Ceramic Process as a Reflection of Environmental Values: A Buddhist Perspective

by

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Summary

Many twentieth-century artists have responded to environmental concerns in their work. The issues addressed have often reflected broader community concerns and helped to raise community awareness and alert people to problems. No single work or artist can hope to effect the necessary changes in governmental or corporate policy and practice to make radical improvements in the situation, but the obvious and important aim is to contribute to the discussion. The environmental values that artists bring to, and express, in their art are shaped by a wide variety of experiences and philosophies, but what has not been explored in depth is the complete integration of the Buddhist formulation of these values into an artist's ideas and work. As a practising artist and Buddhist, deeply concerned about the current state of our environment, I aim to explore and demonstrate how environmental values embedded in Buddhist philosophy can be expressed in my artwork. As Buddhism is a part of who I am, both as a person and artist, there is necessarily an autobiographical element to this research.

In the making of my ceramics I respond to the aesthetic qualities of natural forms but in using them as installation pieces as part of a Zen-like garden I aim to express a much deeper level of engagement with nature and the environment. This engagement is informed by an understanding of the human interaction with nature, which in turn, is informed by the Buddhist belief that all living beings share a common journey, that is a lifecycle based on birth, growth, death and rebirth. The way humans respond to and value these lifecycles is implicit in how we interact with nature. I have a deep faith in Buddhist

philosophy and believe that an understanding of Buddhism can help one deal with the journey through life and the consequent interaction with nature. Therefore this research is focused on creating a body of artwork that is reflective of a Buddhist understanding of environmental values.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis, except with the Research Graduate School Committee's approval, contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other institution and affirm that to the best of my knowledge the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference is made in the text of the thesis.

Li-Feng Lo, Signed……..

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Introduction

In the practice of making ceramics the forms I create come through myself and my working processes, yet I am drawn to nature and thus I represent it. This is evidenced on a material level as a response to the aesthetic qualities of natural forms. But there is a much deeper level of engagement, one that acknowledges that environmental values are based on the human interaction with nature and that, in turn, this interaction stems from the endless cycles of birth, growth and death. These lifecycles, whether they are human or that of other living things, have an effect on the world in which we live, and raise issues about caring for the world in terms of conservation. I have a deep faith in Buddhist philosophy and believe that an understanding of Buddhism can help one deal with this interaction with life and the care of nature.

This research is therefore focused on creating a body of artwork using scale, colour, the shape and form of nature to characterise its qualities. In this way it is reflective of a Buddhist understanding of environmental values. As these environmental values evolve through an understanding of life processes, it is appropriate that this work has an autobiographical element. At many points in this research, I reflect on my own life experiences in relation to death, family, art and Buddhism in order to forge links between the process of making ceramics and the formulation of environmental values. The term ‘environmental values’ is used very consciously because I do not want to limit myself to the strict definition of conservation policies and practices. Rather, I see the term operating on the philosophical level in line with the practice of Buddhism whereby humans are taught to live in harmony with nature.

The aim of studying Buddhism is to reach enlightenment. It is a journey that takes one from a position of naivety where things are seen very simply. The expression that is often used to explain this first level is that the student just sees that the ‘the mountain is mountain and the water is water.’ By practising

Chan/Zen meditation the student will move on to the realisation that ‘the mountain is not mountain and the water is not water.’ In other words there is a sense of confusion, as one’s perceptions of the world are challenged. When the student reaches the enlightenment level, there will be the sense of awakening and clarity so that the ‘mountain becomes mountain again and the water becomes water again.’ It is at this point that the truth is fully realised.

The process of making ceramics is itself a method of engaging in a meditative practice that allows the maker, through the very physicality of moving and manipulating the clay, to reflect on the process of transformation. This transformation can be compared to a lifecycle where something grows, develops and matures. The clay itself is inanimate, of course, but through the hands, the mind and the energy of the maker it becomes something else. In creating natural forms in ceramics I do not aim to imitate or illustrate nature but rather, somewhat paradoxically, to connect with intrinsic qualities of nature such as fragility, and transience.

