanese Garden Art*](#), Hawai’i University Press, 2002.)

In recent, more popular books one often sees the Japanese garden explained as an expression of Zen philosophy. The idea that gardens express Zen is relatively recent; it is not found in the old Japanese garden texts, neither in the early twentieth-century literature on the garden art of Japan. The following pages address some of the more significant contributions pivotal in the establishing the “Zen interpretation” as well as my rejection of it.

A visit of the Garden Club of America to Japan in May 1935 generated great excitement on the Japanese side. It was a period in history when Japan was extremely sensitive to its relations with foreign countries, especially the United States. To receive the club an official General Reception Committee was formed with important politicians and government officials as patrons, perhaps because all club members were “ladies representing the best of America’s cultured society”.



Miss Lizzie E. Boyd with a friend in her garden at Windsor Farms, Richmond, Virginia. Seventy pictures of American private gardens, such as Miss Boyd’s, were illustrated in a limited edition titled *Gardens of America* by the Garden Club in 1936 and returned as a present to the Japanese hosts of the previous year.

From the Japanese side, a book on Japanese gardens was prepared for the occasion. It is Tamura's *Art of the Landscape Garden in Japan*. It was edited in a luxurious edition with silk cover featuring an ink painting by Yokoyama Taikan to be presented to the club members. In the same year Loraine Kuck's *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens* came out. It is here that Zen comes to take a major position in the interpretations of Japanese garden art. Kuck focuses in particular on the stone garden of Ryōan-ji, and describes its Zen qualities, with the harmony of the balanced composition as a clue, as follows:

"In this harmony is found the real key to the meaning of the garden, the philosophical concept which the creator was striving to express. Minds unable to grasp this inner meaning have invented a number of explanations ... But students of real understanding realize that the aim of the designer was something far more subtle and esoteric than any of these. The garden is the creation of an artistic and religious soul who was striving with sand and stones as his medium to express the harmony of the universe ... [follows a discussion on the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental concept of existence. The Oriental supposedly sees himself not as an individual at war with his environment but rather as fundamentally a part of all that is about him.] ... The [Oriental] artist, whatever his medium, is striving to grasp the essentials of his subject, the thing about it which is universal and timeless, and common to both himself and it [=the subject] ... The creator of this garden was a follower of Zen and an artist who strove to express it whatever his medium. The flowing simplicity, the utter harmony, rhythm and balance of the garden express this sense of universal relationship"



The stone garden of Ryōan-ji in 1938. The garden wall had a tiled roof in these days. It was later changed into a wooden roof, more in line with *sabi* esthetics (Shigemori, *Nihon teianshi zukan*).

Seeing the small medieval garden as an expression of Zen philosophy became generally accepted in the following decades and is found in other publications of Kuck as well. The concepts “Zen garden” or “garden expressing (the spirit of) Zen” are common in today’s popular literature on Japanese garden art.

A new interpretation that is generally accepted, makes one suspect a new frame of reference formed beforehand. In this case this new frame of reference must be the 1930s interest in the explanation of Japanese culture as an expression of Zen. This concept has a short history. After Japan was opened to the West in the late 19th century enthusiastic efforts were made to acquire modern technology and other yet unknown achievements of Western civilization. But soon the question of cultural identity became apparent. The debates on a reconciliation of modern Western rationalism and the traditional social and spiritual values of Japan brought forth many publications. Especially remarkable is the *Fundamentals of our National Polity* published by the Ministry of Education. Issued in 1934, it clearly defined a Japanese “spirit” - above all a spirit of harmonious conduct - that was supposedly superior to Western individualism and aggressive rationalism. This public declaration intensified the political character of the discussion on the Japanese spirit. But by that time outstanding scholars had already occupied themselves with the problem. One of these was Nishida Kitarō (1870-1945), considered the most eminent modern Japanese philosopher. Nishida was a highly intellectual person who had practiced Zen meditation and studied European philosophies. He was able to define the Japanese spirit, mainly seen in a Zen religious context, using a Western philosophical frame of thinking. His “universalization” of the concept of the Japanese spirit was an important theoretical achievement in face of the danger of nationalism that the definitions of the Ministry of Education implied. Expanding military adventures, nevertheless led to the Pacific War.

