

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Zen Gardening

A.K. Davidson

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About the Book

The Zen gardens of Japan are places in which to meditate. They can be anything from a landscaped garden, complete with waterfalls, to a bed of raked pebbles. This ancient way of gardening goes back to the Zen Buddhist priest-gardeners of the thirteenth century. Based on abstract compositions, relying on simplicity and suggestion, their gardens were designed to liberate the imagination, while providing a starting point in the appreciation of everyday things.

Zen Gardening is the first handbook to examine the concepts and techniques that make up this garden art and to apply them to the West. It explains the historical relationship between Zen and the development of gardens, and gives practical suggestions for the creation of a Zen garden at home. The chapters on the garden components and their adaptation for the West, principles of design, and construction work, are illustrated with over 150 line drawings. Step by step they show us how to make the most of corners of large gardens, of plots not large enough for lawns and flower beds, or of awkward passageways, alleys and terraces.

The principles of Zen gardening are particularly relevant in our crowded conurbations. Keir Davidson's thoughtful and practical approach enables us to maximize our garden space and to create areas of calm in our own immediate environment. Without precedent in the West, his book will be a source of delight to gardeners of every persuasion.

Zen Gardening

A. K. Davidson

RIDER

London Melbourne Sydney Auckland Johannesburg

For Yvonne, with thanks

Introduction

It is difficult when discussing any aspect of Japanese culture clearly to define origins, influences or stages of development. In talking about Japan we are dealing with a nation, its culture, religions and senses of aesthetics, which until this century has been almost entirely isolated and growing within itself. The products of crafts, the artifacts, the buildings and the gardens that can be seen in modern Japan are the most recent developments in a long line of artistic concepts that stretches back unbroken for over a thousand years. It is this depth of tradition and its importance to the Japanese, that has enabled their culture to hold its own against the upheavals of the present century, and to still be a dynamic, living part of Japanese life.

In this way the concept of gardening in Japan, although some of the gardens are now very old and serve mainly as tourist attractions, is still very much a living one, with traditional ideas being used throughout the country to create gardens of all sizes. In saying this I hope to make it clear that the idea behind using these techniques today is not one of re-creating something lost, or of following long-out-of-date rules, but of using them for a new approach to natural elements in garden design. This approach has not only the feel of history, timeless and tried, but can also suggest a wealth of new ideas for making more of the space available.

Without doubt, one of the major factors behind Japan's historical cultural cohesion and its continuing strength today has been the influence of Zen Buddhism. After its arrival in Japan around 1200 A.D., Zen rapidly combined with, or superseded, the existing philosophical and religious systems to become the driving force behind almost every aspect of cultural and aesthetic development. It is a measure of the unique position Zen Buddhism occupies in Japan that this book should be called *Zen Gardening*, because although, as we shall see, there are other influences present in the history of Japanese gardens, all of which contributed something in terms of concept and designs, it was the introduction of Zen and the work of the Zen priest-gardeners, that really moulded the ideas and techniques into a 'way of gardening' that is still practised in Japan, hundreds of years later, and has attracted the attention and admiration of people throughout the world.

In this book, therefore, I have attempted to explain the relationship between Zen and the development of gardens and then to look at the details of design and construction against this background. One thought to bear in mind while reading the book is that at the heart of Zen lies the concept of the 'Way' - the road that must be taken to achieve understanding. Above I have used the phrase 'way of gardening', taken from the title of a medieval Japanese book on gardening techniques, and it should be noted that the word 'way' here is used as much in the Zen sense, as to explain methods or techniques; for the concepts of 'Japanese gardening' and 'Zen gardening' are to all intents and purposes the same.

A.K.D.
September 1981

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Zen and the Gardens

THE KEY TO the Buddhist mysteries lies in what passed through the Buddha's mind as he sat alone, talking to no one and reading no books, determined to achieve understanding even if he died in the attempt. After several days, sitting in the same spot, totally still, he gained his 'enlightenment'; by a process of meditation over an extended period he had realized the truth of how things really are, the realities of 'being', and it remained now to pass on to others the way in which this enlightenment may be achieved.

