

## *Zen Garden and No Zen Garden: a Bibliographic Essay*

By Glenn Masuchika

A Zen master and a young monk sit before a Zen garden.  
 The Zen master asks the young monk, "What do you see?"  
 Puzzled, the young monk answers plainly, "A garden."  
 The master asks again, "What do you see?"  
 The young monk looks at the small landscape before them and answers, "Rocks and gravel."  
 The master asks again, "What do you see?"  
 Thinking deeper, the young monk answers, "Boulders in a river."  
 "What do you see?" the master asks again.  
 Thinking ever deeper, the young monk replies, "I see, islands in a sea."  
 "What do you see?" the master asks again.  
 "I see, mountaintops above the clouds."  
 "What do you see?"  
 "I see, planets and stars in space."  
 "What do you see?"  
 "I see, Gods and Buddhas in heaven."  
 "What do you see?"  
 "I see, infinities in infinity."  
 "Baka! (fool!)," the Zen master shouts, slapping the young monk on his head. "No rocks! no gravel!"  
 And another slap to his head. "And no garden!"

There are many architectural structures that are intrinsically recognized by both the ministry and laypeople as religious in nature. Stone cathedrals in Europe, mosques in the Middle East, Mayan pyramids in the Yucatan peninsula. One of the most familiar is the Zen garden. In the confines of a Zen Buddhist temple, it is usually a rectangular landscape of gravel spotted intermittently with grey rocks. The Zen garden, as the young monk above experienced, by definition defies any description, specificity, or meaning. The most famous of these Zen gardens is the garden of Ryoan-ji in Kyoto, located in the temple complex of a Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism. It is a 250-square-meter, rectangular garden covered with raked white gravel and fifteen rocks of various sizes, arranged in groups (from left to right seen from the viewing pavilion) of five, two, three, two, and three. There are no plants in the garden except for a small ring of green moss surrounding each grouping of rocks. The garden is surrounded by a two-meter-high "tsuiji-bei" or roofed, mudwalled fence.

The Zen garden has become one of the many images that represents Japan to the world. A garden of white sand or gravel sparsely populated with rocks is among the most well-known images in Japanese religious iconography along with the huge bronze Buddha at Kamakura or the seabound, red Shinto "torii" gate off the island of Itsukushima. Yet few realize that there has been a recent controversy among scholars whether there is such a thing as a Zen garden; whether the Zen garden is a true expression of Zen philosophy, deliberately constructed to aid in Zen training or if it is the product of a lucrative commercial endeavor begun by Zen Buddhist temples after the Second World War. A popular "light bulb" joke is, "How many Zen Buddhists does it take to screw in a light bulb?" The answer is, "Two. One to screw it in and one not to screw it in." It is fitting that a bibliographical essay on Zen gardens would involve a controversy whether there is or is not such a thing as a Zen garden.

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The garden as physical expression of religious belief is an old idea in Japan, and many of its gardens have been influenced by its faiths, both indigenous and imported. One of the doctrines of Shinto, the ancestral polytheistic religion of Japan, maintains that there are gods, both major and minor, in all things, especially waterfalls, strange-looking trees, and huge boulders; and the architects of gardens in ancient Japan followed religious dictates when designing gardens. The oldest treatise for designing gardens in Japan is the *Sakuteiki* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle Publishing, 2001), translated into English as the *Record of Garden Making*, originally attributed to Tachibana no Toshitsuna (1028-1094), taking its final, present-day known form by 1227. This brief manual on how to construct gardens is filled with warnings of curses and of penalties from the supernatural. Section Ten of the *Sakuteiki* is titled “Taboos” and includes such warnings as “if so much as one of these taboos is violated, the master of the household will fall ill and eventually die, and his lands will fall into desolation and become an abode of devils.” The improper setting of stones causes the most trouble. One such rule states that if a stone with a height of more than 1.5 meters is placed in the northeast section of the garden, this will allow devils to enter through a “devil’s gate.”

The Zen garden first began to make its appearance in rudimentary form in the thirteenth century with the appearance of the “*karesansui*” style of garden design in the Muromachi Period (1392-1568). “*Karesansui*” translates into English as “dry-mountain-water,” a garden composition where the natural landscape is replicated in miniature. There is the greenery of plants to represent forested hills and meadows, and rocks and boulders to represent mountains; however there is no flowing or stilled waters, no waterfalls or ponds. Instead, the gardener uses white or gray sand, but more often white or gray gravel to represent water, and the sand or gravel is raked in flowing or ebbing patterns to indicate a fluid movement. A Zen garden goes to a further extreme of expunging all living materials from the sterile landscape, except sometimes allowing small patches of moss around rocks. These small gardens are often found on the grounds of Zen Buddhist temples adjacent to the living quarters of Zen monks or before viewing pavilions.