Most instrumental in popularizing Zen - interpreted in Nishida’s terms - for the Western world was Suzuki Daisetsu Teitarō (1870-1966), an energetic writer, lecturer, and friend of Nishida. An essay by Suzuki on the contributions of Zen Buddhism to Japanese culture published in 1934, one year before Kuck’s publication from which I quoted above, hinted perhaps for the first time at the idea of landscape gardening as expressing the spirit of Zen.

After the Pacific War the interpretation of traditional Japanese culture as being inspired by Zen, in terms of Nishida and Suzuki, won wide recognition. Its peaceful tone was a reconciling element in the demoralizing atmosphere of defeat and occupation by the Americans; it also held a promise for a future of more universal understanding. Suzuki’s postwar *Zen and Japanese Culture*, translated in several languages, was read in many Western countries.

Suzuki and Nishida were lecturing professors at universities in Kyoto and would have been known to foreign students of Japanese culture. It must have been the intellectual climate of Kyoto in the 1930s under the threat of nationalism and full of the buzz of a peaceful spirit of Zen that made Kuck interpret the Ryōan-ji garden as expressing universal harmony. The visit of the Garden Club of America must have intensified - or perhaps even triggered - the effort. Kuck lived in Kyoto for three years, between 1932 and 1935, and in one of her acknowledgments she thanks her one-time neighbor Dr.D.T.Suzuki “who discussed Zen”. Loraine Kuck, from the United States, could easily communicate with the Suzuki’s. Suzuki’s wife, Beatrice Lane, was from US New Jersey and published, like her husband on Buddhism too. Beatrice Lane had an interest in theosophy which might have helped.

In the 1950s the concept of a garden as an expression of Zen and the term “Zen-like garden” (*zenteki teien*) appear extensively and explicitly applied to the Ryōan-ji garden. This occurs for the first time in the Japanese language in a work on Zen and art by Hisamatsu Shin’ichi, a student of Nishida and Suzuki - most likely the starting point of the Zen interpretation in Japanese works on the garden art of Japan. Hisamatsu defines, though not always convincingly, “Seven Characteristics” of objects of “Zen art”. He derives his definitions from classical works

of art that date from Japan's middle ages and were related to the cultural salon of the great Zen monasteries. With these derived Characteristics Hisamatsu proceeds to describe a range of other classical works of art as expressing Zen. One of these is the Ryōan-ji stone garden. Hisamatsu's book, which established more or less a canon of Zen art criticism, was translated in English and inspired several writers on Japanese garden art as well.

Apart from the seven determinative qualities, Hisamatsu gives no explicit definition of Zen art. In order to discuss Zen and garden art, however, we need to know what is actually meant by the term "Zen art". Therefore I will try to distill a definition from the works of Hisamatsu and Suzuki. Hisamatsu treats various traditional arts of Japan; Suzuki concentrates on ink painting, sword fighting, and haiku poetry (-two last ones not addressed by Hisamatsu.) What defines Zen art in both authors' view is the way in which it was created - besides its theme, of course, which might derive from the classical lore of the Zen religion, or a specific attribution to an artistic Zen priest or monk. Suzuki and Hisamatsu both assume an intuitively felt inner creative force that spontaneously and instantly can be expressed by the artist who gains through endless training an infallible technique and is therefore one with his technique and material. Suzuki's explanation of this creative mechanism, which he illustrates for ink painting and sword fighting, is obviously inspired by the Chinese literary tradition. Hisamatsu too refers to many Song and Yuan Chinese works of art.

The creative mechanism in the producing of Zen art, thus defined, presents problems for the art of gardening. Painting or writing calligraphy with a brush, molding clay for pottery, performing theatre or the tea ceremony - all can be done instantly out of an intuitively felt artistic feeling. Using ink, clay, or gesture as raw material, an expression can be given to it and therefore to the execution or the performance. The garden material preeminently used in the small "Zen" garden is natural rock; its expression was not changed by a particularly sensible hand, since the rocks were used in their natural form. Moreover, anyone who has handled garden stones knows that you cannot arrange them instantly by intuition. It is an intellectual process of mentally if not actually moving and matching - searching for an aesthetic effect and technical perfection that requires quite a lot of artistic consideration, not to mention physical force. Composing rocks in arrangements is above all an intellectual design process of matching volumes, colors, and shapes rather, not a matter of intuitive creation. Aspects of Zen - as defined by Hisamatsu and Suzuki - that can be ascribed to the small rock garden are not aspects of execution, construction, or creation by the maker. In other chapters I have already demonstrated that the garden makers of old were not devoted Zen priests but usually menial stoneworkers who possessed an artistic sense gained from technical experience and, in some cases, probably from familiarity with other forms of art.

