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16 Thinking Like a Stone: Learning from the Zen Rock Garden

Graham Parkes

Abstract

The Japanese “dry landscape” (*karesansui*) garden, which consists primarily of rocks arranged in a context of gravel or moss, and is generally devoid of ponds, streams, and the kinds of vegetation that thrive in an abundance of water, is an art form that uniquely bodies forth the power of stone. Great power has always been ascribed to stone in the Chinese tradition, where rocks are regarded not as inanimate lumps of matter, but rather as dense configurations of the cosmic energies (*qi*) that animate the whole world. Large and unusually shaped rocks have thus been the focal points of Chinese gardens for over two millennia. The Japanese continue this tradition by following the way Chinese gardens emulate landscape painting by concentrating vast scenes into small areas, as well as by adopting numerous principles from *feng shui*. While developing a sophisticated language of rock connoisseurship, garden makers in Japan also promote a greater reverence for the naturalness of rock: in arranging a garden one should “follow the requesting mood” of the rocks one has brought there. Thinkers in the Western tradition have had relatively little to say about stone, though the ideas of the salient exceptions (Goethe, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Emerson, and Thoreau) come close to East Asian understandings of rock. The consummate example of the dry landscape style, the famous rock garden at Ryōanji in Kyoto, embodies a number of philosophical and aesthetic ideas from the Japanese Buddhist tradition, an understanding of which enhances our appreciation of this unique work of art. According to thinkers like Kūkai and Dōgen, landscapes when properly perceived turn out to be the body of the cosmic Buddha proclaiming the Buddhist teachings through voice and inscription. These ideas suggest an ontology of consciousness that understands it not as independent of inanimate matter, but rather as a field of energies on a continuum with the energies of rocks and stone.

A Place of Power

On the edge of a Buddhist temple nestled against the hills to the west of the city of Kyoto lies the oldest example of the Japanese “dry landscape” (*karesansui*) garden, regarded by many as one of the more powerful places on the planet. The dry landscape style of garden consists primarily of rocks arranged in an environment of gravel or

moss, and is generally devoid of ponds, streams, and the kinds of vegetation that thrive in an abundance of water. Corresponding to the literal meaning of the Japanese word for landscape, *sansui*: “mountains-waters,” the rocks often resemble mountains while the gravel and moss take on the shape of streams, lakes, and seas.

Much of the power of the upper garden of Saihōji (recently better known as Kokedera, the “Moss Temple”) comes from its rocks, which have been arranged in the form of a “dry cascade” (*karetaki*). Enchanted by the experience they provoke, the novelist Kawabata Yasunari (1975, 86–91) describes a scene in *Beauty and Sadness* where the two female protagonists, both of whom are artists, visit the dry landscape at Saihōji in the expectation of being able to “absorb a little of the strength [of this] oldest and most powerful of all rock gardens.”¹ The experience turns out to be unexpectedly overwhelming: “The priest Muso’s rock garden, weathered for centuries, had taken on such an antique patina that the rocks looked as if they had always been there. However, their stiff, angular forms left no doubt that it was a human composition, and Otoko had never felt its pressure as intensely as she did now. . . . ‘Shall we go home?’ she asked. ‘The rocks are beginning to frighten me.’”² To understand the enigmatic force of this place, and the style of Zen rock garden for which it paved the way, we need to appreciate the very different understanding of stone that prevails in East Asian traditions of thought. But first a fuller description of the garden at Saihōji.

The lower of the two gardens at Saihōji is a beautiful example of the traditional “paradisaal” style of Japanese garden, in which a pond furnished with rocks represents the “Isles of the Immortals” lying in the eastern ocean, as described in Chinese Daoist mythology.³ After walking around the moss-rimmed pond of the lower garden, one climbs a path that leads uphill past a mysterious grove of bamboo. The place begins to assume the kind of numinous atmosphere that Shinto, the indigenous religion of Japan, ascribes to the presence of *kami*, or divinities, throughout the natural world, but especially in the more impressive exemplars of natural phenomena such as mountain peaks, waterfalls, and large or unusually shaped rocks.

On turning the last bend in the path uphill, one comes upon the “dry cascade” of the upper garden. Fifty or so rocks descend the hillside in three tiers, evoking a waterfall deep in the mountains. Most of the rocks are covered with lichen, surrounded by “pools” of moss, and bordered by some moderate-sized trees that describe graceful arcs over the edges of the arrangement. The moss together with the lichen that clothes the rocks in varying thicknesses makes for a remarkable array of colors: browns, dark grays, mauves, oranges, and many shades of sometimes iridescent green. A few miniature ferns and a scattering of dead pine needles add contrasting touches. The warm colors of the moss pools stand out against the cooler hues of the bare stone, and when wetted by rain all the colors become impressively more saturated. If the sun is shining, its rays filter through the trees and highlight different elements of the composition differentially. When the branches sway in the wind, light and shade play slowly over the entire

scene, the movements accentuating at first the stillness of the rocks. But further contemplation brings to mind Zen master Dôgen Zenji (1200–1253), whom the Sôtô School of Zen takes as its founder, and who talks of “learning from mountains flowing and water not flowing” (Dôgen 1994, 87). Under any conditions the dry cascade invites the viewer to enjoy the play of stillness and movement by exploring it synesthetically—as if one were moving bodily through, around, and over it—so that even when no movement is visible within the garden, the movements of one’s eyes promote a dynamic and tactile exploration.

In corresponding natural settings—what the Japanese call *shôtoku no sansui*, landscape “as in life”—one can enjoy rock configurations of remarkable beauty by finding and adopting the appropriate perspective. Sometimes a particular natural grouping will simply catch the attention as one walks by; sometimes another will advertise itself as deserving of a closer look, or else invite one to walk around, crouch, or sit down until the optimal viewpoint is found. With both the garden and the natural setting, a necessary precondition of this kind of enjoyment is an open mind from which preoccupations and prejudices about what one is seeing have been emptied, and a consequent responsiveness to what is actually going on. A natural environment and a constructed environment like the Zen rock garden both conduce to such an open mode of awareness. The main difference is that in the garden the rocks have been arranged, and the range of viewpoints restricted, so that there is no need to search to find the appropriate perspective for the optimal experience.

At first sight the dry cascade at Saihōji gives the impression of a being situated in a sacred grove, and anyone acquainted with Shinto is going to feel the presence here of kami in high concentrations. Shinto has always treated impressive rocks (*iwakura*) with special reverence: it was then a natural step to supplement nature by erecting piles of rocks in order to attract kami to a particular place, and these became the prototypes of the arrangements that would grace Japanese gardens in later centuries. Since rocks were regarded as numinous long before the importation of feng shui and garden lore from China, their role in the Japanese garden became ever more important.

The upper garden at Saihōji manifests several antinomies. Although the scene looks natural at first sight, the composition instantiates a highly sophisticated design. Whereas the rocks themselves appear natural, albeit selected for their mainly horizontal shapes, they are in fact hewn (as components of a former burial mound), which is very unusual for rocks in a Japanese garden. The soaring arcs of the surrounding trees contrast with the angular density of the rock arrangement, and the stillness of the stone sets off the dynamism of the descending-tiers composition. As a dry cascade the composition presents, and makes strangely present, water that is literally absent. Several of the larger rocks have vertical streaks and striations, like the “waterfall rocks” (*taki-ishi*) often found in Japanese gardens, where the streaks create the illusion of a cascade. Some water does, of course, run down these rocks in heavy rain, but the mossy

ground surrounding absorbs the runoff so that no actual streams develop to spoil the effect of a cascade that is dry in all seasons.

Many commentators remark on what is perhaps the most powerful effect of this garden: if one can arrange to contemplate it alone, on a windless day the almost total silence is occasionally interrupted by the deafening roar of a waterfall that is not there. One is again reminded of Dôgen's (1997, 87) "Voices of the River-Valley, Forms of the Mountains" (Keisei-sanshiki): "When the voices of the river-valley are heard, waves break back upon themselves and surf crashes high into the sky." It is perhaps the evocation of an absence through two sensory dimensions at once that accounts for the dry cascade's strange power. The arrangement of the rocks induces the viewer to see a cataract that is not there, and the imaginative projection of downflowing water seems to animate the motionless rocks with an enigmatic dynamism. The effect is enhanced by the auditory hallucination of rushing waters—a disturbing experience for visitors unaccustomed to hearing things that are not there. But it is reassuring to know that hearing with the eyes is not regarded as abnormal by Zen masters: in discussing the mystery of how nonsentient beings preach the Buddhist teachings, Dôgen quotes from a poem by the Zen master Tôzan Ryôkai who says, "If we hear the sound through the eyes, we are able to know it" (Dôgen 1997, 117).

The gardens at Saihôji are attributed to the Zen monk Musô Soseki (1275–1351), who lived some three generations after Dôgen. (The *seki* in his name is, appropriately, a reading of the graph for "rock.") Musô's "Ode to the Dry Landscape" (Kasenzui no in) begins with a tribute to the synesthetic quality of rock gardens (Merwin 1998, 212):

A high mountain
 soars without
 a grain of dust
 A waterfall
 plunges without
 a drop of water.

