

# **MA: Place, Space, Void**

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Length of time depends upon our ideas.

Size of space hangs upon our sentiments.

For one whose mind is free from care,

A day will outlast the millennium.

For one whose heart is large,

A tiny room is as the space between heaven and earth.<sup>1</sup>

1  
Translated from  
Saikontan (Vegetable  
Roots Talks), Yuhodo,  
Tokyo, 1926

[P]lace is the product of lived space and lived time, a reflection of our states of mind and heart. In the original Chinese, the above poem ends with the character 間, which in Japanese is pronounced chiefly as ma.

Originally, this character consisted of the pictorial sign for “moon” (月) — not the present-day “sun” (日) — under the sign for “gate” (門). For a Chinese or Japanese using language consciously, this ideogram, depicting a delicate moment of moonlight streaming through a chink in the entranceway, fully expresses the two simultaneous components of a sense of place: the objective, given aspect and the subjective, felt aspect.

2  
Nitschke, G. “MA —  
The Japanese Sense of  
Place,” Architectural  
Design, London, March  
1966

The translation of ma as “place” is my own.<sup>2</sup> The dictionaries say “space,” but historically the notion of place precedes our contemporary idea of space as a measurable area. Architectural theorists accept this: “In [our] understanding of nature we...recognize the origin of the concept of space as a system of places.”<sup>3</sup> My translation was selected in part to get away from the rendering of ma as “imaginary space” by Itoh Teiji<sup>4</sup>; this deals only with the subjective aspect, without doing justice to the full spectrum of use and meaning which this venerable character represents.

3  
Norberg-Schulz,  
Christian. *Genius Loci*  
— Towards a Phenome-  
nology of Architecture,  
Rizzoli, New York 1980.

4  
Itoh Teiji, *Nihon dizain*  
*ron* (Discourses on Jap-  
anese Design), Kashima  
Kenkyujo, Tokyo 1966.  
“Nihon no toshi kukan”  
(Japanese Urban  
Space), *Kenchiku Bun-*  
*ka* 12, Tokyo, 1963

It must be stressed that a ‘sense of place’ does not negate an objective awareness of the static or homogenous quality of topological space. Rather, it infuses the objective space with an additional subjective awareness of lived, existential, non-homogenous space. It also incorporates a recognition of the activities which ‘take place’ in a particular space, and different meanings a place might have for various individuals or cultures. “Physical appearance, activities, and meanings are the raw material of the identity of places...”<sup>5</sup>

5  
Ralph, Edward, *Place*  
*and Placelessness*, Pion  
Ltd, London, 1976.

From the hundreds of uses of the character ma in traditional and modern Japanese, I have selected a few which I present here in order of increasing complexity of meaning.

# The Domain of Objectivity

## Ma: The One-Dimensional Realm

梁間 (hari-ma) Beam span

Here ma denotes a line in space, a measure of length or distance. From ancient times Japanese architecture was based on wooden post-and-beam construction. The distance between the centerlines of successive posts — the hashira-ma (橋ウマ) — evolved into the basic structural unit of the traditional Japanese wooden house. To signify this carpentry measure, the character is pronounced ken. (Over time and in different regions of the country the ken varied in length from about 10 to 6 feet). By the 16 century, all column sizes and timber dimensions were expressed as fractions or multiples of ken. The sizes of the rush mats which evolved into tatami were also originally derived from the ken.