Living things, by definition, can replicate and perpetuate themselves, constantly responding and adapting to their environment. But living things must also have an end. In personal terms this means dealing with the death of loved ones. Through an exploration of Buddhist ideas I am able to connect the life and death of those close to me with the cycles of life in both human and natural terms. This intense investigation, therefore, supports personal healing. More broadly speaking, it leads to an acceptance of the randomness and spontaneity of nature and an understanding of the truth about life and death. It is in this process that environmental values are realised as the essential interconnectedness between humans and nature must be respected and protected if we are truly to live in harmony with our environment.

This exegesis, therefore, explores how environmental values are shaped by Buddhist beliefs on life, death and nature. Chapter One deals with Buddhist philosophy both in general terms, by way of some important background

information but also more specifically in relation to my own Buddhist journey. It is essential to start with an overview of basic Buddhist tenets as they provide the framework for the subsequent engagement with the environment. I grew up with Buddhism and in choosing to follow one particular master, Sheng-Yen, I have realized that Buddhism, in helping me deal with life experiences, is integral to how I think about art and make art. The work of Master Sheng-Yen is vital to this research project as his approach to environmental protection is to position it as intrinsic to human life itself, both in physical and spiritual terms. To follow Sheng-Yen's teaching is to see no division between one's faith and how one cares for the environment. The Buddhist philosophy is that as humans we need to understand how all of us can live in harmony with nature. This underpins the research and is key to understanding nature and human lifecycles.

The research then extends in Chapter Two to an investigation of how the practice of Buddhism has supported and shaped creative endeavours and, in particular, the role of ceramics in representing Buddhist ideas and beliefs. The social and cultural activities that have emerged through the practice of the Buddhist faith have in fact supported a range of creative practices including Ikebana, the Tea ceremony, Chinese calligraphy and painting, and Zen garden design. These practices will also be considered in this chapter as they contribute to an understanding of how the customs and traditions of Buddhism are given a visual presence, a presence that informs my own artwork.

The investigation then turns, in Chapter Three, to the specifics of the environmental values as delineated through Buddhist teaching and the application of these values to the enterprise of being a ceramicist. Many of the concerns are as relevant to the everyday life of individuals as they are to the specific activities of artists. The ideas on natural and spiritual environmental protection that have been discussed in the previous chapters are drawn upon here to highlight the practical engagement with environmental values.

In Chapter Four the work of a number of contemporary artists is considered. The artists including Andy Goldsworthy, Richard Long, Chris Drury, Nils-Udo, Dale Chihuly and Ruth Duckworth have been chosen for examination as they all engage with nature and the environment. Their approaches are very different from one another, but the common thread that informs and confronts my research is to address human interaction with nature. Another key aspect present in the work of a number of these artists is the use of ephemeral natural materials and the engagement with ideas of permanence and impermanence. The explicit connection to Buddhist understanding of lifecycles is important here as Buddhism stresses the necessity of realising the truth of permanence and impermanence in order to understand the emptiness in this living world. The work and ideas of this group of artists challenges me to reflect on my practice as an artist and my approach to engaging and valuing nature.

This then leads to a detailed examination of my studio practice for this research project. Chapter Five therefore addresses the work that will be in the exhibition in addition to the formative experimental work in this research. My work has ‘a life’ in terms of this project but I am also keenly aware that it is the product of my life experiences, not the least of which is the decision to study and live in Australia for a number of years. I cannot say that artists understand the natural world any better than anyone else, but in my work I aim to show a great appreciation of nature and a reflective response to its essence in line with Buddhist thinking. Therefore, in this research, I am trying to find the way back from a life dominated by material concerns to one in which environmental values are embedded.

