

# THE LEARNING PROCESS OF JAPANESE GARDENS

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Many Japanese garden students and enthusiasts from the United States seek design theories in reading, lectures and discussion, and expect to ‘master’ something after a year or even a few months. However, becoming able to create, maintain and even just appreciate traditional Japanese gardens takes a much longer time with hands-on experience, just like any other traditional arts do. This is because the art of Japanese garden requires complex skills and extensive knowledge that cannot be written in manuals. This is also because a garden is deeply related to the local culture, religion, and natural environment, which can be learned only after living in the area for many years.

**Key Words:** Japanese garden, viewing position, manners, religion, environment, design implementation, professional education, intercultural learning

## 1. Introduction

In this summer Japanese garden workshop in Kyoto, we have always emphasized the background or the meaning of Japanese garden design instead of discussing ‘how to’ techniques<sup>1)</sup>. We discussed and visited historical gardens that represented the style of each period as chronologically as possible, and at the site we discussed the social context and lifestyle of the time when the garden had been created. This approach helped students feel the evolution of design styles and organize their understandings.

During the field trips we used public transportation and walked so that the students could experience the climate and the local people’s everyday life as they were. We also went out in the nature whenever time permitted, which showed students why certain architecture and garden designs had become necessary in this particular climate. We could also see what kinds of natural material were available out there. And of course we could learn great design motives from the nature (Fig.1, Fig.2).



Left) Fig.1 Amano-hashidate in the nature  
Right) Fig.2 Amano-hashidate in a garden

On a cultural side, religions and traditional arts influenced on traditional architecture and gardens immensely. Therefore, we visited religious precincts and participated in religious activities and talked with priests. We also had tea ceremony lessons explaining every action taking place so that the students could understand what kind of consideration was behind the manner and the formation of the setting.

In the beginning such ‘byways’ surprised some American students who seemed to have expected to learn the ‘Japanese garden design theory’ by reading, lectures and studio projects in a much shorter period than most Japanese garden creators have spent on their training outside. In the end, however, they all agreed that such byways were indispensable, and they also understood that was why they had to come all the way to Japan. The actual hands-on experience seemed to have exceeded anybody’s imagination.

After the course, many students testified that they got inspired to reconsider their lifestyle as well as learning tremendously about Japanese garden and architectural design.

## 2. Understanding the Viewing Position

Most Japanese gardens are designed for certain viewing positions. When you see a garden from inside the building, you are supposed to sit down on the floor,

not standing or even sitting down on a chair, because the eye-level is assumed that way in the design. When it is a stroll garden or an approach garden, the stepping stone placement may imply the best standing positions and you should catch such unspoken messages to fully enjoy the setting. We must note that, however, public visitors nowadays do not always have an access to the originally intended viewing positions.

The best viewing positions, which are usually the seating position for the owner of the premises or the most respected guest, are often off limits for public visitors for preservation and other maintenance reasons. For example, the Nijo Castle Ninomaru Garden apparently should be viewed from inside the shoin rooms, but most of visitors are walking around on the ground like servants looking at the garden from a position closer and lower position than they should.

A similar *Shoin* style garden can be seen from a more appropriate view position at Daigo-ji Sambo-in Temple, where visitors are allowed onto the veranda although not into the rooms (Fig.3). At Jisho-ji (Ginkaku-ji) Temple, the opportunity is limited to large groups with reservation for a relatively large additional cost. In many cases, the public visitors and tourists are not seeing what they are supposed to see, and many of them are not even aware of this fact.

At Tenryu-ji Temple, visitors have an option to be on the floor for a small additional cost. You can compare and see how the impression changes dramatically only by a hundred yen, which is about one US dollar. However, the waterfall arrangement, one of the garden highlights, still looks too far from either position. This is because the garden layout was originally planned for boats in the pond<sup>2)</sup>. Many gardens have gone through several owner changes and evolved styles over many periods; therefore original design intention are often unclear or in dispute.