東京と京都の間 (Tokyo to Kyoto no aida) Between Tokyo and Kyoto

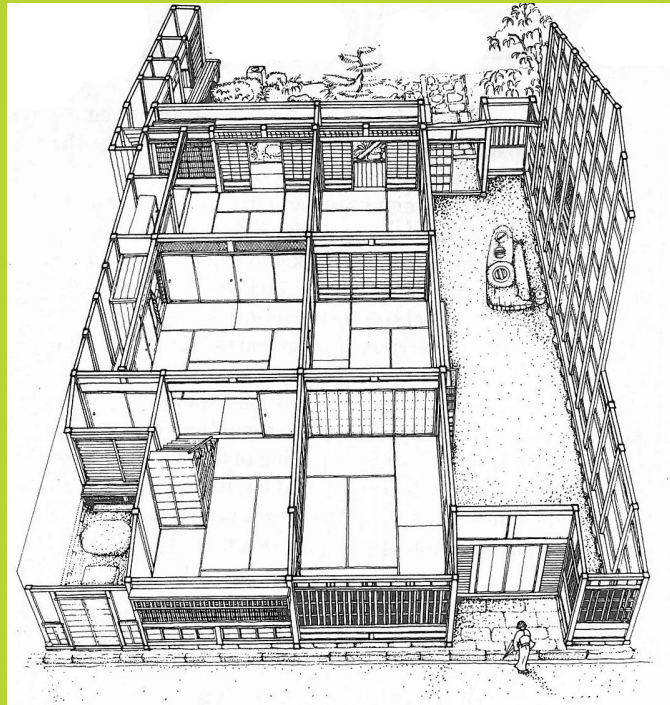
Standing alone and pronounced as aida, 間 denotes not only a straightline distance between two points in space, but also a simultaneous awareness of both poles as individual units. Thus even in a simple onedimensional use, the character ma exhibits its peculiar ambivalence, signifying both “distance” or “interstice” and “relatedness” or “polarity.”<sup>6</sup>

## Ma: The Two-Dimensional Realm

六畳の間 (roku jo no ma) Six-tatami room (literally: six tatami area)

Ma combined with a number of tatami mats denotes area. For a Japanese, however, a reference to a room of a certain number of floor mats would also instantly call to mind a particular usage, interior makeup, decoration and height.<sup>7</sup>

Since the adoption of the tatami in Japanese residential architecture about 500 years ago, there have been two ways of expressing land area: the tsubo (坪), an area one ken square measured from the centerlines of the columns; and jo (帖), the area covered by one tatami. Neither is an exact measure. The tsubo does not respect the thickness of the walls, while tatami sizes vary from region to region. For modern construction, the square meter is always used.



Isometric sketch of a typical machiya townhouse of Nara Prefecture in Imae-cho, showing a doma as a kitchen and workspace (From *Nihon no Minka*, Gakken, Tokyo 1980)

<sup>6</sup> LaFleur, William R. “Notes on Watsuji Tetsuro’s Social Philosophy and the Arts: Ma in Man, Time and Space,” unpublished paper, Topical Seminar on Time and Space in Japanese Culture, Cornell University, 1976.

<sup>7</sup> For a detailed study of the relationship between a room size and its social use over history, see Kojiro Junichiro, “Kokono-ma ron” (The Ninemat Room), in *SD: Space Design*, Tokyo, June 1969.

<sup>8</sup> Ono Suzumu, *Nihongo o sukano-boru* (Tracing the Origins of the Japanese Language), Chapter 2, Iwanami Shinsho, Tokyo, 1972.

## Ma: The Three-Dimensional Realm

空間 (ku-kan) Space (literally: empty place)

The first character in this word originally stood for a “hole in the ground,” and later took on its present meaning of a “hole in the universe” or “the sky.” Ono Susumu<sup>8</sup> suggests that the ancient Japanese divided space vertically into two parts. One was sora (空, sky), which was understood as absence of content, emptiness. The other was ame or ama (天, heaven), which was the opposite of kuni (国, region, realm, government) and thus meant an earthly area of habitation and rule.

Today ku is used for “empty” in the simple physical sense, and for “void” in Buddhist metaphysics. The compound ku-kan and for “void” in Buddhist metaphysics. The compound ku-kun is of recent origin. It was coined to express the concept of three-dimensional objective space which was imported from the West, for which the Japanese language had no word of its own. (The Western concept was, and still is, inherently static and unchanging, without any dynamic sense of variation or human subjectivity. It is merely three-dimensional.)

Thus ku-kan compounds two characters which are charged with independent meanings by long Chinese and Japanese cultural traditions including Buddhism. These traditional meanings soon influenced the compound, yielding a meaning different from the original intent, and causing some obvious confusion in postwar architectural writing.

The structure of Japanese dictates a linguistic description of space different from that of European languages, as illustrated in the following combinations of ma with other characters.

