

MAINTAINING THE PATH TO NIRVANA

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A photo of the garden contrasting fore-and back-grounds suggests its philosophical potential. Photo by Norm Shafer.

By way of introduction, I am a scholar-practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. While I now serve as caretaker of a recently installed Japanese garden on a college campus, Zen and its various modes of aesthetic praxis are not my primary purview, even if their expressions have magnetized my interest since my introduction to Buddhism. In my undergraduate lectures on Buddhism, questions often arise with regard to the meaning of nirvana. What is the path? How does a Buddhist get there? Is it attainable? And what is nirvana, enlightenment, liberation anyway? Even the meditators among us occasionally ask ourselves the same questions.

PHILOSOPHICAL GROUND

The practice of maintaining a Japanese garden, in my mind, viscerally exemplifies that there is no way to get “there” except by being here. As I have learned from my friends and teachers, Bob Chilton and Todd Stewart of Gardens Unlimited, who masterfully designed and installed the Japanese garden on our campus, in training a garden the garden trains you. It is beautifully reciprocal, perfectly non-dual, potent yet invisible. In my studies and contemplations, I have grappled with the philosophical proofs of non-duality so prevalent in

Indo-Tibetan Buddhist philosophy. Such pursuits have proven endlessly fascinating in striving towards an intellectual understanding of the relationship between relative appearances and their ultimate nature, but the final assertion is that while conceptual constructs may offer a metaphorical finger pointing at the moon, this is not the moon itself. Suchness cannot be thought, only experienced.

As a daily meditator, I strive to relax into the experience of that view beyond viewing, beyond subject and object, perceiver and percept, self and other. The goal is “to leave thinking mind to rest without contrivances,” as sung by Padmasambhava, the great eight-century adept credited with establishing Buddhism in Tibet.¹ While the Indo-Tibetan tradition is explicit in structuring a pedagogical progression of diverse tenets as an essential component of the path, Zen tends to eschew logic and philosophy altogether. I once queried Zen Master Ekai Osho about this variance in approach; he replied that relying on concepts to attain non-conceptual experience is like “playing soccer in a swimming pool.” Without relying on non-conceptuality as the ground of the path, how can one drive towards its ultimate non-conceptual goals? It’s not really the same sport. While Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes a gradual

and elaborate path, becoming more and more subtle before leaping into non-conceptual understanding, Zen is renowned for its immediacy and minimalism, both practically and aesthetically.

Likewise, there is significant variance in the practice of the arts in Tibetan and Japanese Buddhism. While Tibet is celebrated for its vibrant artistic culture, and the production of Buddhist art is traditionally considered a means of generating great merit or “good karma,” the actual creation of that art is not typically employed as a complete path to awakening. Qualities such as mindful precision in execution and extensive knowledge of tantric iconography are prerequisite, but painting or sculpting an enlightened figure is more of an auxiliary to the path; most Tibetan artists would still need to apply themselves in intensive deity yoga meditation, visualizing themselves as a buddha, in order to truly realize that their own nature has always been buddha. This distinction applies to the viewer of Buddhist art as well: while extraordinary individuals with deep karmic connections may awaken upon encountering an image, the vast majority of us must exert ourselves in study, contemplation, and meditation to awaken to the meaning of it.

By contrast, in the Zen tradition both the practice and the encounter of the arts may serve as sudden paths to awakening. Emphasizing that perfect buddha-nature pervades every moment and every thing, it is there (here!) to be discovered: why not awaken while placing a stone in a Japanese garden, or plucking the weeds that opportunistically invade the negative space, or simply taking a breath and absorbing the wordless harmony of a meticulously cultivated natural environment? This experience is intimated in the capping verses to a *kōan*:

*It cannot be described;
it cannot be pictured.
The beauty of this garden
is invisible even to the great sages.
The magnitude of this dwelling is so vast
no teaching can stain it²*