By skillfully arranging rocks in the upper garden of Saihôji, the author has transformed a hillside into the face of a mountain; with not a drop of water present, cataracts rush loudly down.

The hill behind the dry cascade is named Kôinzan after the mountain hermitage of the Tang dynasty Chan master Liang Zuozhu (Chan being the Chinese precursor of Zen in Japan). Some commentators claim that the tiers of rocks evoke the steep path leading up to his temple, and represent more generally the difficult ascent to the summit of Zen teaching and practice. Others see it as merely the remains of an actual series of steps leading to another building in the temple: something crafted, but not really a work of art at all. The lower garden is known to represent the Pure Land (*jôdo*), the Western Paradise of Amida Buddha, and the upper garden the defilement of this world

(*edo*), yet other scholars see the dry cascade as a way leading out of the world of defilement (see Hennig 1982, 111–112; Schaarschmidt-Richter 1979, 180).

Whatever the significance of this earliest example of the karesansui garden, several of its features point back to China. And, given the enormous influence of Chinese ideas and practices on the development of garden making in Japan, a brief review of some of that history will be of help.

The Awareness of Stone in China

Few civilizations have revered stone and rocks as greatly as the Chinese (though the Japanese are foremost among those few). A cosmogonic myth from ancient China depicts the sky as a vast cave, and mountains as fragments that came loose from the vault of heaven and ended up on earth. These huge stone fragments in falling through the air became charged with vast amounts of cosmic energy, or *qi* (*ch'i*), before embedding themselves in the earth (Rambach and Rambach 1987, 39). As in other places, there is prehistoric evidence in China of religious practices in which stone plays a key role, and records of rocks being arranged in emperors' parks go back over two thousand years.⁴ Adopted as their prerogative by the imperial family, enthusiasm for stone and the mineral kingdom then spread to the literati, and it endures in the culture to this day.

By contrast with the worldview derived from the modern natural sciences, which make a sharp distinction between the animate and inanimate (with rocks falling on the lifeless side of the divide), the ancient Chinese understand all natural phenomena, including humans, as configurations of *qi*. This energy, with its polarities of yin and yang, ranges along a spectrum from rarefied to condensed, forming a continuum that precedes, or underlies, the traditional Western distinction between the physical and the psychic. An appreciation of this energetic monism of *qi* in Chinese thought will help us to understand the Chinese reverence for rock, and perhaps also to experience the power that the East Asian traditions have ascribed to stone. Mainstream Western ways of thinking with their dichotomies between spirit and matter, psychic and physical, animate and inanimate, tend to obstruct such modes of experience. But if, following this Chinese lead, we can learn to perceive stone as a denser and slower-moving form of the energies that also constitute organic configurations such as plants or animals, our perception of the world will be transformed. (This kind of experiential transformation also leads to a different and more salutary way of thinking about ecological issues.)

The two great powers in Chinese cosmology are those of heaven and earth, the prime manifestations of yang and yin energies. In this sense rock, as earth, is yin, but insofar as stone thrusts up from the earth in the form of volcanoes and mountains it is considered yang. In relation to the basic element of water, which is yin, rock in its

hardness again manifests yang energy. The poles of yang and yin also connote “activity” and “structure,” so that the patterns that emerge from the interaction between heaven and earth are understood as “expressions of organization operating on energy” (Hay 1985, 42, 50). An entry on stone from an eighteenth-century encyclopedia characterizes rocks as follows: “The essential energy of earth forms rock. . . . Rocks are kernels of energy; the generation of rock from energy is like the body’s arterial system producing nails and teeth. . . . The earth has the famous mountains as its support, . . . rocks are its bones.”⁵ To describe rocks as the bones of the earth is by no means counterintuitive for readers raised in modern industrial societies, but the characterization of stone as a concentration of earth’s “essential energy” represents a distinctively Chinese way of thinking that may at first be difficult for some readers to appreciate or experience.

Rather than positing a world of reality behind and separate from the world of sensory experience, Chinese thought has generally sought to understand the transformational processes of existence, some of which may not be immediately apparent. For example, Chinese medicine, acupuncture especially, is predicated on the idea of balancing yin and yang energies within the body, and harmonizing the flows of qi constituting the human frame with the patterns of energies around it. This type of medicine is related to a broader science that explores human relations to terrain and environment: namely, feng shui. This term has usually been translated as “geomancy” (earth divination), though the literal meaning is “wind-water,” and it refers to a very practical form of environmental science that would encourage discarding all the commercial clutter that obstructs our relationship with the natural environment.⁶

The aim of original feng shui practice is to ensure that the places in which one lives and works, from residences and gardens to offices and workshops, are set up in such a way that one’s activities are harmonized with the greater patterning of qi that constitute the environs. Corresponding to the “meridians” in the human body through which qi flows are the “lifelines” (*shi*) that feng shui detects in the configuration of terrain. Drawing on a classic text by Guo Pu from the fourth century, a contemporary scholar (Jullien 1995, 91–92) writes: “Let us experience ‘physics’ as the single ‘breath at the origin of things, forever circulating,’ which flows through the whole of space, endlessly engendering all existing things, ‘deploying itself continuously in the great process of the coming-to-be and transformation of the world’ and ‘filling every individual species through and through.’” This vital breath is itself invisible, though discernible in the contours of landscape. Not all places are alike: they differ according to the patterns and concentrations of the energy flowing through them. Since qi also animates human beings, people who live in places where the circulations of vital breath are more intense will flourish more energetically: “By rooting one’s dwelling here rather than elsewhere, one locks into the very vitality of the world [and] taps the energy of things more directly” (p. 92).

Since rocks of unusual size or shape are special conduits or reservoirs for qi, beneficial effects will flow from simply being in their presence. The rock garden thereby becomes a site not only for aesthetic contemplation but also for self-cultivation, since the qi of the rocks will be enhanced by the flows of energy among the other natural components there. In a work called "A Eulogy to the Lodestone," Guo Pu wonders at the inscrutable operations and interactions of the phenomena that feng shui tries to fathom: "Lodestone draws in iron, Amber picks up mustard seeds. Energy invisibly passes, Cosmic numerology mysteriously matches. Things respond to each other, In ways beyond our knowing" (see Hay 1985, 53).

Classical Chinese philosophy is especially fond of correlations between microcosm and macrocosm, so that the sense of correspondence between rocks and mountains runs deeper than mere symbolization (see Stein 1990). Mountains as the most majestic expressions of natural forces were regarded as especially numinous beings: Five Sacred Peaks stood for the center of the world and its four cardinal points. Rocks were thought to partake of the powers of the mountain less through their resembling its outward appearance than for their being true microcosms, animated by the same huge telluric energies that formed the heights and peaks. The introduction to the twelfth-century treatise by Du Wan, the "Cloud Forest Catalogue of Rocks" (Yunlin Shipu), begins: "The purest energy of the heaven-earth world coalesces into rock. It emerges, bearing the soil. Its formations are wonderful and fantastic. . . . Within the size of a fist can be assembled the beauty of a thousand cliffs" (Hay 1985, 38). This idea that the energies of the macrocosm are concentrated in the microcosm will also become a major principle in the art of the rock garden in Japan.

With the development of sophisticated rock connoisseurship in China, several types of rock came to be highly prized. The most spectacular kind came from Lake Tai (Tai Hu, also known as "Grand Lake") near Suzhou and Shanghai, in the heart of literati culture in the southeast. The earliest description we have of a Taihu rock comes from a poem by the Tang dynasty poet Bai Juyi:

Its controlling spirit overpowers the bamboo and trees,
 Its manifested energy dominates the pavilions and terrace.
 From its interior rise quiet whispers,
 Is it the womb of winds?
 Sharp swords show in its angular edges,
 Their ringing resonance clearer than jasper chimes.
 Its great shape seems to move,
 Its massive forces seem on the brink of collapse.
 (Hay 1985, 19–21)

The geology of the Lake Tai area is remarkable in that the rock there is formed from limestone deposits nearly 300 million years old (p. 36). These ancient formations were corroded into extravagant shapes when the area was covered by sea, and were then

worked and sculpted by the action of hard pebbles in the lake during storms. Especially fine specimens of these Taihu rocks—which often look like frozen billows of ocean spume, or enormous stone fungi burgeoning into the air, or extravagant coral formations poised in an invisible ocean—would often stand alone as the centerpieces of famous gardens. After being touched up by human hands, they would sometimes be submerged in the lake again until they reacquired the appropriate patina.