The term “Zen garden” or the words “Zen” and “garden” in close proximity are common in English translations of Japanese books. Tetsuro Yoshida, in his book *Gardens of Japan* (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1957), speaks about the close connection between Zen and the gardens in temples; and photographer Toyo Okamoto and author Gisei Takakuwa, in their book also titled *Gardens of Japan* (trans. Hirokuni Kobatake; s.l.: Mitsumura Suiko Shoin, 1967), write about the garden at Ryoan-ji and its Zen influences. Sutemi Horiguchi and Yuichiro Kojiro’s *Tradition of Japanese Gardens* (s.l.: Kokusai Bunka Shinkokai, 1963) asks rhetorically if there can be any doubt of a relationship between the asceticism of a Zen monk and the transcendental nature of his garden. The Japan Times’s *Gardens of Tokyo* (Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1972) includes a section about the Ryoan-ji garden as a place for the aesthetic training of Zen Buddhist priests instead of being a garden to meet the aesthetic demands of the aristocracy. Masao Hayakawa’s *The Garden Art of Japan* (trans. Richard L. Gage; New York: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1973) and Kiichi Asano’s and Gisei Takakuwa’s *Invitation to Japanese Gardens* (trans. Richard F. Dickinson and Nobunao Matsuyama; Rutland, VT: Charles E. Tuttle, 1970) both express eloquently the religiosity of the Zen temple and its gardens at Saiho-ji in Kyoto. Hayakawa speaks about the effect of the Zen garden as a means toward self-examination and finally to enlightenment, and Asano writes about “the commanding aspect of the set of rocks” which causes in the viewer “a severe sense of the pursuit of the essence of Zen.”

Literature originating in the English language, both on Asian religions and gardening, also makes this connection between Zen and the dry-style of gardens, and there are numerous books on this subject. Francois Berthier’s *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) is a

compact historic introduction of the development of Zen gardens, a quick and informative read for the neophyte. Paul Kincaid's *Japanese Garden and Floral Art* (New York: Hearthsides Press, 1966) explores the natural connection between Zen philosophy and its physical expression as a garden, as well as its expression in ikebana (Japanese flower arrangement) and the highly stylized performance of chanoyu (Japanese tea ceremony). Mitchell Bring's and Josse Wayembergh's *Japanese Gardens: Design and Meaning* (New York: McGraw-Hill Books, 1981) and Marc Trieb's and Ron Herman's *A Guide to the Gardens of Kyoto* (Tokyo: Shufunotomo Company, 1980) both highlight the influences of Zen beliefs in the structure of Japanese gardens, using as examples the gardens of Saiho-ji, Ryoan-ji, Daisen-in, Shoden-ji, and others. Melba Levick's and Kendall H. Brown's *Japanese-style Gardens of the Pacific West Coast* (New York: Rizzoli International Publishing, Inc., 1999) is a good presentation of how Zen gardens or Zen-influenced gardens have begun appearing outside of Japan. There are even how-to-construct-your-own-Zen-garden manuals, such as A.K. Davidson's *The Art of Zen Gardens: A Guide to their Creation and Enjoyment* (Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, 1983), which includes design principles and construction work, and Sunset Magazine's publication *Sunset Ideas for Japanese Gardens* (Menlo Park, CA: Lane Books, 1968) which introduced the Zen garden to the 1960s American public-at-large with an article on how to "Construct a Zen Type of Garden." Each of these authors and their works freely use the term "Zen garden" to indicate a dry landscape garden that is Zen-inspired, or a garden that is a direct manifestation of the philosophy of Zen Buddhism as one of the tools utilized by the Zen aspirant to gain enlightenment.

Few scholars or laypeople doubt that there are "*karesansui*" gardens in the world influenced by the philosophy of Zen, and many have used the term "Zen garden" without hesitation. However, in 2002, Wybe Kuitert published *Themes in the History of Japanese Garden Art* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii, 2002), where he argues that the Zen garden is a modern, twentieth-century invention and the "*karesansui*" style is actually an outgrowth of the medieval garden art of Japan with little or no initial affiliation to the Zen Buddhist religion. He writes that the term "Zen garden" or, in Japanese, "*zenteki teien*," does not appear in the Japanese literature until 1935, a creation of Loraine Kuck in her book *One Hundred Kyoto Gardens* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1935). Kuitert argues that Kuck, an American living in Japan and a friend of Zen scholar Daisetsu Teitaro Suzuki, superimposed her love of Zen upon the dry landscape gardens, especially upon the garden of Ryoan-ji, and the notion that there exist Zen gardens or "*zenteki teien*" entered into the popular culture of Japanese garden art at that time. He further argues that the term "*zenteki teien*" did not enter the Japanese language until the 1950s, when it began appearing as a description of the garden at Ryoan-ji, and was later applied to other gardens of the same type.

