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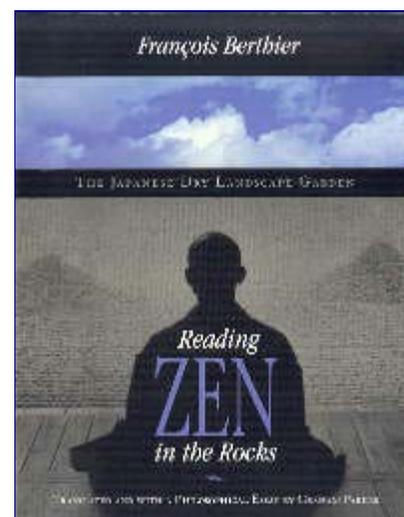


A READER'S JOURNAL

Reading Zen in the Rocks The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden by François Berthier

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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne ©2011



When I lived in eastern Tennessee for a couple of years, I was amazed that rocks appeared after every rain in the small patch of flat ground with grass on it that I called lawn. Where did they come from, was my unanswered question for a long time. I would pick them up and next rain more were back. This never happened back home in south Louisiana. After learning a bit of geology, I discovered that the Cretaceous layer formed the soil of small patch of lawn up north, while in my native home, that same layer is covered by 5,000 feet of soil laid down over eons by the Mississippi River. If we want a rock here, we have to buy one or bring one, you can't just find rocks and stones lying around. We have a small cabin in the mountains of Arkansas where we spend a week each year. It's an easy 9 hour drive and I look for stones of unique shapes and sizes each trip, and usually carry one or two home. I place these in our gardens, generally as a standing stone or *menhir*. They speak to me their "sermons in stone" and I listen. My interest in stones led me to buy and read this book.

The translator of this book in his philosophical essay (almost as long as the translation) says:

[page 128] We have discovered in the ideas of these exceptional appreciators of stone in the West a theme that we shall see developed and amplified in Japanese Buddhist philosophy: the idea that if we attend to the "great central life" of the earth we shall hear some teachings and



see some scriptures couched and proclaimed in a language of nature's own — and in an



unexpected eloquence of stone.

What is Zen? Is it a religion? No, it is not a religion, instead it is more like a philosophical approach to life similar to that followed by the Sufis. Inscrutable to Western ways of thought, both Zen and Sufi masters are characterized by outrageous behavior and child-like imagination. The text explains that Zen is a form of Buddhism that "is nourished by the sap of Daoism."

[page 2] [Its] primary aim . . . is to liberate the human being from the shackles of the rules and conventions imposed by society, and to allow one to regain the marvelous spontaneity of the child, or one's primary nature, original being, or essence. This project is connected with that of the Zen adept, who is in search of his deepest self.

The figure on page 2 is a Daoist hermit on a toilet and on page 3, a patriarch of Zen

tearing up religious texts. Compare these to my statue of the Sufi Nasruddin sitting on his front-to-back donkey. Nasruddin was constantly doing surprising things which offered deep understandings of life to those whose noses were otherwise stuck in religious texts.

[page 2, 3] The basic principle of Zen is very simple: according to Buddhist teaching every creature harbors within it "Buddha-nature" — an expression equivalent to the Christian notion of a "fragment of the



divine" or, in terms of Indian thought, to a spark from the great universal fire from which everything emanates and to which everything returns.

The human being is, however, unaware of this, and that is precisely where the difficulties begin.

How can one become aware of this "Buddha-nature" that is buried in one's innermost depths? To do this, to attain



enlightenment, all methods are fine, including the most extravagant. The path that the Zen monk usually follows is threefold: it includes disconcerting conversations with the master, long periods of sitting meditation, and long stretches of manual activity — since one must practice with the body as well as with the mind.

We saw the practice of the body and the mind in the movie "The Karate Kid" as Mr. Miyagi set the kid to various seemingly mundane tasks of waxing a car, painting a fence, etc. all of which were later woven into the moves necessary to win a Karate match. The building of a garden is a way of practicing Zen. How can this be so?

[page 3] In his Dream Dialogues, Mus Soseki wrote: "He who distinguishes between the garden and practice cannot be said to have found the true Way." What the great monk meant was that to create a garden is a way of practicing Zen. Such an assertion implies close connections between the art of the garden and the search for truth.

There were two kinds of gardens, the early period ones which emphasized change and had flowers and deciduous trees and the later ones consisting mostly of rocks and evergreen bushes which remained still and unchanging through the seasons.

[page 5] The gardens of the Heian period reflected the vicissitudes of human life, whereas the Zen monks rejected transitory phenomena and worthless appearances. They stripped nature bare in order to reveal its substance: their "bare bones" gardens expressed universal silence.