After Buddha's death his disciples decided that this should be done by collecting together his sayings and the tales of his actions so that the resulting scriptures (known now as the *Pali Canon*) could be studied as the way to achieving enlightenment. It was not long, however, before disputes arose about the *Pali Canon* between followers of Buddhism, and from these there developed a number of schools of thought, who differed in their view of the *Canon's* wording, order and, perhaps most important, its role in the teaching of Buddhism. The most direct challenge to the traditional view, which maintained that studying and learning the scriptures was essential to understanding, came from the school which held that, on the contrary, meditation (Dhyana), the process by which the Buddha achieved enlightenment, was the key to realization of the truth. The Dhyana school grew steadily in India and was

eventually brought to China by the monk Bodhidharma during the sixth century A.D., where it became known as the Ch'an sect. After becoming totally assimilated with the Chinese culture and concepts of philosophical thought, Ch'an (pronounced Zen in Japanese) spread first to Korea and then, during the twelfth century, to Japan.

The impact of this meditative approach to Buddhism on Japan was immediate and this can be seen not least in the dramatic changes evident in the development of gardening. Before looking at these, however, we might look quickly at those aspects of Zen thought which had a bearing on those changes. Basically the ideas of the Dhyana school, after being refined by Bodhidharma and subsequent masters, revolved around the actual beginning of Buddhism, the moment of Buddha's enlightenment. The truths he discovered were already there within him but had previously been too deeply hidden by confusion and illusion to be perceived. So the Zen masters concentrated on techniques of 'seeing' through the illusions and sorting out the confusion, as a way to discovering the truths of how and what things really are. In this way, Zen is a process by which man recognizes what he actually is. Most important in this for us is that this idea of transmitting the truth relied not on teachings and written scriptures, but on the sudden flashes of insight that can be triggered in a state of meditation, by a single word, an action, a noise or even an arrangement of rocks. It is the job, therefore, of the Zen master to provide suitable stimulation to individual students at appropriate moments during training, to help guide them towards understanding, rather than by conventional methods of teaching. Whether he does this by a word, an action or choosing a particular place for meditation depends on the particular student, but all the time his aim is to help them along the way to understanding.

As important as any of the techniques the masters used to aid enlightenment were those that used visual stimulation. Of these some involved actions and some contemplation of an object or objects, and included in the latter category were the gardens that were set up in and around Zen monasteries. Through this connection and, as we shall see, others that grew up with it, Zen soon occupied a central position in Japanese culture, affecting every aspect of it from that day to this.

The reasons why the Zen sect became so rapidly and deeply absorbed into Japanese society will, I hope, become clear when we look at the historical development of gardens in Japan during which the impact of Zen is immediately noticeable, but before going on to this I should like to put things into some kind of geographical context. The importance of this is that the physical characteristics of Japan, not always fully appreciated by outsiders, have had a considerable bearing on the kind of garden that developed, even if philosophical and religious thought have provided the actual ideas and details. Japan is first and foremost a land dominated by mountains. An unbroken chain of mountains runs right down the largest island, Honshu, gathering in the centre to form the massive bulk of the Japanese Alps. The mountain peaks here rise to 10,000 and 11,000 feet; sharp, steep-sided ridges join them and the slopes are covered with trees and dense undergrowth. The inaccessibility of these mountain ranges and the lack of wide valleys between them, mean that the people of Japan live on the crowded coastal plains and in the valleys of large rivers. Indeed, it is a celebrated fact that some seventy or eighty per cent of the nation live on just three per cent of the land. The importance of this geography for our purposes lies in three areas.

The first of these is concerned with the atmosphere that these mountains create with their steep, inaccessible peaks and ridges rising into mists and clouds; the deep vegetation

and towering trees; jagged outcrops, boulders, and ravines alive with tumbling water. The forests and mountains were, and in some cases still are, home for wild boar, wolves, wildcats, hawks and kites. With the ferocious thunderstorms and typhoons of autumn and the deep snows of winter, active volcanoes and boiling mineral springs, this was the realm of nature. The mountains dominate the routes of communication between the towns nestled in them and are an ever-present part of life. All this gives them an importance and a role in Japanese life that should not be ignored. The air of mystery that surrounds them, which is similar to that represented in the old *sansui* pen and ink paintings from China, leads to a meditative approach that contrasts with the more practical Western approach to the more accessible, rolling and usable hills of Europe and much of America.

This leads to our second point which is that as a result of the above, the Japanese have traditionally preferred looking at mountains rather than climbing or being amongst them. The contemporary popularity of climbing, mountain walking, hiking and skiing does not really alter this cultural tradition. Rather than scenery, as a whole the Japanese have tended to prefer looking at a particular scene, whether this be the view through a window, the work of an artist's imagination or the re-creation of natural scenes in the form of a garden. This too may be an indication of the influence of the scroll paintings which were generally imaginary landscapes based on the physical characteristics of the Chinese mainland, Korea and later Japan, instead of reproductions of actual views. The important elements were grouped together to represent the landscape.

