Zen And The Zen Garden Essay, Research Paper

“Enlightenment changes nothing and everything. Nothing is solved! Enlightenment is not a goal but a state of being that has to be rediscovered on a continual basis.”

Zen Principles and The Relationship with The Zen Garden

Zen and Japanese Culture

Zen Garden History

The style of zen garden was developed 14 -16th century. Though it was created by zen monks in the zen temples, its style was influenced by the political situation and also by the other religions. The original form of zen garden can go back to the ancient time (before 5th century), when people worshipped the gigantic rocks on the mountain as the symbol of divine power or the place where the god decend. This worship of rocks determined the use of rock in the garden. The worship of the rocks in ancient time was closely related to Shintoism, a religion which originates in the origin of the empror family (www.dxnet.net).

In 6th century, the original form of the garden appeared in front of the house of the emperor. At that time, it was just a pond, which had a symbolic meaning (mirror) and also used for the rituals by the emperor. The rituals were basically the mix of Shintoism and Buddhism, which already came into Japan.

As Japan started trading with China in 7th century, the more sophisticated style from China came into Japan. The design of the capital, the palace, the houses of the nobles, and the style of garden were influenced by China. Also, Buddhism and Taoism from China influenced Japanese culture. The influence of Chinese style garden was evident in the gardens in 7-9th century: the strolling garden with a pond and an island inside the pond. The design usually represented the view of the paradise, which were often mentioned in Buddhist and Taoist thoghts (”Zen,” The Encyclopedia of Eastern Philosophy and Religion, 1989, edition 1.

In late 9th century, Japan stopped the trade with China, and Japanese gradually developped their own style based on their lifestyle. Between 9th and 12th century, the nobles gained the power and had become dominant in the center of politics. They developped their houses and gardens based on their rituals, events, recreations and parties.

The noble’s house and garden would have a wide space in front of the central building for the annual events and the rituals, a water stream, which was used for the event of creating poems, and sometimes they enjoyed boating on the pond and they watched dances and the theater perfomances on the island.

The combination of Buddhism and Shintoism was the dominant religion in Japan, and the design of garden was based on the representation of the paradise in Buddhist thought.

By 12th century, the nobles and the emperor completely lost their power and the warriors took charge of Japan. The political situation had become unstable and there were wars everywhere. At that time, the new form of Buddhism became popular. It was zen. Zen achieved its popularity among regular people and warriors by its simple practice and understandable concept.

As the warriors became more educated and sophisticated, they promoted the art influenced by zen, such as painting, theater, dance, and gardening. The shoguns began promoting gardens which led zen monks to further developped their skill of creating gardens. The garden was a space for those monks to express their vision.

Around this time, the style called “Kare-San-Sui” appeared. It means dry landscape garden, and it was the way to represent water withou using water. It is believed to have started as a way to substitue for water because of the tremendous labor required to create and maintain a garden with water. This style was further developped into the sophisticated style (www.csuohio.edu/history.html).

The dry landscape style was further polished by zen monks. As they appreciated gardens more, the garden came closer to the building and the space for the garden became smaller so that it can be viewed from inside of the building. The design of the garden was still a representation of nature, but it became much more condensed in much smalled space.

Structure of the Zen Garden

The two main elements of a zen or a “dry style” garden are rocks to form mountains and sand to form flowing water. The “sand” used in japanese gardens is not beach sand but a crushed granite and comes in varying shades of white gray to beige Islands have a particular importance for the Japanese. Islands represent a symbol of the isles of the Blest immortal souls and also represent a symbol of longevity and continuing health. Most japanese gardens have both single rock islands and built up islands of rocks and earth. Often, the islands are built to resemble the shape of two prominent symbols of longevity; the tortoise and the crane. The tortoise is believed to live for 10,000 years and the crane 1,000 years (www.zengarden.fi/history/index.html).

Bridges are also common in dry landscape gardens for they not only serve as a function of a path to cross the “seas”, connect islands to one another and also open up alternative views that may not be seen if not crossed.

Finally, it must be understood that the Zen garden is onlycomplete when it is understood (www.dailyzen.com).

The Zen Garden in Relation to Zen (the practice)

In zen practice, one searches for the vision of their true being. Understanding the being, the true nature of the world is the enlightenment. It is also understanding one’s “self”, one’s own “being.” To be able to see the true nature, one has to detach from oneself to see his/her own being. Kare-san-sui style (dry landscape garden) representation of nature was similar to the practice of searching for the true nature, true being of the world. Also, “see what’s not there,” Dry landscape garden’s concept: envisioning the water which doesn’t actually exist, was the close reference for the practice.

Many zen gardens represent the true nature of the world, which we cannot really see in the real world. The gardens become a space where people can meditate on their search for their true being (www.mirmir.net/brix.shtml). In zen, time exists moment by moment, so when one enters a zen garden the calmness and tranquility of that space is very conducive to meditation. When you meditate by sitting in front of the garden, the garden becomes the space you projects your vision onto, and the rocks become the object of focus. You can focus on the rocks, but you should not concentrate on thinking what the rock is. You have to be in the state of being between focusing but not thinking. Thus, the garden becomes a container and the rocks become the point of entry, and it can be easier to envision yourself or the world.

The abstract quality of the garden helps you understand that true being is not what you see in the real world. You have to take yourself away to understand yourself, your true being. It lets you take a smoother transition(Newton, www.io.com).

Another important part of zen practice is enlightenment, which is to sucessfully understand the true being of the world. Often, zen master ask their students questions to help them understand or check to see if they understood “being.” It is called “Ko-an” Some of them are the stories of the zen masters and the students from the old times, and sometimes it is a simple form of question and an aswer. Most of those questions and their answers by zen diciples are irrational and absurd, or abstract because “being” cannot be described by words and these are just to help to understand it better or to check if “being” is understood. A zen Ko-an looks like this;

There was a tree whose twigs and leaves were moving with the wind. One said “The wind is moving.” Another one said “It’s the tree which is moving.” Then, the master who heard them, came by and said, “Actually, your minds are moving.”(www.dailyzen.com)

Another famous Ko-an says; “What does it sound like to clap with only one hand?”(www.dailtzen.com)

The garden becomes the container which carries the abstract language that applies to anything. That’s the nature of “being” because being can be found in anything.

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