Chapter 1 Cycles in Life and Nature in Buddhist Teaching

Although the Taiwanese filmmaker and movie director Ang Lee had been making films for many years, the international acclaim that came after making the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) caused him to ask of the Taiwanese public why they would look to other cultures for their entertainment rather than drawing upon on their own.[1] Before Ang Lee was discovered by the public, he was a stay-at-home dad for six years. During this time he took care of his children while also writing his film scripts and waiting for the chance to create his movies. Lee is sharply aware of his cultural roots and how the mix of a Chinese background with a Taiwanese childhood has shaped his ideas. As Lee asserts, 'I grew up in Taiwan, but you know where my ideas, my brushstrokes, came from.'[2] Ang Lee's words have made me think deeply about my Chinese roots, and in particular, how this relates to my research project. I have been inspired to investigate where I am came from, and to become acutely aware of how the Chinese / Taiwanese culture is so much a part of my art practice.

Experience has shown me that generally Buddhist monks and nuns are extremely calm people. They seem to be very peaceful no matter what the environment or situation. I questioned the basis of this calmness. I had a chance to ask the Buddhist master in my hometown about this and was told, that I will know the answer when the time comes. Then he passed me one of Buddha's Sutras, which is a text for guidance in Buddhist philosophy. Years later, I used this Sutra to learn how to chant for my family members in the hope that I could provide a good way for them to their Nirvana. Although I have been brought up with Buddhism this is the true starting point for my study of Buddha.

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[1] Common Wealth Magazine and CW TV, "Youtube: 李安的電影夢 & 台灣情," http://tw.youtube.com/watch?v=6EboamCK8NU&feature=related.(accessed 8/5/2007)

[2] Bevin Chu, "Ang Lee's Chinese Roots Fuel Cultural Controversy in Taiwan " http://thechinadesk.blogspot.com/2007/09/ang-lees-chinese-roots-fuel-cultural.html. (accessed 9/10/2007)

I have grown up in a culture in which Buddhism, but also other religions, play a very significant role. Buddhism has been in my life, as long as I can remember. I remember my grandmother always taking me with her to the Buddhist temple for the study and chanting of Buddha's sutras in the evening. That was the very first time I attended a Buddhist ceremony. After that time I visited the Buddhist temple quite often until I graduated from high school. Following that, whenever I had the chance to visit my hometown, and the Buddhist temple, my visits elicited very simple emotions like happiness. Going to the Buddhist ceremony was a treat. Now the temple is something of a retirement home for older people to practise Buddhism. It is a place of comfort for me, like a second home. Without being conscious of it at the time, the temple became a sort of spiritual home. In recent years, because of deaths in my family, I have been closer to the Buddha and have tried to understand the lectures and philosophy that Buddha taught to his followers.

To me, the process of human life is a straightforward reflection of the phenomena of nature. There are ups and downs, birth and death. Though we know, of course, that death is just part of the natural process, we as humans, unlike other living things, worry about where we are going after death and so have to overcome our fear of death. This topic has been discussed for decades in Asian countries and it is one of the important topics in Buddhist teaching. Buddhists believe that when a living being dies, the karma that he or she has accumulated in the past will determine the nature of the next rebirth.[3]

The condition of death treats human equally. No matter who you are or what colour skin you have, death will always come. Since ancient times, this inevitability has caused humankind to contemplate the nature of time and eternity. While birth and death can be seen simply as opposites, a beginning and an end, to Buddhists death can be seen as a starting point for another life in the universe. The human lifecycle and the cycles of nature have been integral to Buddhist

[3] Kenneth K. S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, 2nd ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), p.5.

philosophy from the beginning. There are moments in time when the recognition of the meaning of death is especially poignant. I remember a cold November winter day in Chicago when the sun was shining, the sky was clear blue, there were soft white clouds and the temperature was below zero. It was, in fact, a perfect winter day to enjoy nature. On that beautiful day, the story of my life changed. After that day, the sky was not blue in my eyes anymore, it started to become grey. No matter how blue the sky was it still seemed grey to me for quite a long period of time.