The seventeenth-century garden manual by Cheng Ji, the *Yuanye* (Craft of Gardens), offers definite encouragement to improve on nature's work. Simply to move rocks to a garden is already to "denature" them in a sense, but the arrangements are meant to enhance their natural vitality: "Rocks are not like plants or trees: once gathered, they gain a new lease on life." Stone always has to be cleaned after being excavated, but certain kinds of rocks "may have to be shaped and carved with adze and chisel to bring out their beauty" (Ji 1988, 112–114). Such exhortations to apply the craftsman's tools are rare in the corresponding Japanese literature. The *Yuanye* advises that the rocks used for the peaks of artificial mountains should be larger at the top than below, and fitted together so that "they will have the appearance of being about to soar into the air" (p. 110). Sometimes the effect in these artificial mountains is comparable to that of the Gothic cathedral, where the aim is to counteract the weight of the stone and lend it lightness. Rocks in Japanese gardens by contrast generally advertise rather than conceal their weight, though their placement is often designed to exhibit their vitality in the way they thrust up from beneath the ground.

The Chinese tradition tends to revere nature as "the greatest of all artists," in consonance with the Daoist ideal of *wuwei*: nondisruptive action in harmony with natural transformations. The great artist engages in *dou zaohua*, "plundering the natural processes of making and transforming," and takes these creative processes "as his master and teacher" (Hay 1985, 173). But the Chinese art of the garden does not shrink from perfecting natural products when necessary: evidence in Du Wan's *Cloud Forest Catalogue* (Yunlin Shipu) suggests that "twelfth-century connoisseurs seem not to have put a premium on 'natural' stones" (Schafer 1961, 30).

For the Chinese, a major manifestation of the creative workings of nature through the medium of rock is found in the "stone screens" that have long been a common item of Chinese furniture. The veining of the marble used for these screens exhibits "traces of mineral combinations of pure limestone and sedimentary layers of clay mixed with organic material or iron oxides which the limestone has recrystallized," which produce by way of "natural painting" patterns that look like landscapes (Rambach and Rambach 1987, 26–29). Also known as "dreamstones" or "journeying stones," they have been avidly collected by scholars and officials for the decoration of their residences, and several different kinds are described in the *Cloud Forest Catalogue*. These stones manifest nature's artistry in depicting a large part of itself (a landscape) in a smaller part of that part (a rock).

As northern Song landscape painting began to flourish in the course of the tenth century, resemblance to *depicted* mountains became a feature that connoisseurs looked for in rocks. A traditional condition for successful landscape painting in China is *qi yun sheng tong*, which refers to the ability of artists to let their work be animated by the same qi that produces the natural phenomena they are painting. So rather than attempting to reproduce the visual appearance of the natural world, the artists let the brushstrokes flow from the common source that produces both natural phenomena and their own activity. This condition was easily adapted to the art of garden making, where the very elements of the artists' craft are natural beings, which are then artfully selected and arranged in order to reproduce harmonies in the natural world outside the garden within a subtly organized setting (Keswick 1978, 94–96). When Song landscape painting reached Japan, it exerted a similarly inspiring influence on garden makers there, especially in their selection and arrangement of rocks.

Given the traditional reverence in China for natural phenomena, it is not surprising that Buddhist thought should take a distinctively Chinese turn after being transplanted from India during the first century A.D. The legendary patriarch of the Chan School of Buddhism, the Indian monk Bodhidharma, by some accounts spent nine years after coming to China meditating in front of the rock face of a cliff. (Buddhist arhats are often depicted seated on pedestals of rock or in caves, and there is a famous painting of Bodhidharma in a cave of rock by the Japanese painter Sesshû.) A significant development took place in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), in which the Chinese Mahayana extension of the promise of salvation to “all sentient beings,” based on the “dependent coarising” of all things, was taken to its logical conclusion. A philosopher by the name of Jizang wrote of the “Attainment of Buddhahood by Plants and Trees,” and a later thinker, Zhanran from the Tiantai School, argued that “even non-sentient beings have Buddha-nature.”⁷

Therefore we may know that the single mind of a single particle of dust comprises the mind-nature of all sentient beings and Buddhas. . . . Therefore, when we speak of all things, why should exception be made in the case of a tiny particle of dust? Why should the substance of “suchness” pertain exclusively to “us” and not to “others”? . . .

Who, then is “animate” and who “inanimate”? Within the Assembly of the Lotus, all are present without division. In the case of grass, trees, and the soil, what difference is there between the four kinds of atoms? Whether they merely lift their feet or energetically traverse the long path, they will all reach [Nirvana].⁸

The Tiantai School was transmitted to Japan (as Tendai Buddhism) by the monk Saichô (767–823), who picked up the line of thinking developed by Zhanran and was the first in Japan to write of “the Buddha-nature of trees and rocks” (*mokuseki busshô*). The seeds of these ideas would find especially fertile ground in the minds of some formidable Japanese thinkers during the following few centuries.

Japanese Understandings of Rock

Even though no dry landscape gardens from the Heian Period in Japan have survived, we can learn something about the philosophy behind them from the earliest surviving manual for garden design, the *Sakuteiki* (Notes on Garden Making), attributed to the eleventh-century nobleman Tachibana no Toshitsuna. A look at this classic treatise, about one-quarter of which is devoted to the topic of rocks, will help us to appreciate the understanding of rock that underlies the development of the art of garden making in Japan.

The text's opening words "*Ishi o tate*" literally mean "when placing rocks"; but this locution eventually acquired the broader sense of "when making a garden," which demonstrates the centrality of rock arranging to the development of that art. The primary principle to be observed is exemplified in the frequent occurrences of the locution "following the request [of the rock]" (*kowan ni shitagau*). It is used to encourage a responsiveness on the part of garden makers to what we might call the "soul" of the stone: the translator refers in this context to the Japanese term *ishigokoro*, meaning the "heart," or "mind," of the rock (Shimoyama 1976, ix). Rather than imposing a preconceived design onto the site and the elements to be arranged there, accomplished garden makers will be sensitive to what the particular rocks "want." If the garden makers listen carefully, the rocks will tell them where they belong.

Readers operating on the Cartesian dichotomy between mind and matter will tend to regard (and perhaps dismiss) much of the content of this text as naive anthropomorphism, but such readers would do well to reflect on just how recent and parochial the Cartesian worldview is—no matter how efficacious it may have been in the human manipulation of the world by means of technology. By endorsing Cartesian dualism, science gave itself permission to deflate the "world soul" of antiquity, as it were, draining the *anima mundi* and confining all soul to a locus within human beings alone. It is only after such operations that any apparent animation of nonhuman phenomena has to be seen as a result of anthropomorphic projection. This perspective is moreover quite parochial in view of the widespread reverence for rocks in most other parts of the world. (The Indian, South American, Australian aboriginal, Polynesian, and Native American traditions come immediately to mind, but respect for stone seems to come naturally for indigenous cultures.)

For anyone who does not subscribe to Cartesian dualism, some such term as *panpsychism* might better denote worldviews that see humans on an unbroken continuum of "animateness" with natural phenomena. At any rate, to appreciate the role of rock in the Japanese tradition, one does well to try to suspend methodological prejudices and be open to the possibility that the relationship between the mineral and human realms may be closer than might at first appear. (It is not a matter of claiming that the natural science perspective is false, but rather of affirming the validity of other, ancient per-

spectives that are nevertheless still experientially accessible to us in the twenty-first century.)

In a section of the *Sakuteiki* titled “Oral Instructions Concerning the Placing of Rocks,” the reader (listener) is advised to position first the “master rock” with its distinct character, and then “proceed to set the other rocks in compliance with the ‘requesting mood’ of the Master Rock” (Shimoyama 1976, 23). The vocabulary of rock arranging was quite sophisticated by the time the *Sakuteiki* was written, as evidenced by the large number of terms of art applied to different kinds of stone in this short text. They range from the ordinary, such as side rock (*waki-ishi*) and lying rock (*fuse-ishi*); through specialized terms used in connection with ponds, streams, and waterfalls, such as wave-repelling rock (*namikae-ishi*), water-cutting rock (*mizu-kiri-no-ishi*), and stepping stone (*tsutai-ishi*); to the unusual, such as master rock (*shu-ishi*), Buddhist-triad rocks (*sanzon-seki*), demon rock (*ishigami*), and rock of vengeful spirits (*ryôseki*). This detailed vocabulary surely reflects enhanced powers of perception: where the average person might see just “a rock,” the medieval makers and appreciators of Japanese gardens see a particular kind of rock with particular qualities—qualities that are related to a vast matrix of other natural phenomena and interrelationships. As in the Chinese qi cosmology that is behind these Japanese conceptions, the underlying idea is that all phenomena are manifestations of the same cosmic energies, correlated in a multiplicity of different ways that can be understood through appropriate perception and reflection.

A passage containing advice concerning the arrangement of rocks at the foot of hillsides assimilates them to the animal realm: they should be placed in such a way as to resemble “a pack of dogs crouching on the ground, or a running and scattering group of pigs, or else calves playing beside a recumbent mother cow.” The theriomorphism gives way to what we might call personification: “In general, for one or two ‘running away’ rocks one should place seven or eight ‘chasing rocks.’ The rocks may thus resemble, for example, children playing a game of tag.” The dyad of “running” and “chasing” is followed by several others: “For the leaning rock there is the supporting rock, for the trampling rock the trampled, for the looking-up rock there is the looking-down one, and for the upright the recumbent” (pp. 24–25). Rather than dismissing this kind of talk as betraying a naive animism, we would do better to see it as employing tropes akin to personification in poetry, as figurative speech that in fact reflects a rather sophisticated understanding of the relationships between the denizens of what we distinguish as the human, animal, and mineral realms.