At Entsu-ji Temple in north Kyoto, visitors are told to sit down inside the room (Fig.4), which shows how much they care about the viewing position. They also have been trying to protect the borrowed scenery by limiting the public exposure and number of visitors, putting the value of the garden before their economical interest. If not, it would have become like the famous Ryoan-ji Temple, where a huge crowd of tourists is always disturbing the scene.

To find the right viewing position, we must imagine



Left) Fig.3 Rooms behind the veranda are often off limits  
Right) Fig.4 Viewing the garden from a right position

how the buildings and gardens were used. Here, some knowledge about the local religions, culture and social system becomes necessary. We also must respect the places and be careful not to damage these historical assets. Otherwise, more and more places would become off-limits or just be destroyed.

### 3. Understanding the Meaning of Manners

Manners are based on the idea of handling things with care and being considerate to others. The Way of Tea shows an epitome of such way of life. Therefore, we provided a one-day lesson on tea guest manners, explaining the meaning behind each action they are making (Fig.5, Fig.6). The next day we visited the Ura-senke grand tea master's house and experienced a beautiful tea gathering with the truly authentic setting. Sitting down formally on the floor in the somewhat intense atmosphere must have been a hard work for the westerners, but they all testified that the tea gathering was far more enjoyable after hearing explanations. They all understood how rational and considerate the whole procedure was.

Americans usually like to learn reasons for rules and manners, and most of them are willing to do the right thing once they are convinced. It would be regrettable if any cultural matters are irresponsibly explained or missed out in the translation.



Left) Fig.5 Small entrance to a teahouse (*nijiri*) has many reasons  
Middle) Fig.6 Considering others at a tea gathering, 2004  
Right) Fig.7 Listening to a Zen monk at Daisen-in Temple, 2004



Left) Fig.8 A variety of Shinto structures at MotoIse-Kono Shrine

Right) Fig.9 Pure-land (*Jodo*) Buddhism structure at Byodo-in

#### 4. Understanding the Religious Background

Religions had such a great influence in the Japanese lifestyle that the basic understanding of them is necessary when discussing gardens. It helps organizing different design styles and elements as well. Therefore, we always spent some time explaining religions though the discussion has to be quick and shallow. We started from the distinction between Shinto and Buddhism (Fig.8), and then between the different Buddhist sects (Fig.9). We have been fortunate to have inspiring Zen priests to give us some insightful introduction to Zen (Fig.7).

The term ‘Zen’ tends to be misused or overused in the United States. Some take it as a fashion of garden or interior design. Others say ‘Zen is a philosophy, not a religion’, which would surprise the Zen practitioners in Japan very much.

Practice, including both physical and mental exercise, is an essential part of this religion<sup>3)</sup>. So this year, we tried an optional overnight meditation program at Myoshin-ji Temple on one weekend. Four brave students volunteered to participate in this program and went through sixteen hours of strict training sessions. Sitting down with their legs crossed without making any movement at all for an hour each session must have been extremely painful for the westerners. Having to follow the Zen temple’s discipline and to act in a large group even during eating, sleeping and going to toilet must have been surprising for the young people from the most liberal state in the ‘free country’.

However, the student’s comments about their experience after the session were rather positive, to my surprise. One of them even said that she realized for the first time that a life could be so simple and beautiful, though she had been used to the material world. She also wrote in her report that she learned from this trip to Japan that she could be so happy only

if she appreciated what she already had.

Students with such an open mind are able to catch the unspoken messages quickly, and able to understand instinctively how gardens are working in the religious precincts and in our life.

#### 5. Understanding the Natural Environment

‘Seeing is believing’ is the most frequently heard comments from our students, and it is very true when we talk about the natural environment. In our first class in 2001, some students asked why they had to go hiking in the forest instead of discussing the design theory. Soon, however, they all understood how natural environment influenced the Japanese garden design and how important it was to know it. For Japanese gardens, there is no need for a design theory textbook, but you just have to go out in the nature and see how they look like.

