It might sound weird how a kid could see zen inside a Japanese rock garden (karesansui), but I can well remember the first time that I saw a picture of one. I knew nothing about zen back then, and nor did I know anything about karesansui. Still, I was stunned at how the ripples could be so peaceful and dynamic at the same time. For one second I thought about time, about how time dripped away, little by little, quietly, just like the ripples in a karesansui. At the same time, a very different interpretation of time came to my mind, about how time could be still even though it looked as if it was passing by. There are things that remain unchanged time after time. That was my first encounter with zen.

Over the years I've seen so many people trying to figure out what a karesansui implies: wabi-sabi, mujō, yūgen…I, too, wonder what the garden wants to convey through the sands and stones, so I took this class and chose karesansui as my topic. I thought lots of Buddhist ideas were baked into the design, and the designer was trying to show his understanding of these terms. However, to my surprise, as I worked on the project, I learned that was not true, that karesansui was not built to show the designer's understanding, but to show the visitor's understanding.

If there's any purpose that a karesansui carries, the purpose is to encourage *you* to think. What you get out of the garden is entirely up to you, not the designer. The sense of time I felt from the ripples didn't come from the garden. Instead, I was the one who created this feeling, and karesansui merely provided a medium for me to think. In some sense, karesansui can be interpreted as a kōan. Rather than telling people something, it asks people to feel it themselves. The entire idea of "figuring out" what a karesansui means is just so against the designer's intention, who wasn't trying to teach you, but rather, was trying to ask you to teach yourself, and show him your understanding. In fact, according to the book *Shots in the Dark,* linking

karesansui to zen, or Buddhism as a whole, is nothing but a stereotype from the west. The garden is a method to zen, rather than zen itself.

There is one chapter of the book dedicated to various attempts people used to prove the beauty of karesansui. Shigemori Mirei used supplemental lines, Eyama proposed the gold ratio, Ōyama Heishirō gave the famous explanation that only 14 out of the 15 stones are visible, Gerte J.Van Tonder even used computers to aid the calculations. Don't get me wrong, I am a computer major myself and I know how machines can be helpful in various ways. But this entire thing of proving its beauty just feels so wrong. For people who get its beauty, no explanation is necessary; and for people who don't, how are they supposed to feel the beauty using computer algorithms? And here comes my key takeaway from the project, that beauty, just like buddha nature, can never be proved or explained, but only be felt through performances. This is just like the provisional truth and the absolute truth: to get to the absolute truth you can use provisional truth (a medium), but whether you get it or not, is entirely up to you and no one else.

I planned to analyze the Buddhist ideas behind the design of the karesansui, only to find that there was no such answer and that karesansui itself was a kōan to be deciphered by no one but me. Instead of gathering people's interpretations, I left some of my own interpretations in the second column of the poster. They are by no means the correct answers, or the best answers. I devoted quite a lot of space trying to explain why karesansui can be interpreted as a kōan, and how the designer is using it as a skillful means to help visitors achieve awakening. In the third column of the poster, I give my interpretations of the beauty of the sakura tree (weeping cherry blossom tree) at Ryōanji, which somehow resonate with what the Japanese people think, that sakura flowers remind them of the impermanence of life, and symbolize purity. In the last column of the poster, I added some analysis of the architectural style of Ryōanji as a Zen temple,

and what Buddhist ideas are behind the scene. Unlike the karesansui, which is built to serve no other purposes but being a physical kōan, Ryōanji does carry Buddhism concepts in its design. It follows a uniform design called Zenshūyō, which was imported from China, but flourished in Japan. And finally, the first column of the poster provides some background information about Zen, Buddhism and Ryōanji so that the rest of the three columns make more sense.

Why four columns? I put four columns into the poster as four seasons, just like the fusuma in Ryōanji with four panels. I came from Hong Kong, a place that has always been warm, and now I'm in New York, where summer and winter are so different. Seeing the tree leaves fall and pile up on the ground reminds me of, yes, the impermanence of life. But at the same time I realize, again, that what's gone might return in another form. The leaves that fall will come back next year in spring. If you look at it this way, time has never slipped away.

If everything is essentially empty, including time, what shall we do as tiny little creatures in this great grand universe of emptiness? I guess the conversation between Dōgen and the cook drying mushrooms under the sun answers just that question.

"When else can I do it but now? Who else could do it but me?"

All we can do to capture this moment, is to give it all we have, plunge in, and feel it wholeheartedly. I must sound like Kūkai at this point, but trust me, I'm zen. This project means more to me than just a project, and this course means more to me than just a course, because I realize there's no better moment to practice than now, and I'm the only one who can do it.