The elements of Zen that can be attributed to the small rock garden are aspects of perception, interpretation, and the onlooker's taste. As in any work of art it presumes a cultural setting. In the prewar years this was for some the Zen of Nishida and Suzuki; in old Japan, it was the cultural complex of Song and Yuan China as discussed elsewhere. In the twentieth century, many facets of the medieval Chinese-inspired culture of Japan were quite arbitrarily listed under the rubric of Zen. A cultural complex called Zen was seen in relation to Buddhism and gained a religious quality. Gardens, therefore, could have been made to express a superhuman spirit of Zen. It is clear that this type of garden stemmed in theory (and at least part of its practice) from the Chinese intellectual and literary canon of landscape art. The building of a garden was a calculated intellectual activity, not an instantaneous act out of religiously inspired intuition. In medieval Japan it found its place in Zen temples and warrior residences because it enhanced a cultural ambiance. That its appreciation involved religious aspects rather than artistic ones is questionable. A Zen religious experience was interpreted in modern, European philosophy terms by Nishida. It was Suzuki who extended this interpretation to culture and arts - thereby making the mistake of explaining the intent of the original creator of historical works

of art with it. Kuck similarly stated that the Ryōan-ji garden is “the creation of an artistic and religious soul who was striving ... to express the harmony of the universe.” With this statement she assigned the twentieth-century religious or aesthetic experience she felt on seeing the garden to the soul of a medieval garden maker. Kuck mixes her own historically determined interpretation with an old garden that came about in a completely different cultural setting.

Recently some medieval statements have also been taken as evidence that the small medieval garden was an expression of Zen Buddhism. Most important among these is a section from the works of Eihei Dōgen, an early medieval Zen priest.

Dōgen (1200-1253) studied Zen from a young age; when he returned from his years of study in China he had a rather undiluted idea of Chinese Zen. Completely within the Chinese tradition of mountain romanticism, he retreated to live the life of a recluse in a province far away. According to Dōgen’s teaching, one can know the Sermon of Buddha by daily experiences of the physical world. Apart from Dōgen’s stress on the simple diligent life in a Zen monastery, he also teaches in his treatises that one can understand Buddha’s Sermon through nature. This he illustrates with a poem of Su Dongpo, the Chinese poet, official, and literary man whose name is found even in relation to the landscape design of the West Lake in Hangzhou. Su Dongpo, supposed to have reached the highest level of insight or enlightenment upon hearing the rushing sound of a mountain stream, wrote:

The voice of the rapids is verily the wide long tongue (of the Buddha, wk.) The color of the mountains is no other than Buddha’s pure chaste body.

At night we have perceived eighty-four thousand verses (of the sermon in natural phenomena, wk.) How should they be later revealed to other people?

Dōgen uses this poem to illustrate his point: the Sermon of Buddha is manifested in nature in the tangible form of mountains and streams. Later he adds even more clearly:

Don’t mistake simple mountains, rivers, the big earth (physical nature, wk.) for physical nature that constitutes the pure essence of nature.

Dōgen gives two levels of communion with nature - namely the perception of physical (geographical) nature and the religious experience of physical nature as a tangible manifestation, a symbolic representation of a higher truth, that is, the Sermon of Buddha. Presumably Dōgen refers to some religious experience he had himself that made him quote the poem of Su Dongpo. On hearing the sound of a stream the poet receives eighty-four thousand sermons of Buddha - a religious experience of the highest order if he speaks the truth. Dōgen stressed a monastic discipline and disapproved of any form of art. The Soto Zen sect, founded by Dōgen, never became important in producing art. He did not try to gain favor with the imperial and shogunal courts that sponsored the other main Zen sect, the Rinzai led by Musō Kokushi. He sought to create a material atmosphere that would make monks receptive to the Zen experience. Therefore Dōgen must be considered a religiously devoted person.