The nature has also made many sustainable designs, no matter if it was gentle or harsh. After experiencing the summer heat in Kyoto, everyone was instantly convinced why the eaves became so large for Japanese architecture. When we experience the cool breeze of ‘yuka’, or the summer diners set up in the river (Fig.11), we immediately understand that ponds and streams in the gardens were not just a visual element.

When a visitor stands in the Kyoto or the Nara valley seeing the beautiful mountains around it, he/she may understand the Japanese mind to worship the nature. Unfortunately, our students have to be in Kyoto in the least pleasant time of the year and do not have the luxury to experience the other seasons. Many of them, however, are determined to come back and stay longer, and some of them are already doing so.



Top Left) Fig.10 Nature hiking in Kifune, 2001

Top Right) Fig.11 *Yuka*, lunch in the water, 2002

Bottom Left) Fig.12 Farmhouse stay in Okayama, 2004

Bottom Right) Fig.13 Firewood cooking experience, 2004

## 6. Understanding the Professions

Those who wish to seek careers related to Japanese gardens should note that ‘design-build’ is the standard practice in this field. The critical parts of the process are the material selection, the installation and the ongoing maintenance. In this regard, the current college education in landscape design has little to offer for Japanese garden creators-to-be.

In the U.S., certified professionals called ‘Landscape architect’ design a site or a garden, draw a plan and hand it to contractors who will do the actual installation. With detailed drawings and specifications, installation may not be too difficult even for inexperienced workers. The industrialized materials and geometric design also makes a project more efficient to draw, install and maintain. Therefore, American consumers tend to assume that some unskilled workers are doing the job.

When we hear the term ‘landscaper’ (*niwa-shi*) or ‘gardener’ (*ueki-ya*) in Japan, we assume a skilled worker who went through an intensive vocational training typically over ten years, ten hours a day, six days a week. They are scientifically knowledgeable and often educated with traditional arts such as the Way of Tea and flower arrangement. Less experienced ones are called ‘garden apprentice’ (*minarai*, typically experienced less than five years, *naka-narai*, typically experienced less than ten years). They start with simple or labor-intensive tasks while watching their master and senior apprentice to learn more advanced tasks from them. It even takes years to learn how to clean a garden properly because the site and materials are so delicate and complex.

In the older times in Japan, some extremely educated people known as priests, tea masters, highly established samurais and imperial family members played the role of a designer, or a master planner. They somehow communicated the design concept to the garden artisans, and the artisans selected the appropriate materials, brought them in and determined construction details on the spot. These garden artisans often came from lower social rankings, even from the lowest discriminated classes, and made their way up solely with their talent. Some garden artisans were highly educated as their employers, and they often planned a garden and did the entire project themselves. There were also Zen priests called *ishidate*, or stone

setters, who specialized in garden creations.

Everyone involved in a garden creation process is supposed to be experienced because it requires on-site judgements and improvisation all the time. Japanese gardens deal with natural materials as they are; therefore the garden professionals often have to decide the design after they see the available material and make the best out of it. They also try to take every surrounding environment into consideration, natural or human-made, tangible or intangible. With all these complex tasks, they are supposed to be as educated and skillful as an orchestra conductor is.

Such complex job is not suitable to explain in drawings or a written manual, or to teach in a classroom. It is just like the way a musical scores alone cannot reproduce a great piece of music. Therefore, artisans often tell their apprentice just to watch, learn and practice again and again.

You should go out on site and try some actual work before discussing what the job is. You will see that the job is far more labor intensive than you have ever imagined. For example, the boulders you see in a garden is hiding nearly two thirds of it underground, and each one can weigh several tons easily. Even one small stepping stone, which has to be set without any gluing mortar, is heavy enough to give an ordinary person some trouble to carry. The work still has to be done by human power because the site is usually too small and delicate to use cattle or a motored vehicle. The site also makes the pruning job more scary than fun because the ground is often too irregular to set up a stepladder. Above all, you will have to make millions of case-by-case judgements on the spot because each material has its individual shape and quality and each site has a particular condition.



