

Meditation on the Real and the Ideal in Religion Through the Symbolism of the Garden

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Introduction

As I am a historian of religion, I would like to compare Japanese religion with Jewish religion through the view of the garden. As garden is part of culture, we have to ask what is the relation between religion and culture. Here I assume the notion of T. S. Eliot that culture is the incarnation of religion.¹ We can observe the notion of culture on three levels: culture of an individual person, culture of a group, and culture of a society as a whole, of which the third was the most important for T. S. Eliot to find the definition of culture. However, it requires in its nature necessarily imaginative insight to grasp the culture of a society. In order to know the culture of a society as a whole, it is crucial to know the culture of the upper class of society: what kind of religion they fostered. Religion aims at the enlightenment of human beings but the methodology to that aim may vary according to the teachings of religion. This is the point of my paper.

1. Garden in Japanese Culture

(1) Liberal Arts of the Upper class in Early Modern period

I will start with Japanese culture. I will assume that the religious theory of the garden in Japanese cultural tradition was firmly established and permeated in the Early Modern Tokugawa period between 1603 and 1868. Before the modern era, Japan had been a Buddhist country for more than a thousand years, and especially so during the Early Modern Tokugawa period, during which Japan nurtured a most sophisticated Buddhist culture. There is a garden of that period in the middle of the campus of the University of Tokyo, where I had taught for about thirty years. This garden gave me a hint for my subject. I will elucidate on it later.

¹ Eliot, T. S.: "Notes towards the Definition of Culture," in *Christianity and Culture* (San Diego, New York, London, 1968).

It is important to know the religious ideas of the upper class for understanding Japanese culture as a whole. It was not monks but Samurai warriors, at the top of which stood the Shogun, that is crucial for the matter. What was the ethos of that class? On what kind of knowledge were they educated? You know that the Liberal Arts was the subjects of education for the elites of the Ancient Roman upper class. What was the liberal arts of the Shogunates? You are recommended to see the castles of the Shogun and the many landed Lords, the Daimyo, of the period. You will find several cultural facilities in the castle. I recommend to go to the Tokugawa Museum in Nagoya and the Hikone Castle Museum on Lake Biwa. Surprisingly we will find a tea pavilion, Noh-Play Theater, and Chinese study room besides many military instruments such as swords and helmets. These cultural facilities were usually found in the castles. They were connected with Buddhist virtues of man and the Chinese political philosophy of Confucianism. These were the basic subjects of cultural education of the upper class. I will take two elements of their cultural education into consideration in this paper as deeply related with the view of the garden: proper studies of martial arts, and the discipline of the tea ceremony.

(2) The ritual of tea and Zen-Buddhism

I would like to call it “the ritual of tea” rather than “Tea Ceremony”. First of all, we should realize the relation between Zen-Buddhism and the ritual of tea. The ritual of tea was finally theorized by the tea master Sen no Rikyu (千利休 1521-91), at the latter half of the sixteenth century, and at the beginning of Early Modern period. The theory was encapsulated in the term *Cha-zen Ichi-mi*, 茶禪一味, i.e. Cha 茶 is tea, Zen 禪 is zen, Ichimi 一味 is one taste. The term means that “The taste of Tea is one and the same as that of Zen-Buddhism.” The aim of the ritual of tea is exactly that of the Buddhist enlightenment.

Here it is sufficed to be reminded of the theory of the Four Noble Truths of Early Buddhism. Causes of human frustration could be eliminated by various ways of Buddhist discipline, through which the Noble Eightfold Path will be emanated in human beings. Japanese monks regarded the introspection into the mind of human beings as the essence of Mahayana Buddhism and endeavored to elucidate the methodology of Buddhist enlightenment. The first Zen-Buddhist temple, Kencho-ji Temple, was constructed in Kamakura in 1253, and Zen Buddhism began to flourish in Japan. At that time new upper class of warriors emerged, and they decided to accept the way of Zen as the means to the enlightenment since then. Warriors were always encountering

their own death. So for them, the practice of Zen was best fitted for training to become men of resolution. They were led to look into themselves, into their ephemeral life and hopes and desires for elimination.