Having noted this we come to the third point. Then, as now, because of geographical restrictions Japanese society was very centralized, concentrated in the few areas suitable for the growth of large cities. This had two effects

of interest to us. First it meant that new ideas, once established in the courts of the emperors, military lords or religious leaders, the people of influence, they spread very rapidly along the few routes of communication to all other large centres of population, most of which are sprawled across the southern shores of Honshu. So it was with Zen Buddhism, which soon established itself in the major military, religious and social centres. The second point is that the social and administrative centres soon grew into the crowded, teeming towns and cities for which Japan is famous today, where very few houses have what Westerners would term a 'garden' due to the lack of space. So, in the small areas and yards around the houses, the Japanese preference for small 'scenes' and the meditative approach of Zen Buddhism, combined effortlessly to produce small landscaped 'gardens' that could offer some relief and peace of mind to counter the effects of high-density living and bring into the urban surroundings something of the mountains and their spaces and serenity. Gardens were symbolic of this greater outside; people could contemplate them and regain some perspective on life; they could enter a different mood for a while, depending on the kind of miniaturized scene they chose to construct.

From the above background it can be seen that Japan was in many ways ideally suited to the ideas of Zen. The new form of Buddhism fitted the meditative, philosophical nature of the Japanese and their environment. Let's look now at how the arrival of Zen revolutionized the development of the gardens, and start by going back to the very beginnings of Japanese landscape art.

I mentioned in the Introduction that defining the origins of Japanese culture is at best difficult, and gardens are no exception. A garden in Japan can be anything from a small corner containing a stone lantern and a rock, to a large area including ponds and waterfalls.

Impressions can be just as varied: a bowl set amongst dense foliage, a stone path beside a pool, piled rocks flanking a tumbling waterfall, a pine tree arching out over a stream; a wealth of detail seen or suggested almost dreamlike amongst delicate maple leaves that sway and catch the sun. Or wide sweeps of white gravel flowing around groups of stones and miniature trees, a background of rocks or a pond stretching away, full of islands and fish. On their own or in combination, these impressions represent the basic elements that make up the gardens and it is in the use of gravel and rocks that we find the first clues as to how the Japanese garden developed.

Before the introduction of Buddhism into Japan around 600 A.D., the native beliefs, loosely grouped under the name Shinto, were based on the worship of natural phenomena and the ancestors. The part of this which interests us concerns the worship of natural phenomena that were outstanding in some way – in shape or size, beauty, or age, anything indeed that set the particular object apart from others. Thus the object of worship could be a mountain, like Mt Fuji which is set apart by its almost perfect conical shape, or a particularly old tree, a large rock, or a smaller but pleasingly shaped rock. Similarly, particular waterfalls or springs were worshipped. The people were appealing to the spirits that resided within the object for good health, long life, good harvests, good luck and so on. Due to its special qualities the object became sacred and this included the area immediately around it.

Once a particular object or place had come to be worshipped then the area immediately around it became sacred and was marked off with either a ring of stones or ropes. The size of the area depended on the importance of the spirits and could be a few square feet or, in the case of the national shrines, several acres and even whole mountains. Once the area was marked off no one, except

priests, leaders or emperors, could enter, since any other presence would destroy the purity of the place.

Since these ancient beliefs were primarily aimed at ensuring good health, removal of disease, or cleansing of thought and body, purity and purifying was of prime importance. Thus these centres of worship were basically centres purified for worship, and to approach and benefit from the spirits the worshipper must also be purified. The crucial purifying agent was water and it was for this reason that water was inevitably present at these places in some form or another. Maybe a waterfall or stream, or if not naturally present, in water-bowls for hand washing and mouth rinsing. The area would be cleared and often spread with gravel or small stones, the sound of which, when walked on, helped the worshipper to enter a calmer, more removed state of mind. The area would often be completed by the planting of a sacred Sasaki tree, symbolizing the ancient creators of the country.

The similarities between the components of these old sites and those of the subsequent gardens are pretty clear and give us a start in tracing the origins of the gardens. Further evidence of this link between the two is that one of the first words used to indicate a garden and which carries the same meaning now, was *niwa*, which literally meant 'pure place'. In addition to these points the importance of the sun goddess (Amaterasu-o-no-kami) as the central figure in the pantheon of gods is reflected in the general orientation of gardens. As a guiding rule the traditional gardens of Japan were laid out on an east/west arrangement, facing south, so that artificial lakes and streams, when viewed from the north, would run left to right. The garden thus became a rough representation of the sun's course, following the direction and flow of the life-giving source.