When one visits a Zen garden, silence is almost palpably present there — one becomes like one of the rocks which stand in the garden, quiet and unmoving and yet moved within. One is allowed to grasp the essence of nature and thereby grasp one's own "original nature." [Page 6]

A Western professor went to Japan and was invited to a Tea Ceremony. He held out his cup and the Zen master began pouring tea into it. When the cup was filled, the master continued to pour until the tea was running down the sides and onto the professor's hand. He pulled the cup away and objected, "Did you not see that my cup was full and could not hold any more tea?" The master said, "Yes, and did you not come here to learn something without emptying the tea cup of your mind first?" This is the challenge of learning something new: one must empty oneself of all one's preconceptions first. This emptying is not something that is taught in Western cultures, but it is the essence of the Eastern cultures and religions, and especially in the Zen gardens of stone. One sits before the mute stones and one's mind is full of all the "tea" one brought into the garden with one. By meditation on the stones, one can come to pour out the tea of internal noise, and in the silence come to understand one's true face, one's original being, one's own self.

[page 10] The rock gardens are a concrete expression of Zen thought, which is not itself accessible to ordinary people. For that reason they appear impenetrable. They are very different from the garden paradises of the Heian



five mountainous islands on which one attained eternal life. Unable to sail to these islands, they created them in the middle of a flat sea of rocks with several large rocks sitting like the legendary islands in the ocean. These enviable islands sticking out of the sea were brought into view in the stone gardens with large singular rocks rising from a level bed of tiny rocks. One could sit and silently contemplate these distant mountains

period; there is nothing charming about them. On the contrary, they evoke the aridity of the desert, though without its sterility. For the masters animated these rocks in order to nourish the spirits of those in search of their hidden being. In short, it is as difficult to understand Zen gardens as it is to understand one's own self.

The ancient Japanese never navigated out of sight of land, and they believed that in the distant ocean were three to



in a Zen garden.

In my twenties I began to sculpture wood and created a dozen or so wood sculptures, but along the way, I never had a chance or strong desire to sculpture stone. For me stones have been the raw material of sculptures, but to be placed together, not chiseled or chopped into shape. I didn't quite understand why I felt that way, up until now.

[page 44] Even when moved into a garden, the rock must not be retouched by human hands: it must stay intact, remaining in its pure state, for its purpose is to express the world just as it is, and its very essence. Patiently sculpted by waters and winds, it is the work of time, which operates slowly. The point is to respect the rough character of rock, since to work it is to desacralize it. In this connection, it is written in the Bible: "If you raise for me an altar of stone, you may not make it of sculpted stone, for in taking the chisel to the rock you will profane it" (*Exodus, 20:25*).

When my children were pre-teens, we lived about a mile from Disneyland in Anaheim which meant many trips to the busy park. So busy it was that there was a constant tumult from which it was literally impossible to escape from inside the park. I found some respite in New Orleans Square where during the week, there were few people and I could sit sipping an imitation mint julep while



listening to imitation Dixieland Jazz. What I really wanted was a totally quiet place while waiting for the kids to be ready to go home and there was none. I was reminded of this when I found out that the Zen Garden of Ryanji has crowds now, but one could easily recover the silence.

[page 76, 77] Every masterpiece is imperishable, at least for as long as human beings have the wisdom to respect and the intelligence to protect it. Every masterpiece is inexhaustible, like a vital spring whose life-giving waters continuously overflow. Such is the garden of Ryanji, which was built in times of famine and civil war by laborers who were regarded as untouchables, built under the sign of Zen for the edification-or