Three hundred years later, the Tea Master Rikyu, looked on the ritual of tea as the substitute for Zen discipline for non-clerical upper-class warriors. Then the Tokugawa dynasty united Japan and brought peace and prosperity for Japan without wars for 260 years. The founder of the dynasty, Tokugawa Ieyasu (1542-1616), established those cultural subjects as the Liberal Arts for the upper class. The ritual of tea became a system of education which required such various subjects as the disciplined way of life, knowledge of flower arrangement, writing Chinese poems, calligraphy of those poems, or sayings of enlightened experience, arrangement of garden with stones, plants and trees etc.

(3) Ritual of tea as the means to *Tikun ha-lev*

The elites of the Tokugawa dynasty were required to gain various kinds of knowledge, but what was crucially important was the attainment of this art. The art of the Ritual of tea is the emendation of the heart, *Tikun ha-lev* in Hebrew. Gardens were connected with the ritual of tea for the tea masters. Gardens usually have a pond in the middle which is called “the pond of the character of heart”, 心字池. The shape of the pond is made similar to the Chinese character designated for the heart 心, *kokoro* in Japanese. Seeing the pond is meant to look into his own heart. Contemplation of the heart or introspection of the heart, which is called *Kanjin* 観心 in Japanese, is the key concept of Buddhist theory, especially Zen-Buddhism in particular and Mahayana Buddhism in general. The origin of contemplating the garden was part of Zen-training. To enjoy looking at the nature of the garden is the means to the Buddhist discipline of introspection of inner self whose aim is to see the propensity of human soul through observation of Nature.

The last extraordinary prime minister of the Tokugawa Shogunate era, Ii Naosuke (井伊直弼 1815-60), who was a great tea master, preserved his insight into the truth of the art wittingly in his short poem in calligraphy, saying:

“The art of tea is to emend the heart. There are four stages in the art for completion.

茶非茶 This may be said tea but truly not.

非非茶 This may not be called non tea.

只茶耳 This can be said only a tea.

是名茶 This is the true tea.”

Hebrew translation seems more akin to the taste of immediate reality of the words.

Atta omer ze te abal bikhlal lo,

Ze ulai te ulai lo,

Ze stam te,

Ze te amiti.

This practice of the upper class of making gardens in residences has been prevailing downward into the common people and up to the present.

(4) Reflection of the human nature

You might say that there is a difference in cognition between the garden in a Zen-temple and the garden in a Tea-pavilion: while in the former case the ascetic sternness and moral scrutiny may be required for thinking in Zen-Buddhism, the latter may permit entertainment of seeing and appreciating the beauty of nature. The garden which is laid out, arranged, and harmonized by either the Zen-master or the Tea-master is meant to be completed and almost created in the sense that it is never contaminated by human arbitrariness, just like the divine cloth has no stitches. Most of the disciples of the great Tea-master Rikyu were lord warriors who worked out various gardens. Some gardens were very modest but others were large natural gardens which could have borrowed and preserved the traditions of the Pure Land Buddhist ideas bearing the taste of the Japanese ancient noble classes. Even these types of gardens shared the religious idea of Cha-zen-ichi-mi. The garden exists before our eyes as an exemplary creature which demands sincere contemplation. If you see it with the contaminated eyes by your arbitrariness, it will be seen ugly in the sense of aesthetics, or morally wrong, or philosophically fallacious, or sinful and idolatrous in the sense of religious consciousness. The garden can be interpreted as a mirror in the sense of reflecting human propensity.

