

# Mind that Abides

Panpsychism in the new millennium

*Edited by*

David Skrbina

University of Michigan at Dearborn

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## CHAPTER 17

### The awareness of rock

East-Asian understandings and implications

Graham Parkes

If one were to write a book on the topic of panpsychism in East-Asian thought, it would have to be several times the length of David Skrbina's *Panpsychism in the West*, since most of traditional Chinese and Japanese and Korean philosophy would qualify as panpsychist in nature. For the philosophical schools best known in the west – Chinese Daoism and Neo-Confucianism, and Japanese Buddhism – the world is a dynamic force-field of energies known as *qi* or *bushō* (buddha-nature) and classifiable in Western terms as 'psychophysical.' The topic is vast, but a rough idea can be conveyed through a consideration of the Chinese and Japanese understandings of the phenomena that to Western eyes seem least capable of awareness: namely, rocks and stones.

#### 1. Reverence for stone in China

Examples could be multiplied that would confirm the Chinese as the world's foremost lithophiles or petromaniacs (significant that one has to resort to such neologisms in English).<sup>1</sup> Some might think that such unbridled enthusiasm for stone is evidence of some kind of primitive animism or, more charitably, anthropomorphic projection. But nothing could be farther from the truth – as a brief exposition of the philosophical presuppositions underlying the Chinese passion for rock will show. But first a few historical anecdotes by way of introduction.

A text from around the third century BCE mentions "weird rocks" or "strange stones" being sent as tribute to the mythical emperor Yu, and records of rocks being

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1. Some of the material in the next two sections is drawn from my essay *Thinking like a Stone: Learning from the Zen Rock Garden* (Parkes 2008). I gratefully acknowledge the MIT Press for permission to use it here.

arranged in emperors' parks go back some two thousand years.<sup>2</sup> One of the most famous painters and calligraphers of the Song dynasty (960–1279), the poet Mi Fu, has been proposed with justification as the consummate connoisseur of rocks in the Chinese tradition. On taking up an appointment as a magistrate in Anhui province, a place renowned for the quality of its stone, he is said to have noticed a magnificent rock in a garden of the official precincts. Overwhelmed with admiration, he made obeisance to it and from then on addressed it respectfully as "Elder Brother Rock" every time he passed by. The episode became a favorite theme of painters, who delighted in assimilating the poet's shape and attire to the contours and patterns of the much larger rock.<sup>3</sup> The frequent depictions in painting of the isomorphism between human and stone attest to their enduring affinity in the Chinese tradition.

The emperor who ruled China for the first quarter of the twelfth century, Huizong, was not only a great connoisseur of stone but also the most accomplished painter among the many Chinese emperors who painted as well as reigned. Possessed by a passion for stone that amounted to obsession, Huizong built a huge park near his capital at Kaifeng which he filled with the finest zoomorphic and anthropomorphic rocks that could be found. What fascinates about such stone is the way natural processes mold the apparently least animate form of being into the shapes of more complex forms such as plants, animals, and human beings. But thanks to the Chinese inclination toward correlative thinking, such an isomorphism is to be expected.

At the western entrance to the park Huizong placed a rock some fifteen meters high. A visitor observed at the time: "The rocks on the side had various forms. Some looked like ministers having audience with the Emperor. They were solemn, serious, trembling and full of awe. Some were charging forward as if they had some important advice or argument to present."<sup>4</sup> Here we see the Confucian tradition vitally embodied in the practice of arranging rocks in such a way as to make their interrelations mimetic of social relationships. Huizong gave names to his most spectacularly anthropomorphic rocks and had these inscribed upon them in gold. Although the park was called *Genyue* ('Impregnable Mountain' or 'Mountain of Longevity'), the emperor expended so much of his fortune on it that the extravagance eventually cost him the empire – and all his gardens and rocks along with it.

Stone collecting reached another high point in the late Ming dynasty (1368–1644) and has remained popular ever since. A contemporary account describes the vitalizing effect of a particular stone on one of the era's most famous collectors, Mi Wanzhong, as follows (in Little 1999:24): "If he was tired, the stone would rouse him; if he was

feeling low, it would cheer him up. As the madness of his passion got worse, he was on the verge of becoming a stone himself."

