

Zen Garden

In Kyoto, high up in the hills, is an old temple with a famous garden. You have to pay money to get in, these days. I imagine that, not many centuries ago, you would have had to appear to be a seeker — of truth, to use a Western concept, or of peace or of close communion with a deeper reality, which I think is closer to the zen idea. I'm sure you would not have been asked to pay a few hundred yen for a ticket, and that no ticket so cheap would have given you a presumed right of entry.

We buy our tickets and take off our shoes and leave them on a shelf by the entrance. There are at least a dozen other pairs of shoes there already. Only then, in our stockinged feet, may we step up onto the wooden floorboards of the temple itself.

There is a gift shop, with Buddhas and picture books, film, and ceramic ware in imitation of the old pottery carefully placed about the temple. There are also low tables, where we sit on a tatami as a woman brings and pours green tea. For each cup of tea we order, we are entitled to precisely one bean-paste sweet, but I have grabbed three for our two teas. When the serving woman brings the tea, she also brings two little squares of paper for, as she conveys in gesture to clarify the words I don't understand, the sweets. I am embarrassed at the thought of being discovered, and contrive to keep one concealed within my curled fingers as I place two on the proffered papers, as neatly and Japanesely as I can. Is such deception a zen crime? I wonder. Perhaps the woman notices, perhaps she doesn't. She is smiling, and whatever she says I don't understand. But Buddha, which is to say I myself, knows.

But this, our little tea ceremony, comes later, after we've seen the garden. The guidebook has told us it is of the "waterless" type, and has prepared me for something austere.

And there it is.

It is enclosed in a rectangle, one long and two shorter sides defined by stone walls, yellowed and mottled from centuries of alternating heat and cold, moisture and dryness. One might, if so inclined, seek patterns in the mottlings. Much as a child, or even an adult like us in some rare, unguarded mood, might by staring at the cracks in the sidewalk, or the gentle drifting of the clouds, or the textured fungus between one's toes.

The third side is open, and is defined by the very straight edge of the raised wooden floor on which we stand, looking down into the garden. This side is at least twenty paces wide, stride-paces that is, or many times that many for a contemplative man shuffling only inches at a time, to view the garden from all points available along this axis. Such a man, barefoot and robed in saffron, is purely hypothetical, however. At the moment most of the viewing spaces are occupied by more modern Japanese, mostly young, who frown and stare and fidget, chattering only a little more softly than in the other holiday places where we've encountered them. They take pictures, some just of the garden, others of each other with the garden as background. Most seem puzzled by the garden, cocking their heads to stare at it from different angles, but soon give up and slide their feet along the floorboards in search of something more interesting. One especially chattery group of four young women has just left, leaving a space — aural and visual — for us to contemplate the garden itself.

It is an expanse of small white stones, gravel really, carefully raked in ripples around dark, almost black, rocks that rise like islands in the gravel sea. I count them, to confirm that, as the guidebook says, there are fifteen of these dark rocks. The largest and highest is toward the left end of the garden. Another cluster is to the right and nearer to the viewing platform. The others are scattered as randomly as atolls in a real sea. Dark islands in a white sea is just one possibility, which leads to many others. (Who or what inhabits those islands? What rites do

they perform? Do they know about those on the other islands? Do they even imagine that I am watching them?) Small mountains in a wide plowed field might be another. Or planets in space. Or ghosts in the mist. Or water towers on New York rooftops against a lightening morning sky.

(The guidebook claims that all are placed “precisely,” but what could this mean? In precise adherence to what measure or criterion? “Deliberately,” perhaps, according to some strong unconscious impulse of the ancient designer.)

Several visitors, not only the four young Japanese women, seem puzzled and impatient. I am only briefly puzzled, and then I am patient. And even now, the week-old memory of the garden does fill me with tranquillity. Fills me with its emptiness, and mine.

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