One of the most interesting sections in the *Sakuteiki* is titled “Taboos on the Placing of Rocks,” and is full of warnings against violating taboos deriving from feng shui practices. But a primary prohibition appears to be grounded more generally in a reluctance (that was not so evident in the Chinese treatises) to infringe on naturalness. Placing sideways a rock that was originally vertical, or setting up vertically one that was

originally lying, is taboo. If this taboo is violated, the rock will surely turn into a “rock of vengeful spirits” and will bring a curse. Do not place any rock as tall as four or five feet to the northeast of the estate. A rock so placed may become fraught with vengeful spirits, or else may afford a foothold for evil to enter, with the result that the owner will not dwell there for long. However, if the spirits of such a rock are opposed by Buddhist triad rocks set to the southeast corner of the site, evil karma will not gain entry (p. 26).

There is a combination of considerations here drawn from feng shui (the northeast as the most inauspicious direction) and Buddhism. The author cites a Song Dynasty writer who says that in cases where rocks have ended up in a different orientation as a result of having fallen down the mountainside, these may be positioned in the latter way “because the change was effected not by human being but by nature.” But in some provinces of Japan, the author warns, certain rocks may become demonic simply by being moved. Some configurations are to be avoided simply because they resemble the forms of Chinese characters with inauspicious meanings—such as the graph for “curse”—while others are to be encouraged for the opposite reason, as with a pattern of three rocks resembling the graph for “goods” (pp. 29–30).

The misfortunes that will beset the master of the house if taboos are violated are various: he may lose the property, be plagued by illnesses (including skin diseases and epidemics), suffer harm from outsiders, and so forth. Even the women of the household will be adversely affected by transgressions in the layout, as when a valley between hills points toward the house. One has to admit that the early development of the practice of feng shui in China took advantage of people’s susceptibility to superstition, so that a good part of it became tainted with charlatanism and mystification. While some of the discourse on taboos in the *Sakuteiki* seems to stem from mere superstition, we might take such passages not literally but rather as emblematic of a basic and valid feng shui principle: namely that to ignore the relationship between the configurations of life energies that enable human activities and the energies that pattern the environment will diminish those activities and render them less likely to succeed.

A later treatise on gardens, “Illustrations of Landscape Scenes and Ground-forms” (*Sansui narabini yakeizu*), dates from the fifteenth century and bears the name of a Zen priest, Zōen, as its author. The *Sakuteiki* dealt with Heian-Period pleasure gardens from the point of view of the aristocratic owner, while the *Sansui* manual is based on the experience of workmen “in the field,” and treats much smaller medieval gardens designed to be viewed from the building to which they are adjacent—the so-called contemplation gardens (Kuitert 1988, 137–139). About half of the text is devoted to the topic of rock arrangement.

The *Sansui* manual introduces a Confucian-style discourse concerning “master” and “attendant” rocks that is not found in the *Sakuteiki*: “The Master Rock looks after its Attendants, and the Attendant Rocks look up to the Master.” The Attendant Rocks are “flat-topped rocks, resembling persons with their heads lowered, respectfully saying

something to the Master Rock.” Of similar Confucian origin are the “Respect and Affection Rocks”—“two stones set slightly apart with their brows inclined toward one another”—said later in the text to “create the impression of a man and a woman engaged in intimate conversation.” Aside from appellations deriving from the Confucian tradition, another section in the Sansui manual with the heading “Names of Rocks” lists dozens of names from the Daoist, Buddhist, and Shinto traditions (the “Rock of the Spirit Kings,” “Twofold World Rocks,” “Torii Rocks,” and so forth).⁹ The Sansui manual again issues warnings against breaking taboos, especially by reversing the “natural” or “original” position of a rock, which will “anger its spirit and bring bad luck” (sec. 12).

When I used to go backpacking in the High Sierras during the 1970s, I was especially fascinated by the configurations of rocks and boulders I saw up there. So many of them, whether nestled in turf or partially submerged in small lakes and ponds, seemed to have congregated in small groups resembling the so-called nuclear family: two larger rocks as parents, and one, two, or three smaller ones as the children. If this was a case of anthropomorphic projection driven by a desire to have (or be a part of) such a family myself, it was a deeply unconscious one, not to be fulfilled until many years later. Those experiences seemed at the time both very “magical” and highly significant, and they contributed to my moving even farther away philosophically from naive realism. I would interpret them now as examples of a deeper layer of experience than the level on which Cartesianism and scientific realism operate: after a few days away from civilization, living alone in a more or less completely natural environment, experience of the world tended to become prereflective and thereby more direct. Depth psychologists would understand it in terms of archaism and the “participation” typical of the (imagined) experience of human beings at much earlier eras of development.

At any rate, the point is not to claim that this kind of experience is more valid or true than experience of a world of objects that are totally different from oneself as subject, but rather that the perspective of modern science is only one among many—and not one that enhances our understanding or appreciation of rocks. Correspondingly, it seems that the perspectives on rock of the Australian aborigine, say, or the medieval Zen master, are still accessible, under the right conditions, to us twenty-first-century perceivers, and that we would do well to take account of such perspectives as we strive toward an overall understanding of the world. It may take a considerable perceptual and conceptual shift for us to sense the affinities among rocks, and it is such a shift that Dōgen may be aiming at in “Mountains and Waters [as a] Sutra” (Sansuigyō).

By contrast with the *Sakuteiki*, the later manual is richly illustrated, with numerous drawings and sketches. The brushwork suggests influence from Song-style landscape painting, which was being much imitated in Japan at the time, and some of the techniques and ideas about composing “garden views” and *keiseki* groups (depicting scenery in condensed form) may well be based on Song landscape theories (Kuitert 1988,

140–144). Landscape painting exerted a profound influence on garden making in Japan, especially through its aim of conjuring up immense distances through works of small dimensions. This effect is in accordance with the dictum of the Chinese poet Du Fu concerning landscape painting: “To be able, in the space of one square foot, to evoke a landscape of ten thousand leagues!” (cited in Hung 1969, 169). The influence of Song Dynasty painting is evident in the second masterpiece attributed to Musô Soseki, the garden at Tenryûji in the northwest of Kyoto.

Musô was an energetic and charismatic teacher who not only gained a large popular following but also won considerable influence with those in political power. This naturally subjected him to social pressures, and some of his contemporaries branded his work with gardens as frivolous and his love of nature as indicating attachment to worldly pleasures. However, such criticism is irrelevant in view of the Zen Buddhist this-worldly emphasis on the soteric power of nature as something to be celebrated (as long as one does not become attached to it). For example, there is a passage in Musô’s best known work, the “Dream Dialogues” (Muchû mondô), in which he responds by distinguishing between various attitudes toward landscape and gardens and invoking the example of the poet Bai Juyi (part of whose poem in praise of Taihu rocks was cited above):

Bai Juyi dug out a little pond, planted bamboo at its edge, and loved this above all else. The bamboo is my best friend, he would say, because its heart is empty, and because the water is pure it is my master. People who love a fine landscape from the bottom of their hearts possess a heart like his. . . . Those who experience mountains, rivers, the great earth, grasses, trees, and rocks as the self’s original part [*jiko no hombun*], though they may seem by their love of nature to cling to worldly feelings, it is precisely through this that they show themselves to be mindful of the Way [*dôshin*], and they take the phenomena that transform themselves into the four elements as topics of their practice. And when they do this aright, they exemplify perfectly how true followers of the Way love landscape.¹⁰

Those who surround themselves with a small landscape in the form of a garden gain nourishment from nature because its self-transforming elements are “the self’s original part,” out of which “all things arise.” Through advocating the benefits of communion with the natural world in this way, against criticism from narrower souls, Musô contributed to the increasing valorization of nature in Zen thinking and practice.

On the far side of the pond from the main building at Tenryûji there is a dry cascade. Although consisting of fewer elements than its precursor at Saihōji, its rocks are much larger and of equally exquisite shape, and again weathered with bands of lichen that suggest downflowing water. In view of the more open nature of this site—the garden at Tenryûji is a beautiful example of *shakkei*, or “borrowed landscape” (a style itself borrowed from Chinese gardens), where the composition is designed to include natural landscape beyond the garden—the luxuriant vegetation around the rocks accentuates their stark minerality. It is also a consummate example of *shukkei*, or “concentrated

scenery,” in which a vast scene is compressed into a small space in the manner of a Song Dynasty landscape painting.