The other main area in which the early shrines influenced the development of gardens were the larger

spaces set aside for the worship of a variety of spirits. These places were almost parks in which people strolled along laid-out paths passing from one roped-off group to another. The various points of worship, which later developed into elements for gardens were thus joined together to create a much larger whole. They were joined for the people by paths, and in 'spirit' by the great purifier, water, which flowing from a sacred spring would be fed down waterfalls to fill large ponds, passing as it went a number of other sacred points such as trees or rocks. This unification reflected the great oneness of nature and created 'pure' places on a large scale. Later, of course, the water courses and paths developed design principles of their own and became important garden elements in their own right.

From the above we can discern some of the starting places of design and content concepts that later became integral in garden construction. Here are the origins of focusing the attention on groups and the idea of passing from one group to another, which are fundamental parts of Japanese garden design. In addition we have the origins of the idea of roping areas off, which leads directly to the concept of looking at and contemplating the area rather than entering and using it. Over and above these more direct points the design principles of Shinto shrines exerted an immediate influence on the gardens that were based on later imported Chinese models and on temple gardens that were created after the introduction of Buddhism from the mainland. In this way these early ideas contributed to the alteration of imported ideas and led to the development of a distinct Japanese garden.

The years around 600 A.D. saw unprecedented activity between Japan and the mainland - trade, travel and the passing of ideas between the courts of the Japanese emperors and those of the Korean and Chinese kings. Among the more important of these exchanges was the

introduction into Japan from China via Korea of Buddhism. Thus the Japanese received Buddhist ideas that had been influenced, redirected and modified by the art and aesthetic and religious concepts of the great Chinese civilization. The Chinese, and subsequently the Korean kingdoms, instead of adopting all the iconography and religious arts of India, had developed their own ways of expressing and representing the great truths of Buddhism. It was these techniques, subtly influenced by the older existing ideas we have looked at above, that led to the development of the garden in Japan.

Once the Buddhist faith had begun to find acceptance amongst the Japanese, craftsmen and builders were brought over to Japan to help build suitable temples and grounds wherein the new Buddhist deities could be worshipped. Thus in 618 the first-known garden, that is to say one deliberately built as such, was laid out. A Korean immigrant Roji-no-Takumi erected a model of Mt Sumeru (the mountain lying at the centre of the Buddhist universe supporting the heavens), which consisted of a small mound and a connecting bridge, and included a special building from which it could be viewed. This was followed in 620 by a garden constructed for Soga-no-Umako, which included the first known man-made pond with a small island in it.

These two were important prototypes for later gardens introducing as they did the design elements of a mound, representing a mountain or mountains, and a pond with an island. The islands later came to symbolize a number of ideas depending on their actual shape, but at this stage seem to have represented the Buddhist paradise amongst its seven seas. Alongside these ideas for temple gardens came Chinese temple architecture which included the use of small white stones as a ground covering around the buildings and in the spaces between them.

At the same time as these direct imports were making an appearance, other, less obvious, developments were

taking place. These illustrate the way in which existing Japanese concepts and new Buddhist ideas fused to produce something new and individual. Perhaps the clearest example of this was the use of traditional Japanese rock groups to symbolize Buddhist concepts. The specific names and characteristics of various Buddhas were given to suitable rocks or groups of rocks, so that the rocks took on, in some cases, not only their traditional Shinto meaning, but also a Buddhist meaning. For example, large, square stones were named for the Buddhist deity Fudo (the Immovable), the symbolic protector of Buddhism and its adherents. The 'Fudo' stone was often placed by a waterfall, guarding the source and watching over the water as it passed. Thus, by extension, the water itself, and its course from source to outlet protected by Fudo began to take on various symbolic meanings; the believer passing from his enlightenment, through various trials, to the islands of paradise. Similarly groups of rocks were invested with meaning. A group of three would become the Three Bodies of Buddha (transformation, bliss and law) or an important triad of Buddhas, or more abstract concepts such as heaven, man and earth. In this way the old stone groups became integral parts of the new temple gardens.