土間 (do-ma) Work space (literally: earth place), especially in farmhouses with stamped-earth floors

間引く (ma-biku) To thin out (literally: to draw or pull space), making room for plants to grow

貸間 (kashi-ma) Room to let

茶の間 (cha-no-ma) Tea room; because of the word “cha” (tea), this denotes space in the home where guests are entertained or the family gathers

床の間 (toko-no-ma) Display alcove in the traditional Japanese sitting or guest room for a scroll, flower arrangement or objet d’art

The toko-no-ma is at once a spatial and an aesthetic concept, and furthermore has an important social connotation in Japanese life. Classically it constitutes the unifying focus between host and guest, through an act of creation on the part of the host and an act of appreciation on the part of the guest.

虎の間 (tora-no-ma) The Tiger Room (literally, place of tigers) is the name of a room in the abbot's quarters at Nanzenji in Kyoto. The dominant decorative motif on the sliding doors becomes the qualifier of the entire space, a common custom in mansions, castles, temples and present-day hotel ballrooms. The naming of places, manmade or natural, is a universal means of giving meaning and identity to a lived or existential space.

鏡の間 (kagami-no-ma) Dressing room (literally: mirror room) separated from the noh stage by a curtain. This is the place reserved for the magical transformation of the actor, via the donning of the spiritually-charged noh mask, and the meditation or inner-reflection involved in facing the full-length mirror.

## Ma: The Four-Dimensional Realm

時間 (ji-kan) Time (literally: time-place)

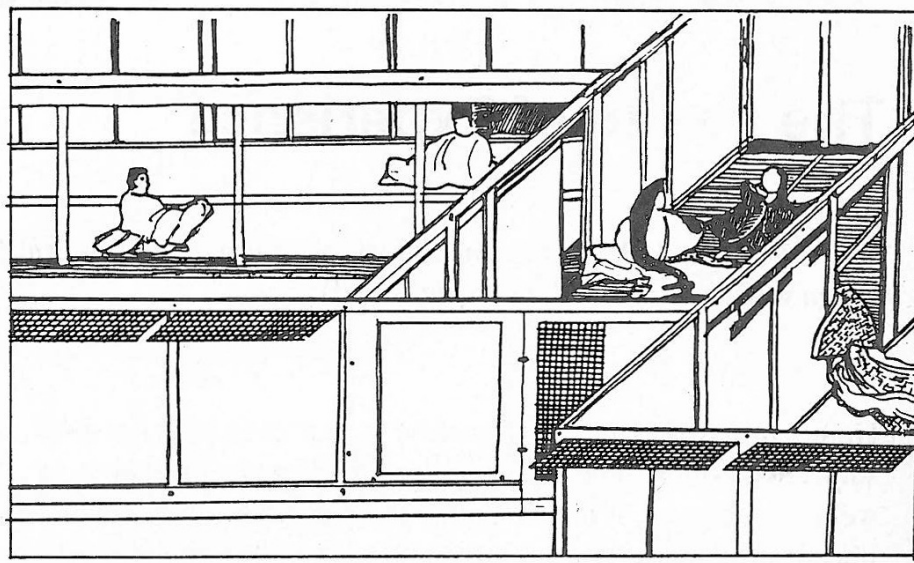
This is abstract time, with no indication of length, beginning or end. The ji character, which incorporates the radical for "sun," is said to have denoted "forward movement of the sun" in ancient China. In Japanese the character is also pronounced toki, perhaps from the very old Japanese verb toku, to melt or dissolve. Thus "time" is expressed in Japanese as "space in flow," making time a dimension of space. Indeed, time is essential to human experience of place.

Here are a few modern Japanese phrases in which ma (sometimes pronounced kan) denotes stretches of time.

瞬間 (shun-kan) A moment (literally: a blink or twinkle of time)

間に合う (ma-ni-au) To be in time for (literally: to meet the time)

間もなく (ma mo naku) Soon (literally: in no time)



Fukinuke-yatai painting techniques by which the viewer is invited to move from scene to scene. (Redrawn from Kasuga Gongen scroll c. 1300)

Most cultures measure and express time in terms of intervals in space (or at least they did so before digital clocks replaced sundials and watchdials). It is not surprising then, that the same Japanese character, pronounced variously as ma or aida or kan, can be used to denote either temporal or spatial extension. Some examples:

相間 (ai-no-ma) Literally: reciprocating place

1. A room in between
2. Interval, leisure

間近い (ma-jikai) Literally: a close space

1. Close at hand (spatially)
2. Drawing near (temporally)

間者 (kan-ja) Spy (literally: ma person); one who works in between known spaces or known hours

間男 (ma-otoko) Adulterer (literally: ma man) one who makes love in between usual places or usual times.