The case of Mi Wanzhong is emblematic of the contrast between the Western tendency to make a sharp distinction between the animate and inanimate, with rocks falling on the lifeless side of the divide, and the ancient Chinese understanding of all natural phenomena, including humans, as configurations of an energy they call *qi*. Around the fourth or third century BCE, philosophical Daoism set the direction for two millennia of subsequent Chinese thought in understanding the cosmos as a field of *qi* energies. The title of the earliest and best known Daoist text, the *Daodejing* attributed to Laozi and dating from the fourth century BCE, can be translated as 'the classic [*jing*] of the way [*dao*] of powers [*de*].' As Roger Ames has shown in a number of his writings on Daoism, the basic idea is of a patterning field (*dao*) of foci of interpretive energies (*de*), in which each particular focal point can construe the entire field from its own perspective.<sup>5</sup>

A passage in a chapter of the second great Daoist classic, the *Zhuangzi*, reads: "The human being's life is an assembling of *qi*. The assembling is deemed birth, the dispersing is deemed death... Running through the whole world there is nothing but the one *qi*" (ch. 22). Since breathing is a process that distinguishes the living from the dead, it was natural to think of the breath as a special manifestation of the energy that animates the cosmos, with an active (*yang*) phase corresponding to inhalation and a passive (*yin*) phase corresponding to exhalation. There we have it: birth life death every few moments in the cosmic breath, which moves through and animates "the ten thousand things."

A later Daoist text known as the *Huainanzi* (2nd century BCE) offers a more specific account:

A shoreline divided the primordial *qi*.  
That which was pure and bright spread out to form Heaven;  
While the heavy and turbid congealed to form Earth. . . .  
The conjoined essences of Heaven and Earth produced *yin* and *yang*.  
The essences of *yin* and *yang* caused the four seasons.  
The scattered essences of the four seasons created all things.<sup>6</sup>

*Qi* is seen here as the source of all the world's particulars, the variety among them depending on where they lie on the spectrum from the most rarefied ("pure and bright") to the most condensed ("heavy and turbid") forms of energy.

A similar idea seems to have arisen independently in ancient Greek cosmology, and especially in the thought of Anaximenes, for whom "the underlying nature is one

2. See Hay (1985:18); also see Kuck, *The World of the Japanese Garden* (1968).

3. Hay (1985:32). See also Rambach (1987:78–79), where there is a reproduction of Mi Fu's *Homage to the Rock* from Wang Gai's *Mustard Seed Garden Manual of Painting*, and Hay (1985:33–35), for three other paintings of this subject.

4. From the *Record of Hua Yang Palace* by the monk Zi-xui, cited in Keswick (1978:54).

5. See, for example, Ames (1991), though this is a theme that he has developed in several subsequent publications.

6. *Huainanzi* 3:1a:1, in Major (1993:62).

and infinite and identified as air.” In particular he speaks of condensation (*puknotēs*) and rarefaction (*manotēs*) as the two basic transformations of this one “nature.”

It differs in its substantial nature by rarity and density. Being made finer it becomes fire, being made thicker it becomes wind, then cloud, then (when thickened still more) water, then earth, then stones; and the rest come into being from these. (in Kirk & Raven 1963:144–145)

This characterization of *aer* as the nature powering all things at varying degrees of condensation is remarkably reminiscent of accounts of *qi*. Yet insofar as Chinese philosophy sees transformations of energy as fundamental, it has no place for anything as substantial as the traditional ‘four elements’ that underlie so much Western thinking about the nature of the cosmos. This difference was for a long time obscured by the practice of talking about the ‘five elements’ in Chinese cosmology – an infelicitous translation of the Chinese *wuxing*, which literally means ‘five goings,’ or ‘transitions,’ ‘conducts,’ ‘doings,’ ‘processes,’ or ‘phases (of transformation).’