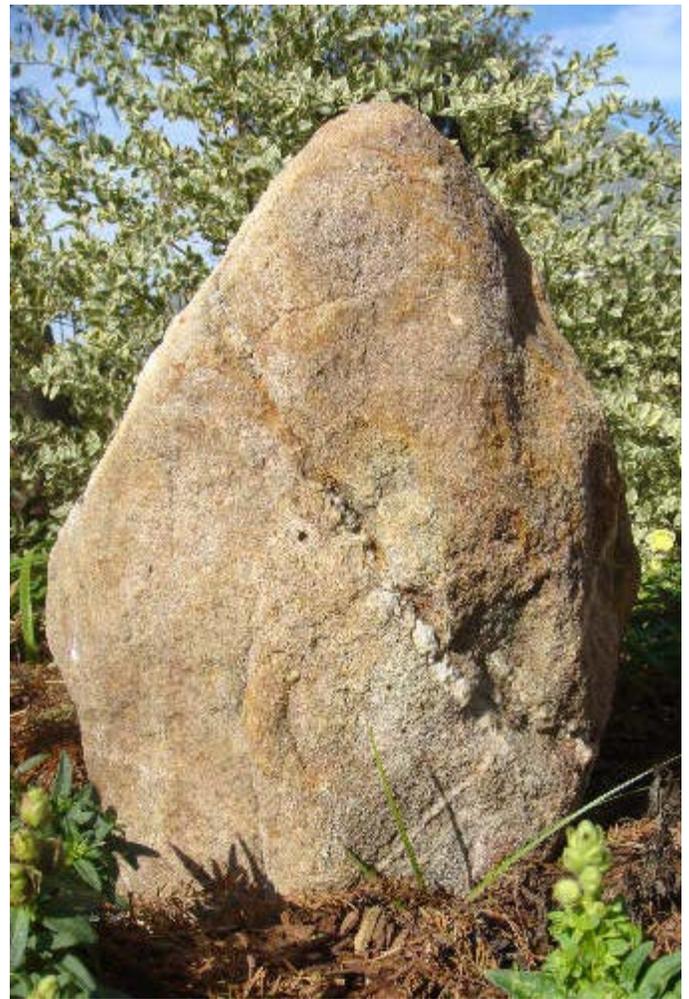
mystification-of the world.

This narrow waste of gravel, with several dwarf mountains with steep sides, never ceases to exercise its fascination upon posterity. In our century the number of visitors who cram into this space is most impressive, and loud is the hubbub that issues from the crowd, forming a screen between rocks and heart. But all one has to do is sit at the edge of the garden and stop up one's ears. Then the miracle happens. In the great silence that is thereby regained, the spontaneous beauty of these rough rocks surges forth, and their immortal chant ensues, the substance of which is this: Beyond the weight of matter there resides Spirit, without which one can never truly live.

In our time we have had Beatlemania and Rock Stars of all kinds, but in ancient Japan, they had Lithomania and Rocks that were Stars! [RJM Note: one *koku* was enough rice to feed one person for a year. The largest ship at the time could carry only 1,000 *koku* of rice.]

[page 104, 105] If lithomania never reaches the heights in Japan that it attained in China, it nonetheless runs deep, and we shall see many — though not all — of the grounds for enthusiasm over stone prove fertile in the Eastern Islands. Emblematic is a passion for a particular rock — a passion that was shared by two of the greatest

figures in modern Japanese history. The warlord Oda Nobunaga was, in his nonviolent mode, a connoisseur of gardens. As such he eventually acquired the most famous stone specimen in the country, the "Fujito Rock," and when he had a garden made for the last Ashikaga shogun at one of his palaces in Kyoto, he transferred this rock from his own garden with unprecedented pomp. "Nobunaga had the rock wrapped in silk, decorated with flowers, and brought it to the garden with the music of flute and drums and the chanting of the laborers." Toyotomi Hideyoshi, an army commander, later purchased it for the unprecedented sum of "a thousand *koku* of rice." When Hideyoshi seized power after Nobunaga was killed in 1582 he immediately had the Fujito Rock transported to his new palace, and at the end of his life he installed it in a place of honor in a special garden he built at Samb-in. This rock was one of the most valuable items in Hideyoshi's not insubstantial estate after he died.



In 1975 I went to a lecture on geology and learned that there are only three kinds of rocks which comprise the Earth: pink rock, black rock, and green rock. The pink rock is granite which floats on the green rock (the asthenosphere). When the green rock breaks through the ocean bed, black rock (basalt) is formed. The continents are large tectonic plates of granite and the stuff we call soil in its various forms is only tiny pieces of granite which have been pulverized, washed away and transformed. In Goethe's unfinished essay titled, "On Granite", he paid his respects to the wonderful properties of the ubiquitous pink rock upon which and out of which we build, well, nearly everything.