Although their minerality is set into relief by the surrounding plant life, the rocks that make up the dry cascade look anything but lifeless. Nor is what animates them the minimal accommodation, on the part of these beings that have never known life or death, of the simplest life forms, lichen and moss. With prolonged contemplation, it becomes apparent that they are alive with a life all their own. In the course of the sermon that Musô gave at Tenryûji on becoming its founding abbot, he emphasized that the Buddha Dharma (which means both “teachings” and “law”) is to be found not only in sacred scriptures but also in the physical world around us:

Everything the world contains—grasses and trees, bricks and tile, all creatures, all actions and activities—are nothing but the manifestations of [the Buddha] Dharma [*hō*]. Therefore it is said that all phenomena in the universe bear the mark of this Dharma. . . . Every single person here is precious in himself, and everything here—plaques, paintings, square eaves and round pillars—every single thing is preaching the Dharma.¹¹

Musô is speaking here from a venerable tradition of Japanese Buddhist thinking about the natural world, which I discuss below. The idea that all things expound the Dharma (*hosshin seppō*) is central to the Shingon school of esoteric Buddhism that was founded by Japan’s most famous religious figure, Kūkai (744–835), and Zen master Dōgen is fond of insisting that “fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles” are “Buddha-nature” (*bushhō*) just as much as so-called sentient beings.¹²

The garden at Tenryûji is designed to be viewed as a scroll painting from the veranda of the main building, a perspective that enhances the mirroring effect of the pond, which is the most spectacular feature of the site. Only on a very windy day does the water of the pond fail to reflect the waterless fall of rocks on the hill beyond. The substantial rocks, which seem to descend majestically down the hillside, harboring an invisible cascade, are mirrored by insubstantial inverted counterparts beneath them. But rather than suggesting a contrast between the real and the illusory, the juxtaposition of rocks and reflections somehow evokes an interplay on the *same* ontological level. The natural world and its image, the substantial and its opposite, are both there at the same time. They are both necessary, belonging together—just as, for the Buddhists, life is always backed at every moment by death, and things can manifest themselves only against a background of no-“thing”ness.

Appreciators of Stone in the West

“If you raise for me an altar of stone, you may not make it of sculpted stone, for in taking the chisel to the rock you will profane it” (Exodus 20:25). This passage from the Bible, though one of several that express taboos against profaning stone’s naturalness

and even emphasize its nourishing capacities (“honey from the rock”), is atypical with respect to the Western tradition in general (see Berthier 2000, 10, 44). Already at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition some parallels with Chinese ideas emerge, but the mainstream soon diverges. Thales, “father of Western philosophy,” is said to have ascribed “a share of soul even to inanimate [literally, “soulless”] things, using Magnesian stone and amber as indications.” Indeed he apparently even said, “the mind of the world is god, and the sum of things is besouled and full of daimons; right through the elemental moisture there penetrates a divine power that moves it” (Kirk and Raven 1963, 94–96). (Remember how Guo Pu, “father of Chinese geomancy,” was also fascinated by the properties of amber and the lodestone.) Aristotle (*De Anima*, 405b, 404a) remarks that none of his predecessors associated soul with the element of earth, perhaps because of the assumption that “movement is the distinctive characteristic of soul.” This assumption seems pervasive in the Western traditions, presumably because—except for those who live in regions subject to earthquakes or volcanic eruptions—the movements of earth are difficult to perceive in the short term. While Aristotle was reluctant to attribute soul to what we now call inanimate nature, he did claim that plants are ensouled, and that humans too are animated by the same “nutritive and generative” features that characterize the vegetative soul.

Subsequent Western thinkers have been similarly reluctant to regard the mineral realm as animate, with the exception of a few hermetically or alchemically inclined philosophers during the Renaissance (such as Paracelsus and Giordano Bruno). However, certain strains in the Judaic tradition constitute another exception to the general lack of respect for rock. “Rock” is often used to refer to Yahweh, to suggest qualities of steadfastness and stability. Martin Buber cites an old Hassid master who said: “When you walk across the fields with your mind pure and holy, then from all the stones, and all growing things, and all animals, the sparks of their soul come out and cling to you, and then they are purified and become a holy fire in you.”¹³ It may be thanks to the heretical Benedict de Spinoza (1632–1677) that some features of this tradition of thought related to the mineral realm find their way into the post-Romantic Era. Spinoza’s arguably “pantheistic” notion of nature’s divinity (*deus sive natura*) was a major influence on the thought of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832)—a thinker who incorporates hermetic thought into an interesting heterodox line of thinking about rock in the Western tradition.

Goethe had a great interest in geology and mineralogy, and in a gem of an essay titled “On Granite” he recalls once sitting on an exposed piece of granite on top of a mountain. He thinks about how the rock extends deep down into the bottommost stratum of the earth, and has remained the same throughout a long history of changes in the earth’s crust. Reflecting on the “ancient discovery” that granite is both “the highest and the deepest,” Goethe writes eloquently of “the solid ground of our earth, and of the serene tranquility afforded by that solitary, mute nearness of great, soft-

voiced nature. In contrast to the fertile valleys, the granite peaks have never generated anything nor devoured anything living: they exist prior to and superior to all life."¹⁴ Goethe's ideas influenced American transcendentalism, and they are no doubt a factor in the more open attitude toward the mineral world that one finds in Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882) and Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862). In a journal entry made while in his mid-thirties, Emerson (1914, Vol. 5, pp. 496–497) records a kind of death experience he underwent on walking out of the house into a night lit by the full moon: "In the instant you leave behind all human relations . . . and live only with the savages—water, air, light, carbon, lime, & granite. . . . I become a moist, cold element. "Nature grows over me." . . . I have died out of the human world & come to feel a strange, cold, aqueous, terraqueous, aerial, ethereal sympathy and existence." The early Emerson is constantly impressed by "the moral influence of nature upon every individual," which he understands as "that amount of truth which it illustrates to him": "Who can estimate this?" he asks; "Who can guess how much firmness the sea-beaten rock has taught the fisherman?" Like Goethe, a great believer in the ancient principle (much discussed to by Theophrastus) that "like can only be known by like," Emerson thinks that the sea-beaten rock can teach the fisherman firmness because it speaks to a rocklike solidity deep within the human soul. This would be the basis for "that spirit which suffices quiet hearts, which seems to come forth to such from every dry knoll of sere grass, from every pine-stump, and half-imbedded stone, on which the dull March sun shines" (Emerson 1983, 29, 461).

Emerson was one of the first American thinkers to appreciate the changes that the science of geology was effecting in our understanding of how old the earth is. Having invoked in his essay "Nature" the "patient periods that must round themselves before the rock is formed, and the first lichen race has disintegrated the thinnest external plate into soil," he wrote: "It is a long way from granite to the oyster; farther yet to Plato, and the preaching of the immortality of the soul" (pp. 546–547). Long though the way is, it does not leave the granite behind, which persists within, allowing the human soul to participate in the deathlessness as well as the mortality of the natural world.

It is imprudent to let the Faustian drive to order the external world blind one to the world within. In a passage from the essay "Fate," which was influential on Nietzsche's enthusiasm for self-discipline and self-cultivation as well as remarkably consonant with the role of this kind of practice in the East Asian traditions, Emerson writes (p. 953): "On one side, elemental order, sandstone and granite, rock-ledges, peat-bog, forest, sea and shore; and, on the other part, thought, the spirit which composes and decomposes nature,—here they are, side by side, god and devil, mind and matter, king and conspirator, belt and spasm, riding peacefully together in the eye and brain of every man." And just as the Zen Buddhist thinkers urge us to acknowledge our interdependence with natural phenomena, so Emerson offers near the end of his active life

a similar exhortation, when he writes (p. 953): "See what a cometary train of auxiliaries man carries with him, of animals, plants, stones, gases, and imponderable elements. Let us infer his ends from this pomp of means." As Emerson moved away from the Christian and Neoplatonic ideas that informed his earlier thinking about nature, his stance became steadily less anthropocentric and more consonant with the non-Western philosophies in which he became ever more interested. His younger friend Thoreau devoted a larger proportion of his energies to thinking about nature, and began from a less anthropocentric starting point than his mentor had done. Although Thoreau's reading in Chinese thought appears to have focused on the Confucian classics, his profound reverence for nature reduces anthropocentrism close to the minimum that is characteristic of Daoist thought. A passage describing sailing down the Merrimack river echoes the emphasis on fluidity that one finds in the *Daodejing* (Classic of the Way and Power) attributed to Laozi: "All things seemed with us to flow. . . . The hardest material seemed to obey the same law with the most fluid, and so indeed in the long run it does. . . . There were rivers of rock on the surface of the earth, and rivers of ore in its bowels, and our thoughts flowed and circulated, and this portion of time was the current hour" (Thoreau 1985, 269–270). While Thoreau's familiarity with Asian thought did not extend to Japan, he nevertheless shares the Japanese Buddhists' appreciation of nature as a source of wisdom. Just as the Duke in Shakespeare's *As You Like It* found "sermons in stones and books in the running brooks," and Emerson maintained that "all things with which we deal, preach to us," so Thoreau too emphasizes nature as a scripture that can be read: "The skies are constantly turning a new page to view. The wind sets the types on this blue ground, and the inquiring may always read a new truth there" (p. 292).

