

Purity and Equanimity – The Mandala of Zen Rock Garden

Wong Wah Sang, University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ultimate essence of realization in Buddhism as the nature of purity and great equanimity. To illustrate this, the Zen rock garden is revealed like a Zen *Koan*, a case study to discern into the essence. The example used here is the *karesansui* (dry landscape) or rock garden in the Ryoanji Temple in Kyoto.

Made up of sand, rock and moss, the rock garden invites direct contemplation from the observers. Scholars, artists and Buddhists etc. have made numerous investigation on this garden to answer the *koan* and different interpretations have been received. Now the Zen rock garden is looked upon as a mandala that bears the meaning to hold the essence of all phenomena. This essence has a technical term called *dharmata*, a Sanskrit word to mean the nature of phenomena which is also the nature of *dharmadhatu*, another Sanskrit word to mean the ultimate universe of Buddhism that contains all (all universes in n-dimensional time and n-dimensional space, all land in samsara and nirvana). The attributes of the *dharmadhatu* can be divided into the form and form-less aspects. There is an aspect of emptiness, a space-like aspect to allow all different manifestation, and an aspect of manifestation, a powerful aspect of vitality to allow things to appear. This aspect of emptiness has the quality of purity as it is free from discrimination and conceptuality while the aspect of manifestation has the quality of great equanimity as vitality is prevalent everywhere in the *dharmadhatu*, in all universes.

Keywords: Buddha nature (Tathagatagarbha), Zen, five aggregates, emptiness, dhamata, dharmadhatu

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The rock garden in a Japanese Zen temple is actually a Zen *koan* – a case study for learners of Zen Buddhism for their experience of realization or even enlightenment. Zen as a meditative training is to see the clarity of the mind so as to realize Buddha nature.

Introducing Ryoanji

Queen Elizabeth of the United Kingdom visited a garden in her 1975 Japan tour. That was Ryoanji Temple (Figure 1) in Kyoto built in 1450. The garden is a rectangle of 248 square meters. Fifteen stones of different sizes were carefully composed in five groups: one group of three stones, two groups of three and two groups of two stones. These are laid on a ground of white gravel, neatly ploughed by the monks each day. The only green plants in the garden is some moss around the stones. This is considered as one of the finest examples of *Karesansui* – dry landscape with its three basic elements of gravel, stones and moss.



Figure 1: Ryoanji Temple, Kyoto

The garden had been designed and positioned to be viewed on lotus seat posture on the verandah of the *hojo* – the residence of the abbot. On examination of the stones, one will discover that the entire composition of the fifteen stones cannot be seen at the same time from the verandah. Only fourteen stones are visible from any part of the verandah. However, it is said that only when one attains enlightenment would the complete composition of fifteen stones be revealed.

Inspired by Ryoanji

The American artist John Cage who had visited Ryoanji in 1962 created visual and audio works of Ryoanji (figure 2) in various forms to be described as “perfect symmetry of the garden”, maximum insight with the least means and pure yet unpredictable space in meditation. This can be seen as trying to align with the Zen spirit of the place.

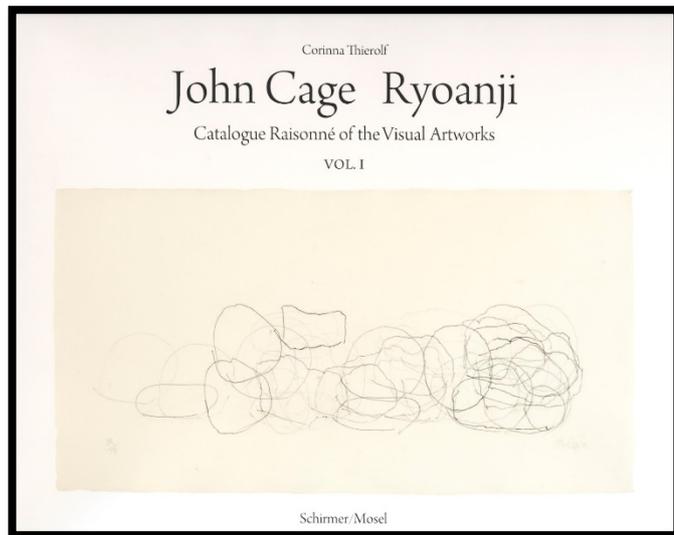


Figure 2 : John Cage on Ryoanji

Another artist, Sarkis, made an exhibition of paintings that appear as soothing waves which is an interpretation of Cage’s music on Ryoanji in long horizontal scrolls of watercolor. Furthermore, two great musicians, Kudsi Erguner (*ney*) and Jean-Francois Lagrost (*shakuhachi*) were inspired to make a musical interpretation of Sarkis’ work using the latter as their music score.

Scientific analysis

Besides artistic interpretations, there are also scientific analysis of the Zen garden. Neuroscience researchers, Tonder and Lyons, from Kyoto University suggested that there are hidden branched trunks in the empty space between the stone groups to join into the main trunk at the seat of the abbot.

Quoted from Wikipedia, Garden historian Gunter Nitschke said: "The garden at Ryōan-ji does not symbolize anything, or more precisely, to avoid any misunderstanding, the garden of Ryōan-ji does not symbolize, nor does it have the value of reproducing a natural beauty that one can find in the real or mythical world. I consider it to be an abstract composition of "natural" objects in space, a composition whose function is to incite meditation."