The dual relation of ma to space and time is not simply semantic. It reflects the fact that all experience of space is a time-structured process, and all experience of time is a space-structured process.

When we look at a traditional Japanese scroll picture or emaki-mono, time is concretely present as our eyes follow a sequence of spatial events interrupted by writing. Our hands actually unroll the scroll, that is, “move the space” as time passes. Nothing could be more detrimental to the intended narrative process of viewing than a full simultaneous display of the scroll as a whole. In traditional Japanese paintings of palaces and gardens shown in the fukinuke-yatai or “blown-away rooftop” technique, time becomes part of our spatial experience as our eyes have to move from scene to scene in various adjacent spaces.

In traditional tourist manuals of famous scenic routes, which were sold as small books and could be unfolded into continuous strip pictures often more than 20 feet in length, an additional technique was used to represent space as a time-structured process. The spatial sights would be drawn above and below the continuous central road, shown as they would unfold themselves concretely over time to the actual traveller. Thus we end up with a “plan” of the route quite different from our modern orthographic maps. In a Tokaido manual of the mid-nineteenth century, for instance, Mt. Fuji is represented about 50 times in various settings along the route.

We can find a similar presentation and understanding of space as a time and mood structured process in the layout of traditional Japanese stroll gardens and, on a smaller scale, a traditional Japanese stroll gardens and, on a smaller scale, in the placement of tobi-ishi, (“skipping stones”) used to make garden paths. By a sophisticated placing of the stones, our foot movements can be slowed down, sped up, halted or turned in various directions. And with our legs, our eyes are manipulated, and our visual input from spatial phenomena is structured over time.



Calligraphy in the grass style, meaning “mysterious and far away”, painted by Kimura in 1983. (From Sumi, November 1983, Geijutsu Shimbunsha, Tokyo)



# The Domain of Subjectivity

## Ma: The Realm of Experience

間が悪い (ma ga warui) I am uncomfortable, embarrassed  
(literally: the placing is bad)

Here a time/space metaphor is used to express a very personal, subjective notion. The phrase is used in everyday situations as well as in the arts. It means that a place or situation is uncomfortable, because of either the atmosphere (environmental or social) or one's own mood, with the result that one becomes self-conscious or embarrassed. A contemporary rendering might be, "the vibes are bad."

This shows us another side of the ma concept — the notion that animation is an essential feature of place. The animation may be something which is projected from one's subjective feelings; but it also may be some external, objective quality, the genius loci or the spirit, which projects itself into our minds. Rene Dubos has alluded to this duality: "I remember the mood of places better than their precise features because places evoke for me life situations rather than geographical sites."<sup>9</sup> The uses of ma point up the fact that the identity of a place is as much in the mind of the beholder as in its physical characteristics.

Many waka and haiku poems begin with a phrase that employs ma to paint the atmosphere of energy of the setting.

Examples:

木の間 (ko-no-ma) Among trees (literally: place/time/mood of trees)

波間 (nami-ma) On waves (place/time/mood of waves)

岩間 (iwa-ma) On rocks (place/time/mood of rocks)

## Ma: The Realm of Art

Ma ga warui or its opposite, ma ga umai, is often used an aesthetic judgment of Japanese calligraphy or sumi-e painting. Compared with Western painting, these Sino-Japanese art forms involve large unpainted areas. Anyone practicing calligraphy soon realizes that proficiency lies not merely in mastering the form of the characters, but also in the relationship of the form to the surrounding non-form. This balance of form and space will always be taken into account in the final artistic judgment.

9.  
Dubos, Rene. A God Within, Scribner's, New York, 1972.

10  
Komparu Junio, The Noh Theatre: Principles and Perspectives, Weatherhill/Tankosha, Tokyo 1983. [11]  
Seike Kyoshi, "Sumai to ma," in Nihonjin to ma, Kenmochi Takehiko, ed., Kodansha, Tokyo 1981..

11  
Seike Kyoshi, "Sumai to ma," in Nihonjin to ma, Kenmochi Takehiko, ed., Kodansha, Tokyo 1981.

The proper appreciation of calligraphy also takes note of the dimension of time, for calligraphy is more than simple painting or drawing. It is an intricate mixture of poetry, dance and action painting. It is not only the placing of form into space, but also the marking of rhythm in time — the traces of the movement and speed of the brush.