One of my family members died that day, within a few short months another family member died. Each of these people were very special to me but one in particular had sheltered me, acting like a protective umbrella which then collapsed and closed off that sense of protection. It took me a few days to realise that this was not a dream. I realised then that my role in my family had changed; I needed to become that same sheltering force, an umbrella, for my family from that day onwards. The transition in my life was difficult but not impossible to achieve. Time has become my best friend since then. It helps me to see things from a different perspective. Also, because of this transition, I have achieved another level of accomplishment in my life.

The Buddhist funeral ceremony was chosen for the members of my family. A key reason for this is that we wanted to follow the teachings of Master Sheng-Yen, an important Buddhist master in Taiwan. Master Sheng-Yen has studied Buddhism all his lifetime and is also the author of many books and the founder of Dharma Drum Mountain in Taiwan. He recommends four steps towards handling and solving problems and these are: facing the truth, accepting, then dealing with the truth, and finally letting go of it.[4] Master Sheng-Yen also advocates practising

[4] Sheng-Yen, *Subtle Wisdom: Understanding Suffering, Cultivating Compassion through Ch'an Buddhism* (Doubleday a division of Random House, Inc., 1999). The foreword of the book provides background information on Sheng-Yen as ‘a renowned teacher of Chan Buddhism, [who] left his home near Shanghai at the age of thirteen to become a monk. During the period of Communist unrest, he fled to southern Taiwan and spent six years in solitary retreat. Later he continued his formal study, earning a doctorate in Buddhist literature from Rissho University in Tokyo. He has also received Dharma transmission in the two major schools of Chan. Sheng-Yen now divides his time between New York, where he is the resident teacher at the Chan Meditation

'Four Kinds of Environmental Protection.[5] By this Sheng-Yen means the spiritual, the living, and the social environments as well as the natural environment. The human body is part of the natural environment and once our body has stopped functioning the human body becomes waste.[6] Buddhist principles recommend that the body be cremated rather then buried in the ground. As a ceramicist, I sometimes wonder about the fact that clay is taken from the natural environment and needs to be fired in order to be transformed into something else that has a new 'life'. While the human body, once the end of the lifecycle is reached, needs to be 'fired' to return to the natural environment. We are united with the natural environment through cremation.

I grew up in a country town in southern Taiwan. When I was a child, I lived as part of an extended family with relatives from my father's side of the family. It was a big family but not huge according to the old days of Taiwanese society. The household, consisting of my family and my father's parents as well as my grandfather's brothers and their families, numbered over one hundred people. The house was a traditional Hakka style house containing more than fifty rooms. My ancestors' house is placed in the middle of the property. The ancestors' house plays an important role in my Hakka roots. It is the place for all the family events; these included weddings and funeral ceremonies. I thought I was strong enough to face the death of my own family members. I was familiar with death in the past from my childhood but somewhere along the line, I underestimated the impact of the death of my own loved ones.

I used to believe that human beings should experience the full cycle of life just like the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter. In certain ways,

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Centre he founded, and Taipei, where he is the abbot of two monasteries.'

[5] ———, "The Four Kinds of Environmentalism," http://www.dharmadrum.org/about/about.aspx?cid=C_00000023&ccid=C_00000029. (accessed 7/3/2006) The Four kinds of environmentalism: (1). Protecting the spiritual environment means keeping our mind stable and pure. (2). Protecting the living environment means keeping our life orderly and simple. (3). Protecting the social environment means being dignified and humble in society. (4). Protecting the natural environment means maintaining the co-existence and co-prosperity of the whole earth community.

[6] ———, *The Spiritual Environmental Protection (聖嚴法師心靈環保)* (Taipei: Dharma Drum Publications, 2004), p. 40-42.

man and nature have some things in common. In the natural world, some places like the North and South Poles do not have four distinct seasons. Similarly, human life does not always pass through four seasons. This truth, I realized and accepted only recently in my life. It takes courage to accept the fact that there may be missing seasons in someone's life. Life experience and religion can teach us to recognise this truth. From the Buddhist point of view, humans will need to practise their faith in order to accept an imperfect lifecycle and an impermanent life.