Corresponding to the ‘Six Energies’ of Heaven – shade [*yin*] and sunshine [*yang*], wind and rain, dark and light – are the Five Processes associated with Earth: wood, fire, soil, metal, water.<sup>7</sup> Far from referring to static elements that form the building blocks of the world, *wuxing* denotes the five primary phases of transformation through which telluric energies pass in a continuous cycle of self-generation: wood → fire → soil → metal → water → wood, and so on. As a dense form of earth, stone is not to be understood as some kind of matter or substance but rather a phase in this endless cycle of energetic transformations, a slow hard change between the softness of soil and the malleability of metal. An entry on stone from an 18th-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.<sup>8</sup>

To describe rocks as the bones of the earth seems to the Western reader natural enough, but to appreciate the Chinese reverence for rock one has to concentrate on the characterization of stone as a manifestation of earth’s “essential energy.” In a work called *Eulogy to the Lodestone*, the fourth century writer Guo Pu marvels at the inscrutable operations of the earth’s energies: “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” (in Hay 1985:53). Even if Chinese thinkers as are unable to articulate the precise operations of these energies, they under-

7. These six atmospheric energies are first mentioned in a text from the 4th century BCE known as the *Zuo Commentary* (to the *Annals of Lu*).

8. Cited from *The Classical Contents of the Mirror of Profound Depths* in Hay (1985:52). The entry on stone is 86 pages long.

stand from experience their considerable efficacy: Guo Pu is revered to this day as one of the founders of that branch of *fengshui* that constitutes a genuine environmental science.<sup>9</sup>

Along with Daoism, Buddhism was another source of panpsychist ways of thinking in China. A significant development took place in the early Tang dynasty (618–907), in which the Mahayana Buddhist extension of the promise of salvation to “all sentient beings,” based on the “dependent co-arising” 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.”

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 . . . whether they merely lift their feet or energetically traverse the long path, they will all reach Nirvana.<sup>10</sup>

The Tiantai School was transmitted to Japan (as Tendai Buddhism) by the monk Saichō (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,” meaning that these so-called insentient beings, being mindful, can be awakened just like the Awakened One (which is what “Buddha” means).

Back in China: with the development of sophisticated rock connoisseurship 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 south-east. The earliest description we have of a Taihu rock comes from a poem by the Tang 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?  
(in 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 (op. cit., 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.

9. For a discussion of *fengshui* as practical environmental science see Parkes (2003).

10. See LaFleur (1989), on which the present paragraph is based.

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 – often stand alone as the centerpieces of famous gardens.

For the Chinese, a special 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 furniture in China. 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,” all of which produces by way of “natural painting” patterns that look like mist-enshrouded landscapes (Rambach 1987:26–29). Also known as ‘dreamstones’ or ‘journeying stones,’ they have always been avidly collected by scholars and officials for the decoration of their residences, and several different kinds are described in the 12th-century treatise by Du Wan, the *Cloud Forest Catalogue of Rocks*, which is the world’s first handbook of rock aesthetics. These dreamstones manifest nature’s artistry in depicting a large part of itself (a landscape) in a smaller part of that part (a rock), and such artistry can best be explained by a form of panpsychism that would posit some kind of mimetic capacity between microcosmic and macrocosmic levels of the natural world.

## 2. Japanese understandings of rock

When the Chinese arts of rock-arranging and garden-making spread to Japan, they found fertile ground in the indigenous religion, Shinto, which has a corresponding reverence for rock and stone. According to Shinto, the whole world is pervaded by awe-inspiring forces known as *kami*. Large and powerfully shaped rocks, as conduits of high intensities of *kami*, were experienced as generating a kind of sacred space around them – an effect that could be enhanced by grouping them together in appropriate ways. Influences from Daoist mythology, Confucian philosophy, and Buddhist philosophy contributed to the development of a unique style of rock garden known as *karesansui* (dry landscape), in which the emphasis was on unworked stone to the exclusion of ponds and vegetation.<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately none of the dry landscape gardens from the mediaeval period in Japan has survived the ravages of time and war, though one thing that did survive lays claim to being the oldest manual for garden-making in the world. This is the *Sakuteiki* (‘Notes on Garden-Making’), attributed to the eleventh-century nobleman Tachibana no Toshitsuna. Even though the text deals with the Heian period pleasure gardens of the nobility with their ponds and streams, a section near the beginning contains the first mention of ‘dry landscape’ in the literature: “There is also a way to place rocks [create gardens] without ponds or streams. This is called the dry landscape style”

11. For a detailed study of this style of garden, see Parkes (2000).

(Takei & Keane 2001:161). 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 stone that underlies the development of the art of garden-making in Japan.