It is well known that Thoreau was an avid reader of literature (he took his Homer with him to Walden Pond), but he warns us that if we concentrate too much on reading "particular written languages, which are themselves but dialects and provincial, we are in danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor, which alone is copious and standard" (p. 411). Following the tradition of East Asian thinkers that undermined the distinction between sentient and nonsentient beings, Thoreau extended the domain of the organic into the so-called inanimate world: "There is nothing inorganic. . . . The earth is not a mere fragment of dead history. . . . but living poetry like the leaves of a tree, which precede flowers and fruit—not a fossil earth, but a living earth; compared with whose great central life all animal and vegetable life is merely parasitic" (p. 568). Thoreau's emphasis on the vitality of the mineral realm serves to mitigate the effects not only of anthropocentrism but also of biocentrism, in a way that anticipates contemporary "ecocentric" thinking. This line of thought leads on to the modern ecology movement, as exemplified in the work of its founding fathers like John Muir (1838–1914) and Aldo Leopold (1886–1948), who expanded the notion of community to include the earth as a basis for for-

mulating a “land ethic,” and also recommended learning to “think like a mountain” (Leopold 1968, 132).

Goethe’s ideas fed into a parallel current of thinking in Germany, through his influence on Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Schopenhauer recommends careful consideration of the inorganic world, and suggests that we reflect on such phenomena as “the powerful, irresistible impulse with which masses of water rush downwards, the persistence and determination with which the magnet always turns back to the North Pole, the keen desire with which iron flies to the magnet, and the vehemence with which the poles of the electric current strive for reunion.” If we contemplate further “the rapid formation of the crystal with such regularity of configuration,” and feel how “a burden, which hampers a body by its gravitation toward the earth, incessantly presses and squeezes this body in pursuit of its one tendency,” we will understand that the inorganic realm is animated by the same “will” that energizes us, only at a lower degree of “objectification” than in the case of plants, animals, and humans. It is interesting that Schopenhauer should mention in this context the yin and yang philosophy found in the Chinese *Yijing* (Book of Changes).¹⁵

The philosopher who is most comfortable with the idea of close relations between the human and so-called inorganic worlds is Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), whose understanding of nature was also deeply influenced by Emerson.¹⁶ With reference to the inorganic as the supposedly “dead world,” Nietzsche writes (in the spirit of Goethe): “Let us beware of saying that life is opposed to death. The living is merely a species of the dead, and a very rare species at that.” He then expresses the hope that human beings will be able to *naturalize* themselves after having “dedivinized” nature. What such a naturalization might involve is suggested by a brief aphorism entitled, “How One is to Turn to Stone.” It reads: “Slowly, slowly to become hard like a precious stone—and finally to lie there still, and to the joy of eternity.”¹⁷

A hint of how a human being might “turn to stone” is in turn derivable from several unpublished notes from the same period, which evidence Nietzsche’s fascination with the benefits of participation in the world of the inorganic. Some of his resolutions show a slight Buddhist tinge and exemplify an attitude that is most appropriate for viewing Zen gardens: “To procure the advantages of one who is dead . . . to think oneself away out of humanity, to unlearn desires of all kinds: and to employ the entire abundance of one’s powers in *looking*.” This unlearning of desires is by no means a rejection of life but rather a joyful affirmation of existence: “To be released from life and become dead nature again can be experienced as a *festival*—of the one who wants to die. To love nature! Again to revere what is dead!” One is able to “become dead nature again” since the human organism consists in part of minerals: “How distant and superior is our attitude toward what is dead, the anorganic, and all the while we are three-quarters water and have anorganic minerals in us that perhaps do more for our well- and ill-being than the whole of living society! . . . The inorganic conditions us

through and through: water, air, earth, the shape of the ground, electricity, *etc.*"¹⁸ This kind of thorough conditioning (which is precisely the topic of feng shui), along with the human being's participation in the mineral realm, constitutes the basis of the feeling of kinship with rocks.

Nietzsche has understood that learning transforms us the way nourishment does, but he also recognizes an unchanging aspect to existence: "But in our very ground, 'deep down,' there is admittedly something unteachable, a granite of spiritual fate" (*Beyond Good and Evil*, sec. 231). The Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1900–1990) connects this statement with Goethe's essay on granite, and with the idea of something similarly unchanging deep within the human soul (Nishitani 1990, 91–92). Stone always held a special significance for Nietzsche: several significant childhood memories have to do with "digging up calcite" and other rocks on a ridge near his home. He later alludes to a language of stone when he asks, clearly referring to himself: "Is a human being not well described when we hear that . . . from childhood on he experiences and reveres unhewn rocks as witnesses of prehistory which are eager to acquire language?" And the thought of "the eternal recurrence of the same," which he regarded as the pinnacle of his thinking and "the highest formula of affirmation that is attainable," first struck him near a magnificent pyramidal rock on the shore of a lake in the Upper Engadin in Switzerland.¹⁹ The thought that enables the greatest affirmation of life strikes the thinker as he stands by a pyramid-shaped rock that is "prior to and superior to all life."

It is not generally known that Nietzsche's friendship with Reinhard von Seydlitz, who was a great connoisseur of Japanese art, instilled in him a desire to emigrate to Japan. "If only I were in better health and had sufficient income," he wrote to his sister in 1885, "I would, simply in order to attain greater serenity, emigrate to *Japan*. . . . I like being in Venice because things could be somewhat Japanese there—a few of the necessary conditions are in place."²⁰ One of the things very much in place there is the subject celebrated in John Ruskin's classic, *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853), a book that Nietzsche may well have read (since he sometimes mentions Ruskin) and would certainly have appreciated. It is fascinating to speculate on how his life would have been if he had fulfilled his fantasy of emigrating to Japan: he would surely have found the Zen rock gardens there conducive to "greater serenity" indeed.

It seems, then, that thinkers in the Western traditions generally regard the mineral realm as philosophically uninteresting. Among the rare appreciators of stone, however, one can discern the idea that, if we attend to the "great central life" of the earth, we may hear some teachings and see some scriptures couched and proclaimed in a language of nature's own. This is a theme that one finds much amplified in Japanese Buddhist philosophy—and expressed in the associated arts through an enlightening eloquence of stone.

The Consummate Zen Rock Garden

The highest consummation of the dry landscape style is the rock garden at Ryōanji in Kyoto. The best way to approach this unique garden is *slowly*, avoiding what is nowadays helpfully signposted as the “Usual Route.” It is such a relief to leave behind the commotion of traffic and bustle of the city, and walk up the cobblestone pathway leading from the street, that one is inclined to head for the famous site directly. But to let the rock garden exert its full effect, one does well to experience its context (and Buddhist philosophy consistently emphasizes the importance of context) by contemplating beforehand the rich profusion of both natural and arranged beauty that surrounds it. In numerous subgardens handsome rocks stand among elegant trees and bushes, while others lie, apparently slumbering, in sun-illuminated moss that glows green around them. Majestic stands of bamboo sway in the breeze, as if beckoning to shadowy backgrounds. Exotic palms thrust sharply skyward among trees that blossom delicately in the spring. Such profusion intensifies the eventual encounter with the distinct lack of profusion at the heart of these gardens, which has been called a “garden of emptiness” rather than a “rock garden.”

After appreciating the abundance of beautiful rocks in the gardens surrounding it, one is struck by how few specimens the dry landscape garden actually contains. On the north side the viewing platform borders a rectangular, gray, gravel-covered area about the size of a tennis court, which contains only fifteen rocks, arranged in five groups (5, 2, 3, 2, 3) or three (7, 5, 3). From whatever viewpoint one adopts, it is impossible to see all fifteen at once: at least one rock is always hidden by another. As in the world outside, not everything is revealed at one time.

The initial impression is one of sparse sterility—until one notices the moss that surrounds the bases of several of the rocks. Not much life for a garden, by Western standards, but just enough to point up the stark minerality of everything else within its borders. In summer the bright green of the moss echoes the lush colors of the trees beyond, while in winter its darker greens and mauves match the hues of both the evergreens and the bare branches of the deciduous trees beyond the wall that runs along the south and west sides of the garden. Being surrounded by a sea of gray gravel, the moss emphasizes the effect created by the elements of the garden being “cut off” from the nature outside. Without these touches of green and mauve the place would look quite different—just as the “seed” of white within the black half of the yin-yang figure (and vice versa) consummates the pattern.

The notion of the “cut” (*kiré*) is an important one in Japanese aesthetics, especially in the figure of “cut-continuance” (*kiré-tsuzuki*) (see Ôhashi 1994), where a cut both separates and joins two things as the cinematic cut links two scenes in a film. At Ryōanji the wall cuts the rock garden off from the outside and yet is low enough to

permit a view of the surroundings from the platform. This cut (which is itself doubled by the angled roof that runs along the top of the wall) is most evident in the contrast between movement and stillness. Above and beyond the wall there is nature in movement: branches wave and sway, clouds float by, and the occasional bird flies past—though seldom, it seems, over the garden itself. Unless rain or snow is falling, or a stray leaf is blown across, the only movement visible within the garden is shadowed or illusory. In seasons when the sun is low, shadows of branches move slowly across the sea of gravel, accentuating the stillness of the rocks to a point where, even when the moving shadows fade, the rocks themselves seem to be on the move, to be in some sense “underway.”