2. Garden in Jewish Culture

Now we turn to the theory of the garden in the Jewish counterpart. Compared with Japanese liberal arts education, Jews have never had the practice of making gardens for their entertainment. Social conditions may have escaped such entertainment but they have the main reason in their religious

practices. But my comparison will not be adequate as my acquaintance of Judaism is very limited and I cannot afford a comprehensive knowledge of Jewish cultural history in the world at all times. In order to make a good result I will confine myself to the idea of garden in Jewish liberal arts for comparison with the Japanese counterpart. It may sound strange to talk about Jewish liberal arts. It is true that I have never heard about it for forty years since I started in this academic profession. However, as I noticed above, education of the upper class of a society is most important in order to know the culture of a society as a whole in the premodern era. So, the liberal arts of the upper class of the society in question is important for the understanding of Jewish culture as a whole. Jewish history never produced such an upper class in the usual sense of the word. But it has created an inherent educational tradition since ancient times in the Rabbinic literature. In this sense, we can assume that the proper study of the Talmud Torah in Jewish tradition is exactly the Jewish liberal arts for us to find their idea of the beauty of garden or of nature. Here I will look upon the rabbinical sages as the founding group of a new Jewish community since they had lost their homeland and their Temple in Jerusalem and been dispersed into the Diaspora in the early centuries of the Common Era.

At the crucial period of the destruction of the Second temple in Jerusalem, rabbinical sages started to collect and elucidate the teachings of God in order to preserve the Jewish way of living for survival. This crucial period produced study groups of sages for 200 years to compile the oral laws as the Mishnah and other divine traditions. So, the main subject of education for the Jewish ruling class has become to learn the divine wills revealed and transmitted in the yeshivas. We only know of the divine teachings which have been preserved in Jewish intellectual legacy from then on: the two Talmuds and Tosephta, and other various Midrashic Literature. Any secular literature was hardly found in Jewish society in general for a long period.

It is interesting for me to learn the vocabulary of Hebrew terms denoting the subjects and activities of such an education. Mishnah stands for short directives for action, Midrash stands for the pursuit of meaning of the Scripture, Halakhah for short legal sentence, and Aggadah for stories, homilies and teachings of non-Halakhic content. All the words signify the teachings of divine wills and volitions. It seems as if the sages were not concerned with human intellectual and emotional activities for their own sake. If so then, what was the garden for them? How were they related to the beauty of nature? Did the sages encourage Jewish companions to entertain in seeing the beautiful garden and in the art of gardening in the natural landscape?

It may be advisable in this context to remind of the Hebrew term 'Pardes,' paradise or heavenly garden, comprised of four letters which were interpreted in the Middle Ages to signify four different levels of divine meanings of the Scripture: i.e. *peshat*, *remez*, *derash*, and *sod*, which are equivalent in turn to Christian Biblical exegesis: *littera*, *analogia*, *homily* or *moralis*, and *anagogia*. The divine ideal garden should be located in Heaven, not on earth. However, we should not rush to the conclusion.

Here I would bring two statements from the rabbinic literature and one verse from the Bible. In this paper I will not analyze each case for its own sake but as ideas seemingly influential on the Jewish people as a whole.

(1) Rabbinic Precepts toward the beauty of nature

The first case is taken from the Mishnah Avot chapter 3.² This teaching seems to imply negative attitude of sages against either the appreciation or the admiration of the beauty of the natural things. Rabbi Jacob said that "If a man was walking by the way and studying and he ceased his study and said, 'How fine is this tree!' or 'How fine is this ploughed field!' the Scripture reckons it to him as though he was guilty against his own soul."

In this admonition we have some problems which would make us hesitate to conclude the general attitude of the sages against the appreciation of nature. Though it is declared that the Scripture condemned the man who admired a fine tree, no text is alleged here. In addition, this saying refers to a specific occasion where a man is walking by the way. He is situated in a dangerous position. We are taught that "one who walks alone on a road is exposed to harm from evil spirits; and if he breaks off his Torah, which is his safeguard, he incurs a danger which he might have avoided".³ It may refer to a specific exceptional case in the sense that if he would be charmed by the aesthetic beauty of a tree, forget the Creator, and lose his mind even for a moment, then it would be so dangerous for him that the evil spirit could catch his mind and enter into him.