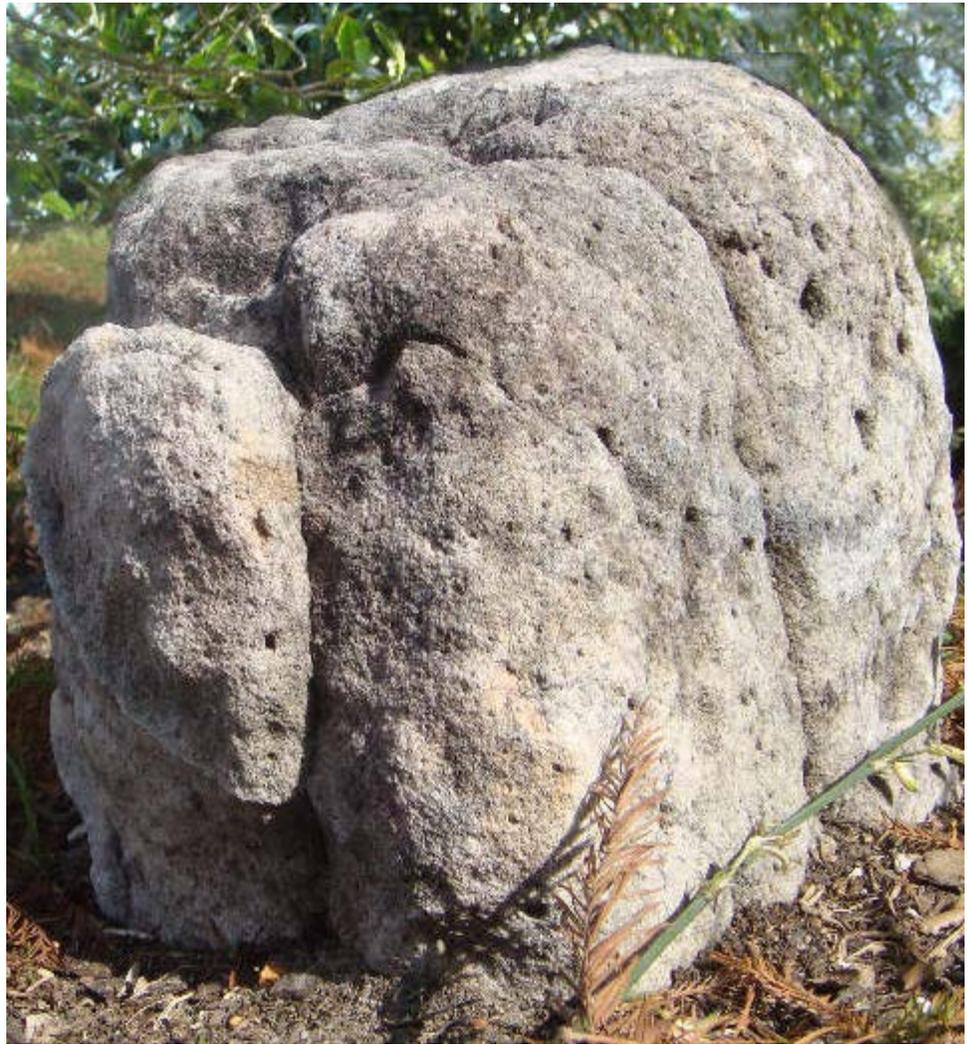
[page 122] Sitting on a high peak of exposed granite, surveying a vast panorama, he addresses himself as follows: "Here you rest immediately upon a ground that reaches



down to the deepest parts of the earth, and no younger stratum, no agglomerated alluvial debris have interposed themselves between you and the solid floor of the archaic world. By contrast with those beautiful and fruitful valleys where you walk on a perpetual grave, these peaks have never produced anything living nor consumed anything living, being prior to all life and above all life." Goethe emphasizes the intimate connection between

soul and stone — and at the same time redeems rock from the realm of the dead or lifeless. And when, inspired by granite, he writes of "the sublime tranquillity granted by the solitary and mute nearness of great, soft-voiced nature," he echoes, perhaps unwittingly, East Asian understandings of stone.

Goethe's highly spiritual understanding of the world was such that he likely did nothing or said anything *unwittingly*. What he says above helps me to understand my attraction for granite rocks which I have pried by my own hands from the grasp of the Earth holding it for millions of years, rocks I have hefted up a steep hill and placed into my car's trunk to transport them unscathed to the top of 5,000 feet of "agglomerated alluvial debris" in my New Orleans garden where I can be inspired by the "sublime



tranquillity of their solitary and mute soft-voiced nature."

In the 1949 film *Late Spring*, Ozu Yasujir the Zen garden of Ryanji makes an appearance as two fathers talk.

[page 144] In their brief conversation by the edge of the garden the two fathers do little more than exchange platitudes about family life-and yet the scene is a profoundly moving expression of the human condition. It gains this effect from the assimilation of the figures of the two men to rocks, which seems to affirm the persistence of the cycles of impermanence. Now that they are on film, those fathers will always, it seems, be sitting there, monumental figures overlooking the celebrated rock garden of emptiness.

Above the entrance to the Temple of Apollo were two dicta: "Know Thyself" and "Everything in Moderation". One may come to know one's inner self by a long, quiet session with Ryanji's granite stones. As for the second dictum, the garden leaves nothing to chance. On the stone basin there is an inscription in four Chinese characters which mean, "All I know is how much is enough." Human life cannot exist if the parameters of the human body are maximized, only if they are optimized, i. e., held in moderation. We can only exist for long if we know how much is enough. And we can only know how much is enough if we know ourselves.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. [foot note text]

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