The garden is cut off on the near side too, by a border of pebbles (larger, darker, and more rounded than the pieces of gravel) that runs along the east and north edges. There is a striking contrast between the severe rectangularity of the garden’s borders and the irregular natural forms of the rocks within them. The expanse of gravel is also cut through by the upthrust of the rocks from below: earth energies mounting and peaking in irruptions of stone. Each group of rocks is cut off from the others by the expanse of gravel, and the separation enhanced by the “ripple” patterns in the raking that surrounds each group (and some individual rocks). And yet the overall effect is to intensify the invisible lines of connection among the rocks, whose interrelations exemplify the fundamental Buddhist insight of “dependent coarising.”

The various “cuts” in the garden at Ryōanji reflect a basic trope in Rinzai Zen (the best *karesansui* gardens are all in Rinzai temples), which is exemplified in the teachings of the great Zen Master Hakuin (1686–1769). For Hakuin the aim of “seeing into one’s own nature” can only be realized if one has “cut off the root of life”: “You must be prepared to let go your hold when hanging from a sheer precipice, to die and return again to life” (Hakuin 1971, 133–135). The functions of the cut in the rock garden may also be better understood with reference to the distinctively Japanese art of flower arrangement called *ikebana*. The term means literally “making flowers live”—a strange name, on first impression at least, for an art that begins by initiating their death. There is an exquisite essay by Nishitani Keiji on this marvelous art, in which organic life is cut off precisely in order to let the true nature of the flower come to the fore (Nishitani 1995, 23–27). There is something curiously deceptive, from the Buddhist viewpoint of the impermanence of all things, about plants, which by sinking roots into the earth and lacking locomotion, assume an appearance of being especially “at home” wherever they are. In severing the flowers from their roots, Nishitani suggests, and placing them in an alcove, one is letting them show themselves as they really are: as absolutely rootless as every other being in this world of radical impermanence.

A corresponding process can be seen in the rock garden, insofar as its being cut off from the surrounding nature has the effect of *drying up* its organic life, which then no

longer decays in the usual manner. *Karesansui* means, literally, “dried up” or “withered” “mountains and waters,” but when Musō Soseki writes the word in the title of his “Ode to the Dry Landscape” he uses a different graph for the *kare* with the meaning “provisional,” or “temporary.” Being dried up, the mountains and waters of the garden at Ryōanji appear less temporary than their counterparts outside, to which manifest the cyclical changes that organic life is heir. But just as plants look deceptively permanent thanks to their being rooted in the earth, so the rocks of the dry landscape garden give a misleading impression of permanence, especially when they are revisited over a period of years. As participants in the “great central life” of the earth, rocks have a life that unfolds in time sequences that are different from ours, yet which is also subject to the impermanence that characterizes all things.

Nishitani has explained the enigmatic power of the rocks at Ryōanji in terms of their ability to enlighten and teach: “We are within the garden and are not just spectators, for we have ourselves become part of the actual manifestation of the garden architect’s expression of his own enlightenment experience. The garden is my Zen master now, and it is your Zen master too.”²¹ This echoes an idea put forward by Dōgen (1994, 94) that while we are seeking a teacher one may “spring out from the earth” and “make nonsentient beings speak the truth.” In keeping with Mahayana universalism, Dōgen recommended abandoning the early Buddhist distinction between sentient and nonsentient beings as obstructive to enlightenment. His assertion that nonsentient beings expound the Buddha-Dharma (*mujō seppō*) is perfectly exemplified in the enlightening effect of the Zen rock garden.

The teachings of the dry landscape garden at Ryōanji can be enhanced through experiencing its context after visiting it as well as before. Prolonged contemplation of the rocks in the central garden leaves an afterimage that lingers in the mind as one heads for the exit. Contemplating the luxuriant surroundings one passes through on the way out with the rather “bare bones” or “skeletal” afterimage of the rocks and gravel in mind conduces to a better appreciation of the dual life-and-death aspect of reality articulated in Zen philosophy. It is as if one sees in “double exposure,” as it were, the life- and deathless source from which all things arise and into which they perish at every moment.²²

Little attention has been paid by previous commentaries to the capacity of arranged rocks somehow to “speak to us.” This phenomenon can best be understood with reference to the ontological status of stone in Japanese Buddhism, which is quite different from a scientific view of matter. To dispel the specter of “primitive animism” that tends to haunt any discussions of rock as more than lifeless, I will focus on the two most sophisticated thinkers in the tradition of Japanese Buddhist philosophy: Kūkai and Dōgen. Their philosophies rank with those of the greatest figures in the Western tradition, from Plato and Augustine to Hegel and Heidegger, though only a brief sketch of the relevant, complex ideas can be given here.²³

Rocks as Sources of Understanding

Anyone familiar with the profundity of Kūkai or Dōgen knows that whatever their talk of the speech of natural phenomena may mean, it is worlds away from any kind of primitive animism. The Shingon esoteric school was the first form of Buddhism to influence the development of the Japanese garden, which it did by introducing mandala as well as other kinds of symbolism into the design of gardens. In several of his writings Kūkai effects a bold innovation in Mahayana Buddhist thinking by revisioning the Dharmakaya (*hosshin*), which had been previously understood as the formless and timeless Absolute, as the “reality embodiment” of the cosmic Buddha Mahavairocana (Dainichi Nyorai) and nothing other than the physical universe. This means that rocks and stone—indeed all of “the four great elements”—are to be included among sentient beings and revered as constituting the highest body of the *Tathāgata* (*nyorai* in Japanese: “the one [who has] come like this”).²⁴

Moreover, with his assertion that the Dharmakaya actually expounds the Dharma (*hosshin seppō*), Kūkai claims that the physical world, as the cosmic Buddha’s reality embodiment and in the person of Dainichi Nyorai, proclaims the essential teachings of Buddhism. At a more basic level than the one on which the Bodhisattvas and Patriarchs teach, the world of nature manifests the fundamental ideas of Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, Dainichi expounds the Dharma purely “for his own enjoyment” and not for human benefit (there are other embodiments of the Buddha, for example the Nirmanakaya and Sambhogakaya, that address human beings directly). So even though the cosmos may in some indirect sense be “speaking” to us, it is not doing so in any human language. Speech is for Kūkai one of the “three mysteries” or “intimacies” (*sanmitsu*) of Dainichi, and so it takes considerable practice for human beings to develop the necessary sensibility for understanding the teachings of natural phenomena. To the relief of those readers who might have struggled in vain to comprehend his formidable philosophy, Kūkai (1982, 145) explains at one point that “since the Esoteric Buddhist teachings are so profound as to defy expression in writing, they are revealed through the medium of painting.” Kūkai often maintained that “the medium of painting” was especially effective, but in view of the prevalence of mandala visualization in Shingon practice, he would surely acknowledge the art of garden design as a medium of communicating ontological features of reality that are not susceptible of formulation in language.

Almost five centuries later, Dōgen developed similar ideas in the context of the Sōtō Zen tradition. Just as Kūkai identifies the Dharmakaya with the phenomenal world, so Dōgen promotes a similar understanding of natural landscape as the body of the Buddha. In his essay “Voices of the River-Valley, Forms of the Mountain” (*Keisei-sanshiki*) he urges his readers to hear and read natural landscapes as Buddhist sermons and scriptures and cites the following poem, which a Chan master in China had authenticated as evidence of its author’s enlightenment (Dōgen 1994, 86):

The voices of the river valley are the [Buddha's] Wide and Long Tongue,
 The form of the mountains is nothing other than his Pure Body.
 Throughout the night, eighty-four thousand verses.
 On another day, how can I tell them to others?

Philosophically speaking, Dôgen asserts the nonduality of the world of impermanence and the totality of Buddha-nature (*shitsu-u busshô*: the idea that the totality of existence is “Buddha-nature”—that is, capable of enlightenment). Arguing vehemently against the more “biocentric” standpoint of earlier Buddhism, he claims that Buddha-nature is not restricted to sentient beings and that “fences, walls, tiles, and pebbles” (which are much in evidence at Ryôanji) are also “mind” (Dôgen 1997, 47). In the same essay, “The Triple World is Mind Only” (Sangai-yuishin), he writes that “rocks and stones, large and small, are the Buddha’s own possessions” (p. 46). Corresponding to Kûkai’s idea that the Dharmakaya expounds the Buddhist teachings (*hosshin seppô*), Dôgen develops the idea that even insentient beings expound the teachings (*mujô seppô*), though in a different way from the sentient. To understand the ways insentient beings can expound the teachings, one must go beyond the usual understanding of the human being as “other” than it, in the sense of being sentient. The practice of zazen for Dôgen expands both sensory awareness and understanding: “In general, hearing the Dharma is not confined to the spheres of the ear as a sense organ or of auditory consciousness; we hear the Dharma with our whole energy, with the whole mind, with the whole body, from before the time our parents were born and . . . into the limitless future” (Dôgen 1997, 119).