Another very important introduction into Japan during this busy period were the Taoist scroll drawings from China. These pen and ink drawings, in the style known as '*sansui*', reflected the Taoist ideas of man's insignificance amongst the might of nature. *Sansui* means literally 'mountains and water' and the drawings depicted towering mountains with mist-shrouded crags, high waterfalls tumbling into bottomless gorges, roaring torrents, trees clinging to the sides of sheer rock faces and, somewhere below, the tiny figures of men struggling to carry out their work, dwarfed and overpowered by the sheer scale and power of nature. The pictures were a celebration of the wonders of nature and expressed the Taoist belief that man

must come to terms with and understand his relative insignificance in the great scheme of nature. It was an idea that the Japanese immediately recognized and understood and the painting techniques and appreciation of the drawings spread rapidly. The drawings were things to be contemplated, the natural world was being promoted as a key to understanding deeper things, and this idea dovetailed with the growing practice of investing rocks and rock groups, gravelled areas and tree groups with specific meaning and importance.

From this time then, gardens were being built that contained the basic elements upon which later developments were based. It is important to note too that right from the beginning, these gardens had a religious meaning, in the sense that they presented the heart of the Buddhist universe and its deities in physical form and were designed to be contemplated. This point is vital to an understanding of later developments and, in particular, to the way in which Zen ideas were incorporated into the designs and how they subtly redirected them.

It was some four hundred years after this initial burst of activity that the next big influence on gardens came into play. During this time, Japan passed from the relative stability of the first emperors into the eras of civil wars. There were continual campaigns for supremacy as the larger military houses vied for power, until Japan settled into the stability of the larger protectorates. Throughout these years there is evidence of a growing dissatisfaction with the highly institutionalized official forms of Buddhism. People without the time or opportunity to undertake the years of study and dedication necessary to gain hopes of salvation through the academic and hierarchical channels of established Buddhist sects, began to search for more direct and accessible ways to relieve the insecurities of life in a country at war within itself, and offer hope for the future. They found it in large numbers in the newly

introduced Jodo Pure Land Sect. Introduced around 1175 this sect held that repetition of the Buddha Amida's name would ensure rebirth in his western paradise, the Pure Land (Jodo). It was the kind of populist and simplified movement that periodically appears from within the ranks of most major religions at times of national stress, or when religious leaders have become aloof and inaccessible and the methods of participation too esoteric and difficult.

One of the keys to the success of this particular movement was that the Pure Land in question was not an intellectual concept but was presented as a recognizable physical reality. It was seen as a place where beautiful pavilions stood amongst large ponds full of lotus flowers, and where the immortal souls passed their time in peace and contentment in boats on the ponds, drifting gently amongst the islands and flowers. The emphasis was on immortality in this paradise and longevity in life for those who believed in the redeeming powers of Amida, and this belief was expressed by repetition of his name. Symbolizing this immortality and longevity were the islands in the ponds, based on the old Chinese concept of the isles of the Blest (the blissful dwelling places of immortal ageless beings). Thus the idea of the paradise was central to the whole sect and, to encourage believers by giving them a glimpse of the life to come, it was represented in paintings and drawings full of colour and joy. It was not long before these paintings were turned into reality and gardens specifically based on them were soon being built. In many cases the gardens and ponds were large enough for people actually to use and take boats out amongst the lotus flowers and islands, while musicians played suitable music from the waterside pavilions. Believers were being given a foretaste of what was to come. These gardens although different in scale and uses, were an important stage along the development of later gardens. Present in them were all the elements we have noted already, and they were the

grand blueprints from which later developments were taken.

The next stage had to be a reduction in scale and with this a shift back to an emphasis on looking rather than using. These large gardens were doomed from the beginning in the sense that land was becoming scarcer as the towns grew, houses sprang up where once large parks had lain, and by the limitations of what they expressed. As the Pure Land Sect lost ground to newer introductions, particularly the Zen sects, so the grand representations of the Jodo Land became obsolete; other wider, more profound conceptions needed expression. Some of these paradise gardens, notably Kinkakuji in Kyoto, survived and can be seen today more or less exactly as they were built, while others, for example Saiho-ji (Kyoto), underwent transformation at the hands of new priest-gardeners who created new styles within the old, making these gardens particularly interesting to visit.

These new priest-gardeners belonged almost exclusively to one or other of the new Zen Buddhist sects introduced around 1200, and, as we have seen, they had entirely different aims. They had a new approach, developing techniques and ideas that created gardens which are still visited by thousands of visitors every year and which represent for most people the essence of Japanese gardens. For these Zen priests the gardens served a different purpose. They were to be used specifically as aids to deeper understanding of Zen concepts. Gardens were not an end in themselves, as were the Jodo gardens, but were to trigger contemplation and meditation; they were not seen as gardens as such, but rather as spaces filled in a certain way. Abstract compositions relying on understatement, simplicity, suggestion and implication were laid out leaving room for the imagination, but providing a starting point in the appreciation of everyday things. In this there was a return to naturalness and