Left) Fig.14 Setting a *tsukubai*, a stone water basin arrangement  
Middle) Fig. 15 Making a bamboo fence  
Right) Fig. 16 Pruning a pine tree

## 7. Education and Training

The succession of such highly sophisticated skills in Japanese garden creation is in danger. Many young people choose modernized college education over time-consuming, demanding and little or non-paid apprenticeship. Most Japanese landscape architecture schools, however, teach more Americanized modern landscape design, and they tend to neglect teaching traditional Japanese gardens and its skills. This also happens because of the difficulty of teaching this complex subject.

Professor Uchida at Tokyo Agriculture College surveyed on how landscape architecture programs in Japanese higher institutions offer hands-on training on gardening. His research showed that most four-year colleges offer no or very little practical training. One of the reasons the schools stated was the difficulty to obtain similar plant materials for all students to practice in a fair condition<sup>4</sup>.

It is the matter of course, however, that each individual plant is different, and it is a gardener's job to make case-by-case judgements. The biggest problem I think is that there are few professors who can really teach such subject or even actually do the job themselves. The career path to be an academic and to be a garden artisan is too different from the beginning in Japan. The industrial-academic collaboration is urgent here.

Finally, some experienced garden artisans, who worries about the future of the industry, have started writing books about gardening for both professional and amateur gardeners. Higher institutions should also invite these experienced artisans who can really pass down the endangered art and skills to the next generations, if they really aim to make a 'professional school'. A good design cannot be produced without knowing how to actually make it, as there are no composer or conductor who doesn't know how to play any musical instrument. We need both wings of the knowledge and the practical experience.



Left) Fig. 17 One of Ueto's apprentice from the U.S., 2001  
Right) Fig. 18 Mr. Ueto explaining Chinese characters, 2002

## 8. A Practitioner's Testimony

Can different cultural backgrounds be understood? Mr. Touemon Sano the sixteenth, known as Ueto, have started his answer by saying that Japanese and westerners are fundamentally different because the former live in a rice-making cycle (spring to fall) and the latter live in a wheat-making cycle (fall to spring). Considering that he has created many Japanese gardens overseas and have accepted many interns from western countries, his words really conveyed the difficulty he has experienced to share the idea with his colleagues from different cultures. He also spent quite a long time explaining the local climate of Kyoto, which told us the importance of knowing it.

During the interpreted lecture, Mr. Sano kept on giving objections to my English translation saying that the nuance became slightly different. He also mentioned how Chinese characters and old phrases can give us great suggestions for our life. The importance of knowing the language is articulated here, as we always recommend that those who wish to study Japanese gardens seriously should learn the Japanese language first. It would be the minimum manner required knowing the conversational level Japanese, if you ask an internship or an employment.

In his humorous lecture, which lasted nearly two hours, he covered all the important backgrounds but did not touch upon any design or construction methods, probably because he knew that it would be misleading for beginners.

## 9. Conclusion

Natural understanding of a cultural context takes years of living inside it knowing the local language; therefore being a native is a great advantage. However, it is not impossible even if you came from outside. In fact, many foreign apprentices are doing much better job than some unmotivated Japanese natives are. It only requires patience to take the long and slow steps and an open mind to accept whatever may come to you. You may even have to listen to people whom you think are wrong at first, because many things can be understood only after certain experience. 'Accepting' is the starting point of Japanese garden and architecture, and our students have done a wonderful job with this regard.

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日本庭園学習のプロセスについて  
鈴木あるの（カリフォルニア大学デービス校客員講師）

摘要)

日本庭園について学びたいと希望しているアメリカ人の学生や愛好家の中には、書物や講義などにより短期間でデザイン理論を習得できると思っている者が多い。しかし他の伝統芸術と同様、作庭や庭の維持管理、あるいは単に鑑賞だけを考えると、十分な能力を身につけるには何十年という実地の経験を要する。それは、マニュアル化できないほど複雑で多岐にわたる知識と技能が求められるからであり、また文化、宗教、自然環境といった長年その中で暮らさなければ身に付かない事柄と深く関係しているからである。