It has been conjectured that, parallel to Dōgen’s view, gardens too were part of nature that similarly manifested sermons of Buddha. Religious experiences such as Su Dongpo’s were supposedly also obtainable from a garden view. As proof of this, a section of Musō’s dialogues with Tadayoshi, the brother of shogun Takauji, is given. The passage has been used in texts on garden art ever since the eighteenth century, apparently to elevate the status of the art. Here, Musō overtly reveals his interest in material culture in the form of landscape art and the use of tea, a beverage of great exclusivity in his days. Drinking tea as well as enjoying a garden view can be advantageous, explains Musō, to the one in search for truth if he does it in the right way.

Musō says:

From olden times until now there have been many who loved to create little hillocks, place stones, plant trees and devise a little brook in order to form garden scenery. And although the fondness for doing this might be the same everywhere, personal ideas always differ. There are those who in their hearts have no particular liking for landscape but ornament their residences because they wish to be admired. And there are also people who collect and love rare treasures only because they cling covetously to a thousand things; since a fine garden is one of these, they seek and amass rare stones and remarkable trees. They do not love the beauty of a fine garden in itself, but only the “common dust” of the world.

Bai Juyi on the other hand dug out a little pond, planted bamboo at its edge and loved it above all else. The bamboo is my best friend he would say, because its heart is empty; and because water is from its nature pure, it is my master. People who love a garden like Bai Juyi possess a heart like him and do not mix with the “common dust”.

There are some among them who, from the depth of their being, are simple and pure, and do not prize the dust of the world; but reciting poems and playing the flute, they nourish their hearts with a garden view. These one should consider to be the kindhearted ones. They do not search after truth; their pure intentions will be the reason for their continuous Buddhist rebirth. But there are also people for whom a garden scene dispels sleepiness, comforts loneliness and sustains their search for truth. They differ in this from the love of gardens felt by the great majority. This must truly be called noble. Because, if one draws a distinction between gardens and a search for truth, one cannot really be called a seeker after truth. Those who believe mountains, rivers, the great earth, grasses, trees, and stones to be as of their own being seem, once they love garden landscapes, to cling to the profane world. Yet they take this worldly feeling – springs, stones, grasses, and trees in their changing appearances following the four seasons – as a means to search for truth. For the seeker after truth, this is the true way to love a garden. Therefore there is nothing bad about loving a garden. Nor is it to be praised. There are no merits or demerits with respect to a garden. These are in the mind of men.

Taking this passage as evidence that the medieval garden had a religious meaning stands essentially on the interpretation of “seeker for truth” (*dōjin*) as “searcher for (Zen) Enlightenment”. In the context of the Chinese studies practiced at the Five Monasteries of Musō, however, this truth must be interpreted as a general, literary, or even scientific truth to be gained from studying the classics. Besides landscape gardening, not quoted here, Musō extends his argument to music and poetry. Truth therefore must be seen as the intellectual truth of the cultured Song literati, whose interest was not focused on Buddhist metaphysics. This is soon clear if we compare Musō’s words to similar Chinese treatises connecting the love of nature, gardens, or landscape scenery (*sansui*) to the behavior of the cultured. Guo Xi, for instance, stated similarly:

Why do superior men love landscape, what is the reason for it? Hills and gardens are the constant dwelling-places for one who seeks to cultivate his original nature ... That is why the fundamental idea of landscape painting is so highly appreciated in the world. But if this is not realized and the landscapes are looked at in a light-hearted way, is it not like blurring a divine spectacle and defiling the pure wind? ... if one looks at them (landscape paintings, wk.) with the heart of the woods and the streams, their value becomes great; but if one looks at them with proud and haughty eyes, their value becomes quite low.

Like Dōgen, Musō quotes a Chinese poet/government official and not a Chinese Zen patriarch to illustrate his theories on landscape. Gardening activities of the poet Bai Juyi relate to the

traditional nature romanticism common among Chinese intellectuals and officials and will have been more in line with Daoist traditions than an act of religious Zen. In Japan, however, all this became associated with Zen temples and Zen priests, although it differs fundamentally from Zen's religious teaching.

