

Deep Japanese Buddhism and Architecture

It is going to be assumed here that the highest forms of Buddhism have been preserved in Japan, and that these forms may lead in some way to Buddhist, or universal enlightenment. There is a strange contrast in their metaphysical form and this contrast is reflected in their temple architecture. Perhaps there is something very fundamental in that; but what may interest us here in America today is that both these tendencies are appearing more and more in contemporary Architecture and Landscaping.

One of these forms of Buddhism is called "Zen." It does not necessarily resemble what has been offered to the public in lectures. One of its main scriptures is called "Prajna-Paramita Hridaya Sutra" which can be translated as "Perfect Wisdom Heart Doctrine." From this one may quote:

"Here, O Sariputra, form is emptiness, and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness, whatever is form, that is emptiness, whatever is emptiness, that is form, the same is true of feelings, perceptions, impulses and consciousness."

We are concerned here with only one thing: how has this been reflected in Architecture and related arts.

My second trip to Osaka was mainly for the purpose of visiting the great monasteries of Mount Koyasan and the little known Monastery of Obaku.

Mount Koyasan is one of the great artistic wonders of the world. The first buildings there were established by the great teacher known as Kobo Daishi, one of the most versatile figures in history. He has brought back to Japan what is known as Shingon teaching. Shingon is Japanese for mantrayana or the use of sound, music and ritual in disciplinary training.

On the surface the basic teaching of Shingon is the opposite of Zen, that everything has meaning or existence. Instead of forms, feelings, impulses and perceptions being empty, any and all are pregnant with life. And one makes use of sound as well as of silence, and form, in the highest and best ways conceivable.

It is very hard to distinguish temples from museums on Mount Koyasan, but the unit-room seems to resemble the cave. Wherever there are mysteries, esoteric forms of worship and rituals, the tendency seems to be to resort to caves. Even in the long history of Jewish and Christian liturgy we find the ark or nave symbolically allied to the womb or tomb. We came from the womb and go to the tomb—and the two are just symmetrical opposites.

The Shingon temples I visited had separate rooms which had walls on three sides, ceilings and an open side. The inside wall was always covered by a painting. Some of these paintings are among the most delicate in existence. At Koyasan one can see some of the finest examples of Chinese painting. Also the earliest pictures of the grand school or tradition known as Kano which persisted for many centuries. We have the flowering of religious art along with excellent examples drawn from nature.

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The fourth side had its movable shoji covered with rice-paper, opening into a corridor. The other side of the corridor opened on to gardens. The buildings were so arranged that each room seemed to have its totally private garden. Yet as one walked along the corridor or veranda one would be surprised to have a completely different vista at almost every turning.

The gardens in general followed principles which we find even today in Japan and in Golden Gate park: still water, running water, rocks, small shrubs which flower and in the back bamboo. Fortunately when I was in Japan I seemed to have arrived at every place in the middle of its own Azalea season so many of the gardens, mountains and hills were at their best.

But the best gardens seem to have been on the shady side of the house; there was no glare, no brilliant sunlight there. Yes, you did have the sun when you went from one building to another, but trees kept the temples in partial shade. In other words darkness and shadow seem to be principles. The soul had to find its ways from darkness into light.

It may also be said in passing that the Shingon sect preserves many ancient Hindu institutions such as Vedic-like ceremonies and chants in Sanskrit.

There was some Chinese influence in the architecture. Thus the curvilinear instead of the planed-flat roofs, any other elements which came from China. But this China was of a different type than the Chinese influence I was to see at Obaku, the difference between T'ang and Ming.

The chaos which occurred in China during the Manchu invasion of the 17th century caused many literati and monks to flee to Japan. Included among them were monks of the Panchen-Ch'an sect which became Obaku-Zen in Japan. The doctrines of this sect are identical with those of Rinzai (the ko'an sect) and the chief difference is that they chant in Chinese instead of in Japanese, Sanskrit or Japanized Sanskrit.

Obaku can be easily reached from Osaka and with not much more difficulty from Kyoto though few Westerners have bothered to go there.

The compound is typically Chinese. There is a characteristic wall around it with circular openings on the side wells similar to the back-wall design in the Schaeffer School. The trees are not part of the landscape, the trees are the landscape. The attendants said they do not grow small or flowering herbs and indeed treat all herbs and small plants as weeds—to be removed if they are distractions. The atmosphere the trees give is that they also are in meditation and belong there along with the program of meditation and silence. (Form is emptiness).

The temple stands in marked contrast with most Japanese buildings. It is almost cathedral like. Evidently the Ming dynasty both inherited much from the preceding Mongols and also added to influences from such people as the Persians and Arabs.

As one looks upward there is a feeling similar to the awe one may have in cathedrals. This comes much more from the atmosphere than from the shape. The whole design makes use of rectilinear schemata both of the two-dimension and three-dimension variety. The roof is windowed and so the light streams in, not bright but rather resembling the filtered light of some greenhouses. The walls are covered with windows. The movable entrance-doors are windowed.

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There is a familiar feeling. We have here the western tradition that “in the beginning was light;” and the teaching of Buddha that all humanity already possessed perfect wisdom but was unaware of it. So in contrast to the mystery-teaching of the Egyptians and Shingon Buddhists of coming from darkness into light, everything was of the nature of light and there is no coming and no need to come (a teaching of the afore-mentioned Prajna-Paramita Hridaya and other Zen Sutras).

Instead of paintings one finds sculpture and ceramics. Some excellent examples have been retained and most students of Chinese art visit the place when they can. The benefit derived from courses under Ching Wah Lee demonstrated itself here. Indeed the whole regimen was based on the ubiquitous existence of light. It was in extreme marked contrast with Koyasan.

After returning home to the United States and watching the developments in Architecture, one cannot help noticing “the perennial philosophy” making its impression in so many of our new buildings. In a certain sense much of Japanese Zen has come here to stay.