In the area of the performing arts, the following is the typical phrase used to praise used to praise a performance of rakugo, the traditional comic storytelling genre:

(hanashi no ma go umai) This time (ma) of the story was excellent

The aesthetic quality of the rakugo performance depends as much or more on the time of the pauses as on the quality of the voice. The pause is both an interval in time and a bridge between sound and silence. The 15-century poet Shinkei had this to say about ma in the recitation of poetry: "In linked verse, put your mind to what is not."

This admonition corresponds to the oft-quoted dictum on noh acting by Zeami, the great formulator of the noh plays: "What [the actor] does not do is of interest" (Senu tokoro ga omoshi-roki). Indeed, Komparu Kunio regards noh as no more nor less than the art of ma: the staging is meant to "create a constantly transmuting, transforming space [ma] of action"; the acting, to do "just enough to create the ma that is a blank space-time where nothing is done": the music, to "exist in the negative, blank spaces generated by the actual sounds" and the dance, to acquire "the technique of non-movement."<sup>10</sup>

Noh is the supreme expression of the art of ma, combining all the aspects that have so far been elaborated here into one great symphony. It epitomizes the traditional Japanese artistic preoccupation with dynamic balance between object and space, action and inaction, sound and silence, movement and rest.

間取り (ma-dori) Design (literally: grasp of place.

The Japanese architect traditional worked to "create a sense of place" (ma-dori o tsukuru). Implicit in this term, according to architect Seike Kyoshi<sup>11</sup>, was the design not only of structural elements in space, but also of the variable arrangements for temporary uses which are so characteristic of the Japanese dwelling. By adding and removing sliding doors, windows, portable screens and other household utensils, the Japanese home is adapted to changing seasons, uses and social needs. Nowadays, unfortunately, the term ma-dori, so charged with connotations

of place, has been replaced with an “exotic” imported term: dizain (design).

## Ma: The Realm of Society

Japanese collective conditioning is very well developed. The importance of sense of place to this mindset is revealed in some of the phrases used to describe cases of deficiency.

Japanese collective conditioning is very well developed. The importance of sense of place to this mindset is revealed in some of the phrases used to describe cases of deficiency.

間抜け (ma-nuke) Simpleton, fool (literally: someone missing ma)

間違う (ma-chigau) To be mistaken (literally: place differs)

Clearly, the Japanese language is shot through with a dynamic sense of place. But the profound importance of the ma concept in Japanese society is best revealed in the everyday terms for “human being” and “the world”:

人間 (nin-gen) Human being (literally, person-place or person-inrelationship)

世間 (se-ken) World, society (literally: world-place or world-inrelationship)

仲間 (naka-ma) Coterie; companion (literally: relationship-place)

Two related conclusions seems to offer themselves. First, that people are thought to exist only in the context of “place.” Mankind was seen as only one component in a bigger whole of man/environment/nature. The implication is that the greater the whole, rather than human beings by themselves, is the measure of all things. This is reinforced by Buddhist philosophy.