Not only can one hear the cosmos as a sermon; one can also see, or read, the natural world as scripture. As Kûkai (1972, 31) writes in one of his poems:

Being painted by brushes of mountains, by ink of oceans,
 Heaven and earth are the bindings of a sutra revealing the truth.

Again it takes effort and desire for learning to read this natural text, but the notion of nature as scripture certainly does justice to the sense one often has that there is something “inscribed” in natural phenomena, and in stone especially, that patterns in stone have some kind of meaning. Similarly for Dôgen, the sutras are not restricted to writings contained in scrolls, since the natural world too can be read as sacred scripture. This is the message of his essay “Mountains and Waters as Sutras” (Sansuigyô), where he writes that the words of the eternal Buddha “are engraved on trees and on rocks, . . . in fields and in villages” (Dôgen 1994, 177). In another essay, “Samâdhi as Experience of the Self” (Jishô zanmai), Dôgen (1999, 32) writes that the sutras are “the whole Universe in ten directions, mountains, rivers, and the Earth, grass and trees, self and others.”

These ideas of Kûkai’s and Dôgen’s, together with those of Musô discussed earlier (“every single thing is preaching the Dharma”), provide a philosophical basis for understanding the powerful effect of the rocks and gravel at Ryôanji: they can be heard

as expounding the teachings of Buddhism, and read as sacred scripture. Just as contemplation of dry landscape gardens can enhance one's understanding of Japanese Buddhism, so a sense for the Japanese Buddhist conception of the expressive powers of so-called inanimate nature can help one better appreciate the role of rock in the garden inspired by Zen. The rocks at Ryôanji proclaim the Buddhist teachings of impermanence and dependent coarising with unparalleled clarity, and at the same time point to our human "original nature," which may have more rocklike steadfastness to it, at the deepest layers of the self, than is commonly realized in scientific models for mentality.

Conclusion

Whereas the Chinese tradition reveres rocks for their age and beauty, and for their being vitally expressive of the fundamental energies of the earth on which we live, Japanese Buddhism adds pedagogic and soteric dimensions by inviting us to regard rocks and other natural phenomena as sources of wisdom and companions on the path to deeper understanding. Such ideas can serve as a salutary corrective to the anthropocentric philosophies that underwrite the ruthless exploitation of the earth for human ends in the name of technological progress. To this extent there may be practical and not just aesthetic lessons to be learned from our relations with rock, and compelling reasons to attend to "the mute nearness of great, soft-voiced nature" both inside and beyond the confines of the dry landscape garden.

The garden at Ryôanji makes a brief but significant appearance in one of the classics of Japanese cinema, Ozu Yasujirô's *Late Spring* (1949). The scene in question consists of eight shots, seven of which show the Ryôanji rocks, and which are separated and joined by seven cuts. After two shots of rocks in the garden, the camera angle reverses and we see the main protagonist with his friend—they are both fathers of daughters—sitting on the wooden platform with the tops of two rocks occupying the lower part of the frame. Two rocks and two fathers. Cut to a close-up of the fathers from their left side, with no rocks in view. In their dark suits, and seated in the classic Ozu "overlapping triangles" configuration, leaning forward toward the garden with their arms around knees drawn up toward their chins, they look like the two rocks. They talk about how they raise children who then go off to live their own lives. As they invoke such manifestations of impermanence, they remain motionless except for the occasional nod or turn of the head.

In their brief conversation by the edge of the garden, the two fathers do little more than exchange platitudes about family life—and yet the scene is a profoundly moving expression of the human condition. It gains this effect from the assimilation of the figures of the two men to rocks, which seems to affirm the persistence of cycles of impermanence. These images of assimilation capture one of the central ideas behind

the dry landscape garden: that of the continuum between human consciousness and stone, which is also understandable as the kinship of awareness with its original home.

Notes

Parts of this chapter have been adopted and refined from my essay "The Role of Rock in the Japanese Dry Landscape Garden," in François Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 85–155, and the permission of the University of Chicago Press to reproduce them here is gratefully acknowledged.

1. Kawabata 1975, 86–91. Japanese names will be given in the traditional order: family name followed by given name.

2. I have changed *stones* to *rocks* in the translation. On first visiting the dry cascade at Saihōji, I was immediately struck by the similarity with Cézanne's paintings of rocks, and so was intrigued later to find Keiko, in Kawabata's novel, compare its power with that of "Cézanne's painting of the rocky coasts at L'Estaque" (p. 87). Kawabata may not have been familiar with Cézanne's magnificent canvases of rocks and trees at Fontainebleau, which look even more like the dry cascade at Saihōji than do his renderings of rocks on the Mediterranean coast.

3. A central feature of ancient Daoist lore was the belief that a race of Immortals inhabited floating islands far away in the eastern seas. This occasioned repeated attempts during the Qin and Han dynasties (300 B.C.–300 A.D.) to discover these sites and find the elixir of immortality. As mentioned in the main text, rather than going out to search for their islands himself, the Han dynasty Emperor Wudi (140–89 A.D.) attempted to entice the Immortals by constructing rocky islands of his own in ponds of the palace garden. Since the floating Isles of the Immortals were mountains, they were inherently unstable, so the Lord of Heaven had instructed giant turtles to carry them on their backs to stabilize them. For this reason they are often represented in Chinese gardens as resting on turtle-shaped rocks rather than floating on the sea. The Immortals were imagined as spending much of their day (and, since they were immortal, their days were long indeed) flying around the mountain peaks on the backs of cranes. Thus Turtle Islands (*kameshima*) and Crane Islands (*tsurushima*) became very common features in the development of Japanese landscape gardens (see Berthier 2000).

4. See Kuck 1968, 39; Hay 1985, 18. Hay's essay in this exhibition catalog is a magnificent treatment of the role of rock in Chinese culture more generally.

5. Cited from "The Classical Contents of the Mirror of Profound Depths" in Hay 1985, 52. The entry on stone is eighty-six pages long.

6. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see my essay, "Winds, Waters, and Earth Energies: Fengshui and Awareness of Place," 2003.

7. See LaFleur 1989, on which the present paragraph is based.

8. Zhanran, *Jingang Bi*, as cited in Fung 1953, Vol. 2, 385–386.

9. *Sansui narabini yakeizu*, secs. 4, 84, 14, 78, 31. I follow the translation of the complete work by David Slawson (1987, 142–175), who reads the work's title as *Senzui narabi ni yagyô no zu*, and translates it as *Illustrations for Designing Mountain, Water, and Hillside Field Landscapes*.

10. Musô Soseki, *Muchû mondô*, cited in Benl and Hammitzsch 1956, 158–159. Translation modified in the light of the original and the discussion by Nishitani (1982, 108).

11. Musô Soseki, "Sermon at the Opening of Tenryûji," in Ryûsaku Tsunoda, William Theodore de Bary, and Donald Keene 1964, Vol. 1, 254.

12. Kûkai (1972), "The Difference between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism," especially 151–152; Dôgen (1997, 47), "The Triple World is Mind Only" (Sangai-yuishin).

13. Cited in Dillard 1974, 198.

14. Goethe 1988, "On Granite," Vol. 12, 131–134.

15. Schopenhauer, *The World as Will and Representation*, Vol. 1, Secs. 23, 27.

16. For more detailed discussion, see my essays (Parkes 1997a, 1998b).

17. Nietzsche, *The Joyous Science*, aphorism 109; *Dawn of Morning*, aphorism 541. The translations are my own, but the references to works available in English will be to the aphorism number, so that the passages can be found in any edition. For a full discussion of Nietzsche on "divinization" see my essay "Nature and the Human 'Redivinized': Mahayana Buddhist Themes in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*," 2000.

18. Nietzsche 1980, Vol. 9, notebook 11, secs. 35, 125, 207, 210 (1881).

19. Nietzsche 1980, Vol. 8, notebook 11, sec. 11, and notebook 28, sec. 6; *Miscellaneous Opinions and Aphorisms (Human, All-too-human, vol. 2/1)*, aphorism 49; *Ecce Homo*, "Why I write such good books," "Thus spoke Zarathustra," sec. 1.

20. Nietzsche, Letter to Elisabeth Förster, December 20, 1885.

21. Keiji Nishitani, as recounted by Robert Carter (1992, 95).

22. Nishitani (1982, 50–53) speaks of the "double exposure" of the life and death perspectives in *Religion and Nothingness*. For more on this topic see my essay (1998a) and also compare chapter 3 for a similar concept in Nahua thought.

23. For a more detailed discussion, see my 1997b essay.

24. Kûkai (1972), "The Difference between Exoteric and Esoteric Buddhism" (Benkenmitsu nikyô ron), and "Attaining Enlightenment in This Very Existence" (Sokushin jôbutsu gi).

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