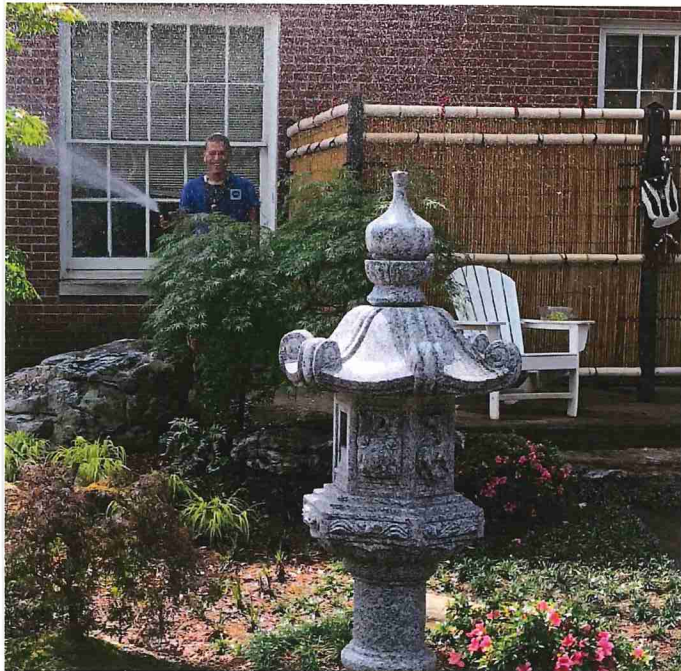
While any lived moment of samsara or cyclic existence, this round of suffering and rebirth according to Buddhism, can serve as a means to awakening, Japanese gardens have a special power. The mere vision of that aesthetic space can inspire realization—if one can view without viewing. Humbly striving towards perfect failure, I interpret this stanza to mean that direct experience is unfabricated and



non-conceptual, so *it cannot be described* with words. Direct experience is immediate and non-dual, so *it cannot be pictured* or conceptualized in mind or memory. Recognizing the *beauty of this garden*, a metaphor for the abundant richness of this life when resting in the open fullness of the aesthetic present, true beauty is not “seen” but remains *invisible even to the great sages*, who know it beyond any division between seer and seen. There is no separation: beauty transcends the tangible ground of appearance and its fundamental dichotomy into self and other. We ordinarily take this world to be our dwelling place, however temporary, but our eternal home is *dharmakaya*, the ultimate devoid of subject and object. Transcending boundary and limitation, the *magnitude of this dwelling is so vast* no concept can contain it, and *no teaching can stain it*—not even Indo-Tibetan Buddhism’s countless tenets!

MAINTENANCE AS THE PATH

Although the endpoint of these verses may be that the beauty of our buddha-nature is present in every moment, it focuses upon a Japanese garden as the point of inspiration, metaphorically perhaps but practically as well. Just as our samsaric experience, churned by ignorance of its true nature, is paradoxical



in the sense that wisdom pervades it ever-present, Japanese visual artforms are wondrously paradoxical as well, functioning as visual *kōans* that can unlock the full potential of present experience. Both bonsai and gardens are premier examples: as living, constantly changing artforms they embody the truth of impermanence, Buddha’s first “mark of existence” that defines this world. As expressions of dynamic transformation, they also represent the challenges we face in working with change, most especially when confronting deterioration. So, they exemplify an unsatisfactory aspect of life that results in suffering, the second mark of existence. And yet, if we can rest within the inevitability of change and even our heartfelt longing for things to remain, then attachment to the past and aversion towards an altered present or projected future may be released, and selflessness may dawn as the true nature of appearances. This occurs by directly settling into the immediacy of experience. As the true nature of phenomena, selflessness is the third and final mark of existence according to the Buddha. It becomes further elaborated as buddha-nature, emptiness, *dharmakaya*, and so on according to later Mahayana or “Great Vehicle” schools, which are the wellsprings of Tibetan and Zen Buddhism alike.

Therefore, merely viewing a Japanese garden can impress the Buddha’s three marks of existence upon an observer. Yet Buddhism requires deep practice to transform the view such that the three marks inform life experience no matter the perspective. As practice itself, it may be argued that the maintenance of a Japanese garden is especially effective in this regard. Impermanence is innate in a garden’s design: seasonal cycles of hibernation and growth help determine the plantings, and even a rock garden’s stones blossom

LEFT: Dan Hirshberg raking. Photo by Mike Morones.