We need to recognise too that although the full cycle of life may not be easy to complete in the physical sense, perhaps by believing in it, it may be achieved mentally. Some people's expectations are lower than those of others; a little thing may make them happy. We can choose how to live our lives; it is in our hands, even though there may be only one or two seasons in it. This is true of the American environmental artist, Robert Smithson, who died at age thirty-five but his artworks and ideas live on and influence environmental art and artists today. In Buddhist philosophy, it is said that some people attain enlightenment earlier than others, but there is nothing wrong with this. When the right time comes enlightenment will blossom.

A fundamental principle of Buddhism is that 'emptiness is everything'. It means as human beings we come from nature and will one day return to nature. The process of life is more important than the end. The time we have with our loved ones in our journey is more important than other factors of life. But the problem lies in recognising this before the truth is forced upon us. Many of us come to the realisation only after we have lost loved ones and are forced to acknowledge that those who died would never return. We cannot turn back the time and so suffer in memory of them. The suffering can create a mental prison, which must only be dismantled through meditation and practice leading to enlightenment.

As Buddhist principles, in understanding life and nature, underpin the exploration of environmental concerns, it is now appropriate to discuss the basic tenets and their application to my research in some detail.

Buddhist philosophy

Buddhism originated in India over 2600 years ago. The Chinese and Taiwanese versions of Buddhism have this rich heritage but have also been shaped by Confucianism and Taoism. These major influences have been at work for many centuries to shape contemporary Buddhism. In this research I focus on the Chan/Zen Buddhism which has become significant to my generation and which I experience in daily life.

In Buddha's philosophy, 'Dependent Arising' (緣起) is the universal principle of human life. In Buddha's own enlightenment the 'dependent arising' was the moment he became the Buddha. 'Dependent Arising' is difficult to understand, so Buddha used the 'Four Noble Truths' as a way of explaining it. The four truths are: The Noble Truth of Suffering (Dukkha); The Noble Truth of the Origin of Suffering (Samudaya); The Noble Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha); and The Noble Truth that leads to the Extinction of Suffering (Magga).[7] The Four Noble Truths are one of the most fundamental principles of Buddhist teaching and explain Buddha's understanding of the nature of suffering. They appear in many of Buddha's sutras. Master Sheng-Yen has explained the four basic principles of Buddhism as preached by Buddha in his first sermon as,

> 1) in the ultimate analysis, life is suffering; 2) the cause of suffering is desire; 3) there is a state of peace called nirvana, beyond all suffering and poisons of the mind; and 4) the way that leads to nirvana includes the practice of morality, concentration, and wisdom.[8]

While the four noble truths deal with human suffering it is the noble eightfold path that must be studied and followed in order to overcome the cycle of birth and

[7] David Brazier, *The Feeling Buddha* (New York: Fromm International, 1997), p. 97-104.
[8] Sheng-Yen, *Subtle Wisdom: Understanding Suffering, Cultivating Compassion through Ch'an Buddhism*, p. 131.

rebirth. Buddhist philosophy advises people to follow the eightfold path in order to overcome their suffering. Buddhists believe this will lead their minds to the pure stage. When the mind becomes pure then we will have the true ability to solve environmental problems. The following steps make up the Eightfold Path:

Right view or understanding

Right directed thought

Right speech

Right action

Right livelihood

Right effort

Right mindfulness

Right concentration [9]

By practising the Noble Eightfold Path, Buddhists believe that there can be an end to suffering (dukkha) and that an individual can move toward self-awakening and into the level of enlightenment. Once a Buddhist reaches enlightenment then the cause of suffering will be clearly understood. This helps Buddhists accept the cycle of birth and death in this universe.

Key to this practice is that the follower must have the intention to generate karma. The positive intention is considered more important than the deed. If there is no right intention than there is no karma generated. In Buddhist belief karma is essential because it is 'according to the karma of the past, [that] a living being will undergo repeated rebirths in the cycle of existence and assume a different form in each rebirth.'[10]

[9] Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 68-72.
[10] Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey*, p.5.