² This Mishnah is in Avot Chapter 3, Verse 8 according to the Danby's English version but is the second part of verse 7 according to Albeck's Hebrew version.

³ Mishnah Avot 3:9 according to the numbering of Herford, R. T.: *The Ethics of the Talmud* (Schocken Books, 1962), 73.

The second case seems to offer an opposing view on the beauty of nature. The sages taught in the Baraita that one who beholds beautiful creatures or beautiful trees shall say: "Blessed be He who has such things as these in His world".⁴

This Baraita is found in chapter nine of Tractate Berakhot of The Babylonian Talmud. Various blessings are listed in this chapter after the teachings of main blessings: i.e. the reading of the Shema, The Eighteen Benedictions, Birkat HaMazon. These additional blessings may give us a hint on the views of the sages toward the environment and nature including natural beauty and natural disasters. For example, the Mishnah teaches that a place where idolatry has been uprooted, he says "Blessed... Who uprooted idolatry from our land," and for mountains and for hills, and for seas and for rivers and for deserts, one says "Blessed ... Who has made creation."⁵ Our Baraita concerning the beautiful creatures is found in the Gemara of this last Mishnah which concerned those natural things as mountain, hills, and seas. But it seems strange that the beautiful creatures and trees are treated in the same category with such strange creatures as elephant, ape and long-tailed monkey. The tradition has it "Our Rabbis taught: One who sees an elephant, ape and long-tailed monkey says, 'Blessed be He Who makes strange creatures'. If one sees beautiful creatures and beautiful trees, one says: 'Blessed be He Who has such as these in His world'". These various blessings have one basic view in common that praise to God who has bestowed so much beauty in His world.⁶

This may be said to be the basic attitude of the sages to the Divine creation, i.e., *Ma'ase Bereshit*, which is the continuation of the idea of prophetic immediate experience of the Infinite,⁷ using the concept of Transcendent God of Descartes.⁸ The Bible preserves descriptions of the immediate revelation of the divine to humans who have interpreted it as the divine calling to be the prophet. We have it in the Book of Isaiah 6:1-3 that "I beheld my Lord seated on a high and lofty throne; and the skirts of His robe filled the Temple. Seraphs stood in attendance on Him...Holy, Holy, Holy! The Lord of Hosts! His presence fills all the earth".⁹ This last sentence

⁴ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 58b. English translation was taken from *the El-Am version of the Talmud, Berakhot* (Israel, 1982), 1059.

⁵ BT Berakhot 54a, *The El-Am version of the Talmud, Berakhot*, s983.

⁶ *The El-Am version of the Talmud, Berakhot*, 1059.

⁷ Hiroshi Ichikawa, "Legacy of the Prophetic Experience in Judaism," in *Consciousness and Reality—Studies in Memory of Toshihiko Izutsu* (edited by Taku Iwami et al, Iwanami Shoten Publishers, 1998), 183-20.

⁸ René Descartes, 'Principles of Philosophy' in *Descartes, Selected Philosophical Writings* (Cambridge University Press 1988), 166-169.

⁹ *The Jewish Study Bible, Second edition* (Oxford University Press), 778-9.

signifies the magnificence and glory of the divine power of creation. We would feel a similar impression in another description in the Book of Jeremiah 1:11-12 in that “What do you see, Jeremiah? I replied: I see a branch of almond tree (ShaKeD). The Lord said to me: You have seen right, For I am watchful (ShoKeD) to bring My word to pass”.¹⁰ If we are able to assume that the divine glory of Kavod experienced by the prophets had been worthy and evaluated by the subsequent sages, Jewish people could have enjoyed seeing beautiful nature and even arranging flower gardens.

These first and second traditions would teach us the opposing views of the sages concerning the attitude to the natural beauty and this may be typical Jewish dialectics. This debate will lead to the conclusion: The first opinion regards the aesthetic aspect of nature as negative element which will deprive human being of the adequate judgement of good and evil, while the second opinion evaluates aesthetic aspect of nature as means to help enhance human recognition of the ontological value of creation. However, it seems that the second view exactly stands for the legitimate and fundamental theory in terms of the divine creation, whereas the first view shows a real threat by the human propensity of deviating from the true cognition of the divine creation. Perhaps, the real problem is not the aesthetic aspect of nature but the human propensity. The threat does not come from outside but from inside of the human being.