Since the publication of Kuitert's book, the argument whether Zen gardens exist or do not exist has not abated. The journal *Sukiya Living: the Journal of Japanese Gardening* has taken a strong stand against the existence of Zen gardens and the use of the term. In its pages, editors, researchers, and college professors have called Zen gardens a "fad," a "misconception," and "a bogus appellation," and a native of Japan states that temples have generated income by promoting the "Zen garden" fad to attract money from Western tourists.<sup>1</sup> There also have been books that may have responded to the controversy. Christian Tschumi wrote in his book *Mirei Shigemori: Modernizing the Japanese Garden* (Berkeley, CA: Stone Bridge Press, 2005), a biography of Mirei Shigemori, a twentieth-century garden designer, "... I will refrain from using the somewhat misleading term Zen garden and will instead refer to this garden type by the original Japanese term *karesansui*." However, there is evidence that Kuitert was not the first to advocate this position. Marc P. Keane wrote in his 1996 book *Japanese Garden Design* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle

<sup>1</sup> "The 'Zen Garden' Term," *Sukiya Living: the Journal of Japanese Gardening*. <http://rothteien.com/superbait/zenviewpoints.htm>

Publishing, 1996) about sand-and-stone gardens which are most often referred to as “Zen gardens” but should be properly called “*karesansui*.”

Despite overtures to replace “Zen garden” with the word “*karesansui*,” the writers of both popular and academic religious works and gardening have not been widely accepting of this switch. A search for the term “Zen garden” often retrieves many articles in popular magazines. Scholarly journals publish articles that use the term “Zen garden” with no warnings that this could be a bogus term.<sup>2</sup> A search for “*karesansui*” in academic online databases such as *ProQuest* (Multiple Databases), *Academic Search Complete* (EBSCO), and *Bibliography of Asian Studies* (Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies) retrieves far fewer articles than the term “Zen garden.”<sup>3</sup>

For the general public, this argument has little to no significance. However, for librarians, especially subject specialists in world religions, Asian studies, landscape architecture, horticulture, and other related fields such as history, sociology, and anthropology, the controversy can lead to a failure to retrieve pertinent materials on this important Japanese religious subject. If writers of either popular magazines or scholarly journals cannot agree on a “legitimate” definition of a stone-and-sand type of Japanese garden that may or may not have Zen influences, librarians will have difficulties performing comprehensive searches. To make matters more complicated, neither “Zen garden” nor “*karesansui*” are Library of Congress authorized subject headings. If Kuitert is correct in his analysis of gardening literature in Japan before the Second World War, librarians are unable to retrieve all the pertinent books, sections of books, and articles in the Japanese language because of their inability to know what the proper search term would be if “Zen garden” or, in Japanese, “*zenteki teien*” is an improper term. This problem is exacerbated for non-speakers of the Japanese language and those not having access to any Japanese language online databases.

The silhouette of a sitting monk, eyes closed, hands folded together, quietly meditating before the brilliance of a garden of white gravel and a handful of well-placed gray rocks is as iconic a religious image as the multitudes journeying to Mecca or worshippers bowing before the Wailing Wall in the Old City of Jerusalem. No one doubts the authenticity of these photographs of Muslims or Jews consumed by their religious practices. However, for the Zen Buddhist, the accusations of whether the sitting monk is an artificially staged performance before an equally artificially staged landscape whose purpose is to bring in money from tourists are all too real, and how this controversy will eventually be played out will be reflected in the literature produced by this conflict.



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<sup>2</sup> Post-2002 scholarly articles include Gert J. Van Tonder, et al., “Perception Psychology: Visual Structure of a Japanese Zen Garden,” *Nature* 419, no. 6905 (September 26, 2002): 359-360; Sean McGovern, “The Ryoan-Ji Zen Garden: Textual Meanings in Topographical Form,” *Visual Communication* 3, no.3 [October 2004]:344-359; Allen S. Weiss, “The Limits of Metaphor: Ideology and Representation in the Zen Garden,” *Social Analysis* 54, issue 2 (summer 2010): 116-129.

<sup>3</sup> A search for “Zen garden” in ProQuest produces 1,346 citations; in Academic Search Complete 31 citations; Bibliography of Asian Studies 3 citations. A search for the word “*karesansui*” in ProQuest produces 45 citations; Academic Search Complete 4 citations; Bibliography of Asian Studies 2 citations. Searches were performed on September 10, 2011.