Right understanding relates to the knowledge of suffering. Buddhists are taught to use their wisdom and knowledge to see through the cycle of karma and rebirth and that this is an unavoidable fact of human life. Right Thoughts relate to emotions. By practising mind training, Buddhists can create peaceful minds and develop a sense of compassion. Right speech means that spontaneous speech will contain no lying, harsh talking, and empty gossip. Right action means pure body behaviour and avoiding any action that would cause harm. Right livelihood means that a person's way of living should also cause no harm. The goal of right livelihood is to provide a happy style of living both for ourselves and also for others. Right effort means that proper concentration on Buddhist study will be undertaken. The mind will then be able to work independently of the values of the world. Right mindfulness and right concentration are concerned with the practice of Buddhist meditation.

Through meditation and the practice of the eightfold path a person will reach a level of enlightenment where an understanding of the basic Buddhist principle of emptiness can be reached. The principle of emptiness is the foundation of all Buddhist studies. Emptiness is a constructive concept. For example, if there is no space, then the house cannot be built, if the bag is not empty then we cannot put things in it, if the mind is not empty then no other thought can enter or live there. The order to create an 'empty mind' then will allow a person to create space where they can truly immerse himself/herself in new, pure thoughts. It is only through recognising what emptiness means that we can understand and accept the impermanence of life.

The Praj-naparamita Sutra (般若經) is the main Buddhist Sutra that teaches the Emptiness concept. In Buddhism, birth is emptiness, death is also emptiness. We as human beings come from the earth and ultimately, return back to nature. The Buddhist concept of Emptiness refers to emptiness of inherent existence. So, therefore, it is proposed that,

> Existence is precisely emptiness;
>
> Emptiness is precisely existence.[11]

This concept deals with the Dharma body of Buddha, the body that is 'not limited to any time or place'. Followers of Buddhism can experience this also through the process of seeking enlightenment. The emptiness that enlightened followers come to understand 'refers to no self and "existence" refers to causes and conditions'.[12]

In the philosophy of Buddhism, emptiness is a process of life. This can be explained by understanding how a beautiful flower develops. A seed is formed, it sprouts, grows, matures, and a flower bud develops which then blooms. When petals fall to the ground, the flower starts to return to the ground. It returns to where it originally came from – emptiness – to before the seed. Another analogy to help understand the philosophical meaning of emptiness can be found in the use of clay. Clay, itself is a simple solid material. It can be transformed into a functional object such as cup. How is a cup empty? When there is nothing inside the cup, we usually say that the cup is empty. This is the normal meaning of emptiness. But, is the cup really empty? From a physical point of view, the cup still contains something, that is, air. From the Buddhist point of view the cup is empty, there is no existence in the cup. Sheng-Yen explains emptiness this way:

> Formlessness is emptiness. This is the emptiness in "Existence is emptiness" or "Form is emptiness," as it is expressed in the *Heart Sutra*: if you have something, you do not have it at the same time, because it is changing at every moment. Seeing the essence of emptiness embodied in visible forms is called formlessness. Like the flowers on the altar in the temple, everything has existence and emptiness at the same time. Existence is the form of the flowers. But since they are ever-changing, they are empty. An ever-changing form is formless. What exists now is vanishing. What has just existed is gone now. "Form is emptiness."[13]

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[11] Sheng-Yen, *Faith in Mind*, Daily Dharma Series (Taiwan: Dharma Drum Publications, 1997), p.136.
[12] Ibid., p. 136.
[13] Sheng-Yen, translated by Lin Yu, and edited by Linda Peer and Harry Miller, "Environmental Protection and Spiritual Environmental Protection," *Ch'an Newsletter*, June 1997.