Anyway, two opposing possibilities are open here. We are not sure which of these options would the Jewish people have taken as their dominant attitudes toward the aesthetic aspect of nature. So, we have to look into the view of the sages toward the human instinct.

(2) The beauty of the garden and the prohibition of idolatry

The third case comes from the Bible, on the creation of woman. We could make the distinction in the idea of goodness in the Creation story, in which the goodness which God saw in each creature and said that it was good, was sharply distinguished from the goodness which Eve felt when she saw the tree that it was pleasant to the eyes (Genesis 3:6).

Why did her decision deviate from the right way? This story reminds us of the Jewish obsessed adherence to the prohibition of idolatry, when interpreted in the spirit of above-mentioned Rabbi Jacob’s saying of the Mishnah. The man who admired a fine tree, is exposed to harm from evil spirits that are within himself; Eve’s personal affection to the beauty of the tree

¹⁰ Ibid, 908.

symbolizes the human instinct, desire, or impulse, which is exactly equivalent to the Hebrew term *yetzer* which would be usually activated against the will of God. I am not sure but it seems that the typical Jewish negative evaluation to the aesthetic aspect of natural beauty might have been caused by the Rabbinic strictly negative attitude against idolatry. I am inclined to think that they did not like to arrange the garden beautifully for entertainment for fear of the idolatry or lest being doubted of idolatry. The diaspora condition of Jewish life ever since the late ancient period through the long Middle Ages onward, they were always careful not to be influenced by the Greek, Hellenistic, or Roman culture of representative images. And then they became unconcerned with the beautiful surroundings of nature, still less entertained in arranging for garden. Rather the ideal garden of the 'Pardes' will be more proper idea for their enlightenment. That is the garden full of divine ideas and counter-ideas, with plural levels of meaning of the directives and statements of the divine Scripture. Entrance to the garden is through the Talmudic study and discussion. There can be nothing in nature on earth as a garden of the Transcendent. Such a garden will be only found in heaven, in ideal world, which is not to be perceived by human cognition. It will be found beyond over the way of the Talmudic study.

I might have put too much emphasis on the obsessed hesitation of the sages afraid of human sinful tendency. There have been traditions somewhere in Jewish communities decorating the interior of the synagogues: the mosaic pavement floor with the famous Biblical scenes and the Zodiac in the ancient synagogues in the Galilee, the fresco paintings of the Biblical scene on the walls of the ancient synagogue in Dura-Europos, the palace-like noble hall of the early modern synagogue of the Venetian Ghetto Nuovo, and the restored overwhelming picturesque synagogue of the Eastern Europe in Polin Jewish Museum in Warsaw. These examples may teach us that Jewish people have been permitted to entertain beautiful things as long as they were kept inside the sacred precinct.

Conclusion

I tried to compare the idea of enlightenment in Judaism and Buddhism by means of the notions of the garden. Pardes, Jewish equivalent to garden, which signifies heavenly garden, an ideal aspect of natural beauty, is the revelation of the divine teaching in Scripture in Judaism. The will of God can be said to be immanent in the 'pardes' in transcendence and articulated only in words, but will not be revealed to us by images or natural and artificial objects. Contrary to that, in Zen-Buddhism,

a natural garden with sand and rocks or with some trees and groves has been used as the means to make our mind observable for ourselves or to project our mind to a natural garden. For the upper class of Japan in early modern era, the aesthetic aspect of nature came to be recognized as the means to introspection into our own heart by the notion of *Cha-zen Ichi-mi* of the ritual of tea. Then garden which is part of the ritual of tea has been indispensable as the means to enlightenment for the upper class of society at the beginning but then the idea has spread and prevailing to common people all over Japan.

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