The text’s opening words, “*Ishi wo 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 frequent occurrences of the locution “following the request [of the rock].” They are meant to encourage a responsiveness on the part of the garden-maker to what we might call the ‘soul’ of the stone: one 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, the accomplished garden-maker will be sensitive to what the particular rocks ‘want.’ If he listens carefully, they will tell him where they best 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 naïve anthropomorphism; but they would do well to reflect on just how recent and parochial the Cartesian worldview is – no matter how much it has enabled human manipulation of the world by means of technology. By endorsing Cartesian dualism, natural science gave itself permission to deflate the ‘world soul’ of antiquity, as it were, draining the *anima mundi* and bottling up of all soul 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. The parochial nature of this perspective is evident from its contrast with the widespread reverence for rocks in most other parts of the world at almost all times. (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 those who do not espouse a Cartesian dualism, the term ‘panpsychism’ is an appropriate name for worldviews that have humans embedded in an unbroken continuum of ‘animation’ pervading all natural phenomena. At any rate, in order to appreciate the role of rock in the Japanese tradition we do well to suspend methodological prejudices and be open to the possibility that the relationship between the mineral and human realms may be closer than is first apparent. (It’s not a matter of claiming that the natural science perspective is false, but rather of affirming the validity of other, ancient perspectives that are nevertheless still experientially accessible to us in the twenty-first century.)

The most important thing is the position of the “Master Rock” – the most powerful in the garden or group – which will then dictate how the other rocks are to be placed. In a section of the *Notes on Garden-Making* entitled “Secret Teachings on Setting Stones,” the reader is advised to position first the Master Rock, or Main Stone, and then proceed to “set [the other rocks] in relation to the request of this one stone” (Takei & Keane 2001:183). The vocabulary of rock-arranging was quite sophisticated by the time this text was written, as evidenced by the large number of terms of art

applied to different kinds of stone it contains. They range from the ordinary, such as 'side rock' and 'lying rock,' to the more striking, such as 'master rock,' 'demon rock,' 'Buddhist triad rocks,' and 'rock of vengeful spirits.' This detailed vocabulary surely reflects a heightened sense for stone: where the average person might see just 'a rock,' the medieval makers and appreciators of Japanese gardens see a particular kind with its own unique dynamism, tendencies connected with a vast matrix of other natural phenomena and interrelations. 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 attention and reflection.

A passage containing advice concerning the arrangement of rocks at the foot of hillsides assimilates them to the animal realm: "The stones at the base of a mountain or those of a rolling meadow are like a pack of dogs at rest, wild pigs running chaotically, or calves frolicking with their mothers." The theriomorphism gives way to what we might call personification: "As a rule of thumb, when setting stones, if one pair 'flees' from the group, then seven or eight should 'chase' after them, like children playing tag. The dyad of "running" and "chasing" is followed by several others: "If there are stones that lean, there should be some that lend support; if some proceed, then others should acquiesce; if some face up, then others should face down; and to balance the stones that stand upright, there should also be those that recline" (184–185). Rather than dismissing this kind of talk as betraying a naïve animism, we do better to see it as employing tropes akin to personification in poetry, figurative speech that 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 fascinating sections in the *Notes on Garden-Making* is concerned with "taboos" on the placing of rocks, and is full of warnings against violating taboos deriving from *fengshui* practices. But a primary prohibition appears to be grounded more generally in a reluctance (that is not so evident in the Chinese treatises) to infringe upon the stone's 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 kind of curse.