RIGHT: Bob Chilton of Gardens Unlimited watering. Photo by Dan Hirshberg.

with lichen and moss when regularly watered. The gravel gathers the plant matter of the natural environment beyond its perimeter, and its raked lines succumb to erosion in the face of weather, never mind the invading footprints of innocent squirrels or reckless undergrads. With maintenance activities thus being both diverse and constant, those responsible for Japanese gardens live impermanence in a way that is both acute and unavoidable. As much as we may wish to ignore the constant deterioration of the possessions and people of our life (most especially our own bodies and minds), for a gardener change is visible, tangible, and undeniable in each passing moment of their encounter with the garden. No matter the perspective—whether macroscopically expansive with eyes relaxed surveying balance in the total composition, or laser-focused upon the minute detail of a single seedpod just descended on fresh gravel—impermanence is obvious. For those who have accepted responsibility to care for a garden, it presents a direct and profound opportunity to engage impermanence and its challenges.

For novice *niwashi* or gardeners like myself, the constancy of impermanence likely inspires a range of sufferings which can be categorized by means of Buddhism's "three poisons" or fundamental afflictions: attachment, aggression, and ignorance. In maintaining a Japanese garden, there may be attachment to the mental image of the garden at its most recent moment of maintenance, now only a memory, and craving for that to remain stable and "real." Impatience may arise due to the amount of time the garden demands in competition with other responsibilities. Likewise, there may be irritation in imagining the carelessness of those who alter the space, willfully or not. And then there is the subtler delusion that pervades both attachment and aggression by failing to acknowledge the inevitability of these processes. Both afflictions are prolonged and empowered by mindlessly dissolving into the negative ruminations of thought and daydream, losing any sense of direct experience in distraction, and looking anywhere but at the present moment, which in truth is nothing but perfection, again and again. And again.

Herein lies a great paradox and profound instruction so wondrously illuminated through Japanese garden care: when resting in the absolute immediacy of now, the present moment, even impermanence is empty. It does not exist at all. It arises only in the conceptualization that compares the present to the past or fantasizes a future. In each instance of comparative thought, which signifies the loss of the pure present, the natural process of change can become hurtful. If we can rest in the absolute immediacy of each present moment, however, there truly is no change. There is only a moment so fleeting that it is gone beyond momentariness, beyond any sense of "now," transcending time and change by means of it. Continuity is illusory, a concept founded on comparison, so fundamentally flawed and yet so definitive of consensus, for what is life without time? Because of gardening's many activities, whether as complex as a new raking pattern, or as simple as plucking a single clover shoot from a verdant carpet of moss, maintaining a Japanese garden demands the patience of timelessness. Only then may there be "no suffering, no origin of suffering," as the bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara recites in the *Heart Sūtra* or *Discourse on the Perfection of Wisdom*, the renowned pith instructions of the Mahāyāna recited every day in countless Zen temples.

BEAUTY AS THE FREEDOM OF FRUITION

Emptiness, the third mark of existence, defines the true nature of all that appears, all that arises. Absorbing oneself in the action of maintenance, releasing self-concern and settling intention towards the positive effect of the garden on its viewers and inhabitants, the gardener can transcend the tedium of time and the challenges of impermanence. The myriad forms of suffering dissolve when attention exclusively rests on the task at hand. Often assumed to be banal, unskilled, and simplistic, watering is an excellent example of deep practice. It becomes a resource for joy when one slows down enough to engage it as such. Then one might be present for true moments of magic, as when a cool mist is gently blown back on a hot day as sunbeams send rainbows

Todd Stewart of Gardens Unlimited and Dan Hirshberg.
Photo by Mike Morones.



shimmering. Such experiences may be inspiring, but the true goal lies beyond the extraordinary. Even when the act of watering fades back to “normalcy,” when resting in that present again, it is experientially distinct but equal, another moment of richness. Right there, unattached to the past without craving a repetitive future, the *niwashi* may merge with the garden’s invisible beauty, as the *kōan*’s capping verses call. The gardener is the garden, and the garden is the gardener. In Japanese examples especially, they are vividly interdependent: one cannot arise and inspire without the other. The labor and its product are inseparable, non-dual, selfless. That is nirvana, liberation, freedom, the end of suffering in this life, totality—for a moment.

And now is the time to go water the garden we call “Little Sun” (*Taiyo-chan*).

1. Excerpt from “Guru Rinpoche Song” as translated by Jim Scott. For a complete discussion of Padmasambhava’s emergence as Tibet’s premier cultural hero, see Daniel A. Hirshberg, *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet’s Golden Age* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2016).

2. Capping verse from “Gongshan’s ‘Going Beyond Buddha’” as translated in John Daido Looi, *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dōgen’s Three-Hundred Kōans* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 2005), 17.