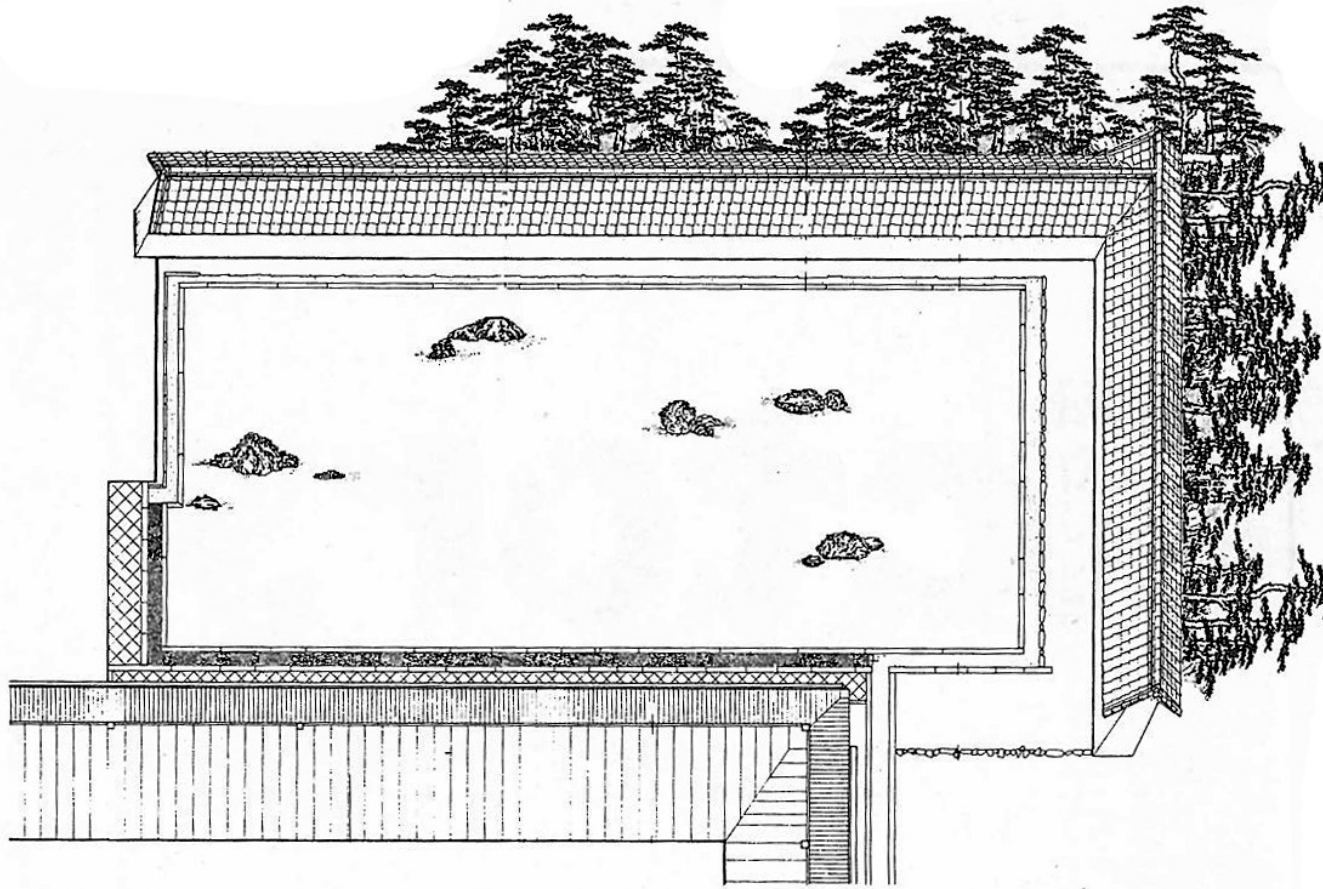
The second point is more obvious in Japanese behavior: everyone must have a social “place,” for it is one’s social relations, and not one’s individual characteristics, that constitutes identity. Hence the ubiquitous namecard, clearly identifying the bearer’s place and role. Traditionally, Japanese had no word corresponding to “individual” in the Western sense. The current word for “individual,” *kojin* (個人 literally, it=person), was coined recently to express an imported Western notion. There has always been the common word for person/people, *hito* (人), but it refers to a discrete body and has none of the isolating nuance of the Western “individual.”

In the Japanese language, and thus in the society, a person is conceived of as a flexible and easily linkable dividual, that is, as part split from and belonging to a larger whole. Everyone is educated to shake off the delusion of a separate individual ego, and to express supra-individual values. What characterizes a person as human is that one is always together with other humans. In Japanese history, the only physical escape from the community was through withdrawal into the mountains, and in that case a person was referred to as *sen-nin* (仙人) “hermit,” a world of otherworldly nuance. There never has been a Japanese word for “privacy.”

In contrast, the Western mind has tended to envisage the human being as a perfect and self-contained individuum (that is, indivisible whole) who should be educated to distinguish oneself from everyone else. We are encouraged to view the self as real, to discipline I and to express highly individual values. The desire to produce individual genius, a “superman,” has haunted all of Western history.

The corresponding social ideas are of course diametrically opposed: the Western society of self-assertion, of the eternal conflict of individual interests, and the Japanese society.





Bird's-eye view of the rock at Ryoanji (From Izozaki Arata, *Ma: Space/Time in Japan*, Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York 1976)

<sup>12</sup>  
LaFleur, William, "Saigyō and the  
Buddhist Value of Nature," Part II,  
*History of Religions*, Feb. 1974. The  
translations are my own.