A stone that is 1.2 to 1.5 meters tall should not be placed in the northeasterly direction. This will become a Phantom Stone [demon rock], and, since it would become a landmark to aid the entry of evil spirits, people will not be able to live there for long. However, if a Buddhist Trinity [Buddhist triad formation] is placed in the southwest, there will be no curse, nor will devils be able to enter. (189)

There is a combination of considerations here drawn from *fengshui* (the north-east as the most inauspicious direction) and Buddhism. It was believed that sometimes simply to transpose a rock from its natural home in the mountains or riverbeds could lead to its turning demonic. 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 stones have

weathered naturally, they can be set or laid in the garden as they were found nature without impediment" (193). 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' (190–192).

The misfortunes that will beset the master of the house if taboos are violated are various and dire: he may lose the property, the household may be plagued by disease, and the master may lose his wealth, servants, and domestic animals. 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 *fengshui* in China took advantage of people's susceptibility to superstition, so that a good part of it became tainted with charlatanry and mystification. Yet while some of the discourse on taboos in the *Notes on Garden-Making* seems to stem from mere superstition, we might take such passages not literally but rather as emblematic of a basic and valid *fengshui* principle: namely that to ignore the relationship between the configurations of life-energies that enable human activities and those that inform and shape the environment will diminish those activities and render them less likely to succeed.

At this point a brief autobiographical interlude is unavoidable. What never fails to strike me, when hiking through rocky terrain, are the ways rocks and boulders tend to gather in what look like social groups. In particular, whether nestled in turf or partially submerged in small lakes and ponds, boulders in many different parts of the world seem 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. Rather than being cases of anthropomorphic projection, such impressions of kinship, which always seem charged with significance, present themselves as coming from a deeper realm than the level on which Cartesianism and scientific realism operate. With some distance from the structures of civilization and immersed in more natural surroundings, our experience of the world becomes prereflective and thereby more direct. Depth psychologists would understand the phenomenon in terms of archaism and the quasi-mystical 'participation' typical of the (imagined) experience of human beings in far earlier eras.

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 in kind from oneself as a subject, but rather that the perspective of modern science is only one among many – effective for certain practical purposes, but not one that much 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 21st-century experiencers, and that we would do well to entertain such perspectives as we strive for a fuller understanding of the world. The perceptual and conceptual shifts that allow one to sense such affinities among rocks open up modes of experience that are rich in meaning.

### 3. Stone as a source of understanding

The sense that so-called inanimate phenomena of nature ‘speak’ to us is fully confirmed by some of the profoundest philosophers in the Japanese Buddhist tradition, and in particular by the ninth-century Shingon Buddhist thinker Kūkai and the thirteenth-century Zen master Dōgen. Both thinkers discuss the speech and scripture of natural phenomena at a depth that is far from any kind of primitive animism. The Shingon esoteric school was a form of Buddhism that, like Zen, brought the locus of salvation back from some yonder shore and distant time beyond innumerable reincarnations to the present existential situation experienced by “this very body.” In several of his writings Kūkai radicalizes Mahayana Buddhist thinking by revisioning the ‘Dharmakaya,’ which had been previously understood as some formless and timeless Absolute, as the “reality embodiment” of the cosmic Buddha *Mahavairochana* (*Dainichi Nyorai* in Japanese) and nothing other than the physical universe. This means that natural phenomena such as rocks and stones are to be included among sentient beings and revered as constituting the supreme embodiment of the Buddha.

Moreover, with his assertion that “the Dharmakaya expounds the Dharma [Buddhist teachings],” Kūkai claims that the physical world, as the cosmic Buddha’s reality embodiment and in the person of *Dainichi Nyorai* (where the personal is not projected onto the natural world but is there, numinously, all along) proclaims the essential teachings of Buddhism. At a more basic level than where the Patriarchs and Bodhisattvas teach, the world of nature makes manifest the fundamental tenets of Buddhist philosophy. Furthermore, the Buddha *Dainichi* expounds the Dharma purely “for his own enjoyment” and not for human benefit (there being other embodiments of the Buddha that address human beings directly). So that 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’ of *Dainichi*, and so it takes considerable practice for human beings to develop the necessary sensibility for overhearing the discourse and understanding the teachings of natural phenomena.

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* 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:

The voices of the river valley are the Buddha’s Wide and Long Tongue,  
The forms of the mountain are nothing other than his Pure Body.  
Throughout the night, eighty-four thousand verses.  
On another day, how can I recount them to others?