Musō himself is also a man of this world. His love of landscape and nature must be viewed within the frame of his brilliant career as politician. He managed to become a “nation's teacher” (*kokushi*) mostly because of his pragmatic way of thinking. Justifying a luxurious life, when it sustains the search for whatever truth, will certainly have impressed the new rulers at the shogun's court. The passage quoted above is part of Musō's response to a question of Tadayoshi, brother of the shogun Takauji.

Another remarkable saying of Musō has also been taken to prove that the medieval garden had a religious content. It is from the same compilation of dialogues as the above quotation, the last lines of which it somehow resembles.

In every way there is basically no notion of big or small. Big and small are in men's perception; big and small, long and short, high and low, peace and war, these thoughts are merely illusory perceiving of phantasms.

It refers again to the relativity of human perception explained in pairs of opposite ideas. Even peace and war are mere phantasms. The same relativity of perception is basic to an understanding of Musō's verse *Echo of the Mock Landscape*, which begins with:

*senjin tatasezu
ranpō sobadatsu
kenteki sonsuru nashi
kanbaku nagaru*

*Not even a grain of dust is raised,
yet soar the mountain ranges.
Not even a drop of water is there,
yet falls the cataract*

Not even a grain of dust becomes a soaring mountain range in the poet's vision: Again he refers to the relativity of human perception, a common theme in the literature of late Heian and early medieval times. Both of Musō's short statements have been taken to mean that parts of the empirical truth perceived in a garden, however small, manifest a higher truth of Buddhism that transcends the reality of the garden. Therefore Musō would have emphasized the relativity of reality. In this view the garden needs only to be a representative token of real nature. It can be as small and abstract as the little garden at Ryōan-ji and yet refer to the Sermon of Buddha. But if this is a correct interpretation, the best garden representing this sermon would consequently be nothing - certainly not an aesthetically pleasing garden that would, in the line of Dōgen, only distract from a real search for enlightenment. Moreover, the facts of his life challenge the idea that Musō's statements demonstrate a religious content of the medieval garden. In his Kyoto years he was highly involved in the cultural aspirations of the new ruling class of the military. His advocacy of gardens was very opportune indeed in this period of palace building and temple founding. A significant difference is that Musō allows for gardens when they sustain the search for truth, whereas Dōgen stated with much emphasis the necessity of a spartan material surrounding and a monastic discipline in which gardens as an art form are explicitly rejected. However important Musō may have been for the establishing a medieval garden theory, one must doubt that he was a devoted Buddhist. He was vehemently criticized on this point – for instance by Myōchō, the founder of Daitoku-ji. More interesting within our context is the criticism of a monk of the temple Tōji, who fulminates against Musō's enthusiasm for gardens. In a letter he wrote:

People practicing Zen should not construct gardens. In a sutra it says that the Bodhisattva Makatsu, who wanted to meditate, in the first place totally abandoned the this-worldly life of making business and gaining profit, as well as growing vegetables. For how can one remain in a deep state of Zen, if one cannot detach oneself from the daily sorrows that disturb the heart?

I say, priest Musō who has many disciples and is considered a great Zen teacher at present expounds incessantly that one should practice Zen while the beauty of his gardens is admired! Is that not far removed from the meaning of the sutra? Recently much clamor on this point is heard in the Zen temples and everywhere there are signs of unrest.

There can be hardly any doubt that Musō in his Kyoto years was far from a devoted Buddhist. His statements on garden art, therefore, cannot be taken to proof any religious quality for the medieval garden.

Indeed studies on the garden art of Japan offer no convincing example that medieval individuals had an experience of Buddhist enlightenment on seeing a garden, although it is not unimaginable.

For the time being the word “Zen” can only be used with regard to medieval garden art when it indicates a cultural inspiration by Song or Yuan China.

The question remains, then: why use the word Zen?

Perhaps of related interest:

Wybe Kuitert 2019. ["Review of spaces in translation – Japanese Gardens and the West"](#), *Contemporary Japan* 31(1): 111-116

Wybe Kuitert 2016. ["Context & Praxis: Japan and Designing Gardens in the West"](#) *Die Gartenkunst* 28 (2): 278-292

Wybe Kuitert 2002. ["Japonaiserie in London and The Hague, A history of the Japanese gardens at Shepherd's Bush \(1910\) and Clingendael \(c. 1915\)"](#) *Garden History* 30 (2): 221-238