## The Domain of Metaphysics

Ma was adopted by Japanese Buddhists to express the notion of emptiness or the void. Two examples of this use by the poet-monk Saigyō in the 12 century employ the following compound:

絶え間 (taema) Pause, gap (literally: discontinuous place)

The first poem catches a momentary glance over the Inland Sea:

Kumori naki  
yama nite umi no  
tsuki mireba  
shima zo kohori no  
tae-ma narikeri

Not clouded  
mountains around the sea  
in which the moon I see;  
the islands, in ice  
holes become.

The second poem relates the scene of a rainstorm in the monk's hut:

mizu no oto wa  
sabishiki io no  
tomo nare ya  
mine no arashi no  
tae-ma tae-ma ni

Sound of water,  
of this lonely hermitage  
the only friend becomes,  
in the gaps and gaps  
of the mountain storm.<sup>12</sup>

The adoption of tae-ma in these poems is an allusions to the Buddhist experience of ku (空), of the void or emptiness; the first uses a spatial metaphor, the second a temporal one. They are expressions not only a poet, but of a mediator too.

With the discussion of the void we have left the scope of phenomenology, architectural or otherwise. The "void" in the Buddhist sense is not a concept arrived at by rational thought, but an expression of an incommunicable individual experience, accessible only to a person practicing meditation.

The classic expression of the paradoxical nature of this emptiness is or no-thingness is the Heart Sutra. It is one of the discourses ascribed to Gautama Buddha, and is recited by almost all Buddhist sects in Japan. It begins with:

Here, o Sariputra, form is emptiness and the very emptiness is form; emptiness does not differ from form, form does not differ from emptiness.<sup>13</sup>

This world view offered by Buddhism only makes sense if one appreciates the first word of the sutra, the word “here.” “Here” means “in my state of being,” that is, enlightenment. Thus, for the normal human being the sutra cannot make sense; it will stay utterly paradoxical. Ultimately, nothing can be stated about the “void.” It is impossible even to think about it.

Nevertheless, enlightened ones, each in their own way, have created many devices with which they have tried to lure their disciples into a state of being in which the above phrase does make sense.

Buddha used words and what he said has been transmitted to us in the sutras. Chinese and Japanese enlightened masters who have followed his path have used poetry, painting and gardening to communicate their messages. One of the most famous examples, and for me an effective one, is the rock-garden at Ryoanji, the “Peaceful Dragon Temple” in Kyoto. We do not know who created the garden, nor when it was created in its present form. It is a karesansui (dry landscape garden), to be appreciated from a fixed vantage point, on the verandah of the temple.

My suspicion is that the origin of the garden lies in meditation techniques using staring.<sup>14</sup> For here, the object — the natural rocks — is aesthetically so perfectly arranged in space — the finely raked white sand surface — that eventually the onlooker ceases to be aware of either the one or the other separately. The flow of energy is reversed and one is thrown onto the experience per se — consciousness.

This “experience” — the word has to be used in quotation marks now — of consciousness is the “experience” of the “void,” of “no-thingness,” of “emptiness.” It is therefore not a philosophical or aesthetic concept, but a notion derived from personal experience, a notion both beside and beyond the personal experience, a notion both beside and beyond the experience of our physical world. It does not deny it. It is based on the reversal of the usual flow of our energy.

13  
Rajneesh, Bhagwan Shree, The  
Heart Sutra, Rajneesh Foundation,  
Poona 1977.

15  
Tagore, Rabindranath, Poem 100,  
Gitanjali, London 1914.

14  
An outstanding explanation of  
visual meditation techniques is  
in Rajneesh, Bhagwan Shree, The  
Book of Secrets, Vol. 2, Rajneesh  
Foundation, Poona 1975, pp.  
105-181

A blank surface of sand in front of a Buddhist temple or an empty sheet of white paper in Zen painting is not enough to trigger this insight. Architecture, gardening, painting or poetry, that is, some highly sophisticated setting of form and non-form, is necessary to “experience” the void in the above sense. Only a poet can put this paradox into words:

I dived down into the depth of the ocean of forms, hoping to gain the perfect pearl of the formless.<sup>15</sup>

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## Colophon

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