(Dōgen 1994–99, vol. 1:86)

Philosophically speaking, Dōgen asserts the nonduality of the world of impermanence and the totality of Buddha-nature. (To say that the totality of existence is ‘Buddha-nature’ means that all phenomena in their interrelations participate in 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” are also “mind” (1994–99, vol. 3:47). Given that the Japanese term for ‘Buddha-nature’ (*busshō*) has, like our word ‘nature,’ connotations of birth and life, it is significant that Dōgen includes human-made artifacts such as fences, walls, and tiles in the realm of the mental – though the Japanese word *shin* (mind), like the Chinese *xin*, means ‘heart’ as much as ‘mind’ and thus refers to the mental in the broadest sense.

Furthermore, corresponding to Kūkai’s idea of the Dharmakaya’s expounding the Buddha Dharma, Dōgen develops the idea that even “insentient beings expound the teachings” – although in a different way from the sentient. To help his listeners or readers understand how insentient beings manage this, he recommends practicing *zazen*, or ‘just sitting,’ which gradually takes one beyond the usual anthropocentric understanding of the insentient as utterly ‘other’ than the human.

It’s not only a matter of listening and hearing, but also of seeing and reading. Along with hearing the cosmos as a sermon, one can also see, or read, the natural world as scripture. As Kūkai (1982:31) 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 practice motivated by a desire for understanding 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 that patterns in stone especially have some kind of meaning. This is perhaps a more muted form of panpsychism than that exemplified by river valleys’ giving voice to Buddhist teachings, but it’s clear that the inscription is performed by the phenomena themselves (as with the dreamstones) and not by any agent outside or beyond the natural world. The skeptic’s charge that this is merely a case of projection might be valid if one claimed to find inscriptions in English or some other human language, but again the point is that we have to do here with natural language in the literal, primordial sense.

Similarly, for Dōgen, the sutras (Buddhist scriptures) 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*, where he writes that the words of the eternal Buddha “are engraved on trees and on rocks . . . in fields and in villages” (1994–99, vol. 1:177). In another essay, *Samadhi as Experience of the Self*, he writes that the sutras are “the whole Universe in ten directions, mountains, rivers, and the Earth, grass and trees, self and others” (*ibid.*, vol. 4:32). Fields and villages (human-made things again), grass and trees, as legible signs – but all in dynamic and differential interaction with everything else (Saussure!). It all issues from the same source, even though that source is by no means singular (as metaphysical sources in Western thought tend

to be), but is rather, like the words of the Buddha and the interplay of self and others, radically multiple.

A third Buddhist thinker deserves mention here, the Zen master Musō Soseki (1275–1351), who flourished some three generations after Dōgen. As a renowned garden-maker in the 'dry landscape' style, responsible for two masterpieces in Kyoto (at Saihōji and Tenryūji), Musō was a great advocate of the soteric power of nature as something to be celebrated – as long as one doesn't become attached to it. There is a passage in his best known work, the *Dream Dialogues*, in which he responds to criticism that his emphasis on the natural world makes his philosophy too worldly.

Those who experience mountains, rivers, the great earth, grasses, trees, and rocks as the self's original part, 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, 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.<sup>12</sup>

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, Musō contributed to the increasing valorization of nature in Zen thinking and practice.

Musō's ideas about the activity of the world's phenomena are very much in line with those of Kūkai and Dōgen:

All things in the world – grasses and trees, bricks and tile, all creatures, all actions and activities – are nothing but the manifestations of the Buddha Dharma. 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.<sup>13</sup>

When even artifacts are said to be capable of spreading the teachings, one is inclined to ask whether these Japanese Buddhist thinkers would draw the line at such common products in contemporary Japan as plastic water bottles and nuclear waste. Are *all* artifacts through their Buddha-nature expounding the Dharma? In panpsychist terms, are synthetic products sentient in the same way as natural products, things produced by human labor on natural materials, such as leather gloves, or wooden mallets? And if not, does the difference justify a favoring of the latter on aesthetic grounds or for reasons of human flourishing? These are questions that one needs to ponder if panpsychism is to contribute to ecological thinking.