The Zen perception and the Mandala

What one would react to a phenomenon can be understood in this Zen *koan*. At that time there was wind blowing on the flag. One monk said: the wind moves. Another monk said: the flag moves. The sixth patriarch of Zen (in China), Hui-Neng said: Not the wind moves. Nor does the flag. It is the mind of you passionate ones that moves.

The way to understand how Zen perceives things can be revealed through the mandala. The mandala in Buddhism can appear in various forms. One is the sand mandala made of colorful sand created and destructed in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. Another is a physical form of temple or *stupa* in which a good example is the Borobudur found in Indonesia. This is like a stepped pyramid with the size of a football field and filled up with wall murals and small stupas with Buddha statue inside. Also, the Samye monastery in Tibet is designed and constructed as a symbolic representation of the ultimate universe, the *Dharmadhatu*. Then, tangkas showing images of deities are mandalas, too. The Moji-mandala Gohonzon in the Nichiren sect is actually made up of words ...

In spite of its diversity, we can search for the common meaning in these forms of mandala. Mipham explains the meaning of the Sanskrit mandala is “the ground that holds essential qualities.” So let us look at Ryoanji as another form of mandala to reveal its essence.

Essence of our conventional world

The five groups of stones can correspond to the five aggregates (*skandha*) – form, sensation, perception, mental formation and consciousness. These are actually the sequential process of human cognition on things. Form refers to the object which can be a physical form, sound, odour, taste, touch or intellectual thought. When it comes to contact with the mind, it is called sensation. What is it? The mind starts to enquire and recognize as the process of perception. Then in mental formation a knowledge of the object is formed in the mind. What should I do with it? The decision is made in the mind as one decides the response to the object. This process of consciousness completes the whole sequence of cognition.

The co-existence of the stones and moss corresponds to our convention of non-living and living things as well as their inter-dependence.

Besides the stones and moss there is the white gravel which is carefully ploughed each day. The white gravel does not bear any fixed shape with an indeterminate form. They just take on any form that is ploughed by the monks. As such it corresponds to the Buddhist meaning of emptiness – the indeterminate aspect of things. Yet forms will result through the contact and action with the environmental conditions. The white gravel is part of the composition of the garden and its function is to locate the stones in fixed location. This is precisely the function of emptiness. Like the distance between two walls is determined by the space in between. Or like the duration of silence in between two musical notes controls its tempo.

Further insight reveals the non-separateness of form and emptiness. The Heart Sutra says: “They should correctly view those five aggregates also as empty of inherent

existence. Form is emptiness; emptiness is form. Emptiness is not other than form; form is not other than emptiness.” This means form and emptiness are just two parts of the single phenomenon “form-emptiness” or “manifestation-emptiness” like the palm and back of our hand.

We can further examine the hidden basis of this phenomenon.

The Ultimate Essence

In our conventional world, we can categorize the qualities of things into three aspects: application, appearances (characteristics) and nature. Like water, to float a boat is its application, wetness and colourless is its appearance. When we come to nature, we will always talk of qualities that are in fact either application or appearance. In this way, we come to the conclusion that its nature is emptiness. This can be tried on all other things and will arrive at the same result of empty nature. Or we can call this the nature of things – *dharmata*.

The most basic meaning in application is the appearance of things. When things can appear in this world, we see this as vitality and brings forth life. We call this the aspect of manifestation.

Then for an appearance to exist, that thing must be able to be perceived and one must have the quality to perceive it. This power of things to distinguish and to be distinguished is called the aspect of perception. Then things to change and to bring forth new things, there is the aspect of emptiness. These three aspects – manifestation, perception and emptiness – correspond to the application, appearance and nature in the ultimate universe, the *dharmadhatu*. Or we can say these three aspects are prevalent in the *dharmadhatu* – all the different worlds for humans, non-humans and Buddhas. In the Ryoanji, these three correspond to the moss, the stones and the gravel.

In the conventional world the three aspects, application, appearance and nature, are often combined with conceptuality and notions. Like that we write on a table but not on a chair usually. However in the *dharmadhatu*, these three aspects, manifestation perception and emptiness, just exist naturally and prevalently without any conceptuality nor even intentional thoughts. To stress that everyone can have this quality, we say everyone has Buddha nature. To be able to experience these aspects, we say this is the wisdom of *tathagatagarbha*, the inner self-realization wisdom of the Buddha.

Concluding remarks: Purity and equanimity

In the experience in our conventional world, we call this the state of consciousness when the five aggregates are the physical and mental activities of our mundane world though non-separate from empty nature. In the ultimate free from conceptuality, the three aspects objectively and prevalently exist. We call this the state of wisdom.

To understand this two states, the example used by Master Tam Shek Wing is the image on the TV screen. The images analogizes the state of wisdom and the TV screen analogizes the state of wisdom.

Because of the state of wisdom is naturally free from conceptuality, we realize this as purity. Because the state of wisdom is prevalent and always exist with the state of wisdom no matter anywhere, we realize this as the great equanimity.

The state of wisdom uncontaminated by the state of consciousness is purity. The state of wisdom without discrimination on any state of consciousness is great equanimity.

Purity and equanimity is the ultimate state of experiences and ascertainment attained by the Zen practitioners.

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Contact email: wswong@hku.hk