12. Musō Soseki, *Muchū mondō*, in Benl and Hammitzsch (1956: 158–159) (translation slightly modified).

13. Musō Soseki, "Sermon at the Opening of Tenryūji," in Tsunoda (1964: 254).

At the other end of the spectrum from synthetic products are the rocks of the Zen garden, as exemplified by the dry landscape masterpiece at Ryōanji in Kyoto. This garden is a paradigm of landscape – *sansui*, mountains waters, in stone and gravel – as sacred scripture, in which rocks that are now world renowned proclaim the central Buddhist teachings of impermanence and dependent co-arising with considerable power.

The initial impression made by this garden is one of sparse sterility – fifteen rocks (7+5+3) like mountains in a sea of light gray gravel – 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 that are visible outside the garden, 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 garden's south and west sides. Being surrounded by gravel, the moss emphasizes the effect created by the elements of the garden being 'cut off' from the nature outside.

The notion of the 'cut' is an important one in Japanese aesthetics, especially in the figure of 'cut-continuance,'<sup>14</sup> where a cut both separates and joins two things, just 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 within. 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. 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 peaking in irruptions of stone. Each group of rocks is cut off from the others by the expanse of gravel, and the separation is enhanced by the 'concentric ripples' patterns in the raking that encircle 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 co-arising,' whereby one sees the dynamic interrelations among all phenomena.

The Zen rock garden is cut off from the surrounding nature with the aim of *drying up* its organic life, which then no longer flourishes and decays in the usual manner.

14. See R. Ōhashi, *Kire: Das Schöne in Japan* (1994).

*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 (rocks and gravel) of the garden at Ryōanji at first appear less temporary than their counterparts outside, which manifest the cyclical changes that organic life is heir to. But just as plants look deceptively permanent thanks to their being rooted in the earth, so the rocks of the dry landscape garden, which appear not to change over the decades, give an impression of permanence that is ultimately deceptive. As participants in the "great central life" of the earth (in Thoreau's happy phrase), 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.

The philosopher Keiji 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.<sup>15</sup>

This echoes the idea from Dōgen that, while we are seeking a teacher, one may "spring out from the earth" and "make nonsentient beings speak the truth" (1994–99, vol. 1:94). 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 gardens that have been inspired by Zen. Contemplation of these rocks can lead to an awareness of what the Zen tradition calls our 'original nature' as humans, which, while apparently fleeting, insubstantial, and ephemeral, may have more rocklike steadfastness to it, at the deepest layers of the self, than is commonly realized in scientific models for mentality.

#### 4. Some consequences and implications

Focusing on the phenomenon of stone within the context of East-Asian panpsychism, we have seen that the Chinese tradition reveres rocks for their age and beauty, for their being expressive of the fundamental energies of the earth on which we live, and for their role in vitalizing human activities. Japanese Buddhism adds pedagogic and soteric dimensions by inviting us to regard rocks (and other natural phenomena) as sources of wisdom, and moreover as companions on the path to profounder awareness. Before considering the implications of these ideas, we might ask whether these East-Asian forms of panpsychism are similar to the standard Western forms, or, if not, what the important differences might be.

According to the distillation of the essence of panpsychism in the West by David Skrbina, it is important that "objects have experiences *for themselves*," that "the mind-like quality is something internal to or inherent in the object," that "the experience is *singular*," and that "this oneness is reflected in a kind of unitary mental experience" (2005: 16). The East-Asian understanding is quite different, with little emphasis on the internal and 'for itself,' the singular and unitary. It is by contrast non-essentialistic, with 'for others' emphasized, and mind understood as radically relational and external rather than internal and inherent, and therefore multiple and plural. There is "Big Mind," the whole field with its patterning, the structured totality, and lesser minds, particulars as foci within the patterning of the field which construe the totality each from its own particular perspective, and where a sense of the whole through experiential relations with other particulars requires a multiplicity of views and angles. This is the basic idea, from Chinese Daoism to Japanese Buddhism. But why so different, one wonders, from the Western versions?

It is clear that one current of panpsychism in the West does emphasize such features as unity, inherence, and so forth, but perhaps these features come too much from traditional conceptions of philosophy, and the more interesting kinds of panpsychism in the West have different emphases that correspond more closely with East-Asian forms. Or perhaps it's that, of the two Western currents, the one with Heraclitus as its source is closer to the Asian, while the form originated by Parmenides plays out mainly through Platonism. In the Heraclitean stream are the Stoics and Epicureans, and, much later, Nietzsche, whose panpsychism is especially robust. But this is a topic for a different essay, since it's time to conclude, reverting to the East-Asian form and a brief consideration of some of its implications.

One salutary consequence of an awareness of panpsychic kinship with stone and earth is that it obviates any feelings of alienation from the world. If one follows the injunction of Nietzsche's Zarathustra to "stay true to the earth," one can feel fully at home in the world – which is by no means to say that the whole world means us well.<sup>16</sup> The earth is productive enough (without meaning to be so) to sustain an enormous population of human beings, as long as a sufficient proportion of them work the land; but avalanches of rock still injure or kill any humans unfortunate enough to be in the way. Yet whether or not earthquakes have claimed more human lives over time than mining disasters, impartial observers see hubris at work in the practice of mining where respect for telluric forces might be more fitting.

The most important implications of panpsychism in the current world situation are surely for environmental issues and ecological thinking. While Descartes is not here the villain he is often made out to be, there is no doubt that radical Cartesianism, whereby one thinks of oneself as being essentially mind and thus totally other than non-human (mindless) beings, has contributed significantly to the development of

15. Keiji Nishitani, as recounted in Carter (1992:95).

16. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. Graham Parkes (Oxford 2005), Prologue, §3.

those peculiarly Western forms of technology that are designed to control and exploit all other beings for human benefit. Such a Cartesian view also provides moral sanction for such exploitation, since if other beings are essentially different in kind from humans, this precludes the possibility of any moral responsibility toward them.

One reason why, by contrast, the natural sciences in China, in spite of their high level of sophistication, did not assist the development of such exploitative technologies, is probably that they remained – thanks to their basis in *qi* cosmology – panpsychist in outlook. If the ancient Chinese were nevertheless pretty successful in ravaging their environment, this was in part due to the internecine warfare that plagued the country for so many centuries. And when in the modern period Mao Zedong declared war against nature, in the name of making the nation strong, he was explicitly pitting himself against scientists who adhered to more traditional Chinese understandings of the natural world.<sup>17</sup>

Insofar as panpsychism understands humans and other beings as being interrelated by virtue of participating in a continuum of degrees of awareness, it tends to promote a respect for other forms of life and existence. The strength of this tendency would depend in part on whether the panpsychism is subscribed to only in theory, as an intellectual commitment, or whether it's experientially based as a result of some kind of (somatic) practice like Daoist or Buddhist meditation. In the former case a gap between belief and actions, good intentions and failed practice, is likely to open up. One might be a practicing Christian, for example, who believes that the natural world as God's creation is worthy of respect, and yet if there's an opportunity for vast financial gain through ruthless exploitation of natural resources, that belief may easily be relegated to the back of one's mind for the time being. On the other hand, if one follows a thinker like Dōgen and engages in the practice of sitting zazen, one gradually comes to experience a mental or psychical kinship with other beings; and as this experience becomes incorporated, one's activities are naturally transformed thereby. Here we have the Buddhist idea of the intimate link between the twin virtues 'insight and compassion': as one comes to realize one's interrelations with others, selfishness is correspondingly reduced, and increasing compassion is a natural consequence.

Because of our usual preconceptions concerning rocks, we not only regard them but also experience them as being more distantly related to us (if related at all) than plants or animals. They are thus an especially challenging form of 'other' with respect to the task of developing compassion. But if we shift our conceptions, and direct our attention to the rocks in an exemplary East-Asian garden, we find that our perceptions of them will shift as well. Then we may even begin to hear them proclaim the tenets of panpsychism, or to see them as texts that attest to the pervasiveness of psychical significance.

17. See the account in Dai Qing, *The River Dragon Has Come!* (1998), pp. 151–153. Also the more general discussion in Judith Shapiro, *Mao's War against Nature* (2001).