The way to reach an understanding of these principles and philosophy is through meditation. In meditation, there are three levels to practice. The first level is collect the chaos of the mind, the second level is to concentrate and unify the mind, and the last level is attaining a purity of mind. When we reach the final level of meditation, we can let go of self and attain a level of wisdom. However, meditation should not be seen as something separate from our daily lives. The most important use of meditation is when it becomes embedded into our everyday activities. Through practise, the Buddhist disciplines can be a part of daily activities.[14] There are many ways of meditating in Buddhist teaching, each of them can lead the heart and mind to a clear and an indescribable sense of pureness. The different modes of meditation include, counting the breath, chanting, mind setting, and letting go.[15]

Counting down numbers will help to concentrate the mind on the spiritual level during the meditation process. In the end, it seems as though there are no more numbers that you could continue to count. After that, the separate feeling between body and mind seems not to exist. The body and mind become united and one in the spiritual level. As noted above, the particular type of Buddhism that I follow is called Chan. This is the philosophy that is explained by Sheng-Yen and that connects most directly with the relationship between humans and the environment. As Sheng-Yen explains,

> Chan practice unifies our subjective inner world with the objective outer world. Chan practice is not intended to produce some imaginary blissful state, nor self-comforting, nor escape from reality. We, as practitioners, must manifest in the outer world what we experience internally. We must share our practice, concepts and experiences with others and teach others to do the same. Thus we can influence others to help us accomplish the mission of spiritual environmental protection.[16]

Learning meditation is a skill akin to learning to play a musical instrument: it is learning how to ‘tune’ and ‘play’ the mind, and regular, patient practise is the

[14] Sheng-Yen, *Subtle Wisdom: Understanding Suffering, Cultivating Compassion through Ch'an Buddhism*, p. 68.
[15] Ibid., p. 67-97.
[16] Sheng-Yen, Yu, and Miller, "Environmental Protection and Spiritual Environmental Protection."

means to this. Progress will not occur if one is lax, but it cannot be forced. For this reason, meditation practice is also like gardening: one cannot force plants to grow, but one can assiduously provide them with the right conditions, so that they develop naturally. For meditation, the 'right conditions' are the appropriate application of mind and of the specific technique being used.[17]

The study of Buddhist philosophy allows a person to accept the truth. The aspect of this truth that is a concern here has to with the current situation in regard to nature and environmental concerns. It seems that in many places nature has been treated very badly and that the effects of human activity are telling. In the cycle of things, nature then affects humans who have to live in a sick environment. Buddhists believe that all living things have a spirit. This is not dissimilar to the Western perspective that deals with the sense of a living force in nature acting collectively as Mother Nature. It is therefore appropriate to refer Mother Nature as being something that humans have treated badly or neglected. This attitude needs to change so that Mother Nature can be treated as equal to human beings. In other words, let Mother Nature and humanity become one then we will have better chance to protect our living environment. Sheng-Yen tells us that,

> It is up to us to safeguard the natural environment. To accomplish this mission, it is necessary for each and every one of us to recognize the seriousness of the problem and to actually and physically do something about it. The guiding concepts and practical methods of Ch'an can help to purify of our minds and the society as a whole so that we protect the natural environment more conscientiously and effectively.[18]

I have always believed Buddhism can help us to understand the environment and our relationship with it. Quite simply, Buddhist doctrines teach us to respect nature and live in harmony with it.

[17] Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History and Practices*, p. 244-45.
[18] Sheng-Yen, Yu, and Miller, "Environmental Protection and Spiritual Environmental Protection."

Chapter 2 Buddhism, Ceramics and the Creative Arts

In this chapter I will address the practices and activities that have developed out of Buddhism. The philosophical thinking embedded in Buddhism informs my project and it is therefore appropriate to begin with a story which explains how, in this philosophical context, ceramics have come to play such a significant role in my life.

I grew up in a small country town in southern Taiwan. My village was dominated by agricultural activities. Nearly every household would raise poultry or domestic animals for food, including chickens, ducks, geese, or pigs in the backyard. Each household comprised an extended family. My family lived this way, too, with my grandparents, parents and their brothers and sisters and, of course, all of the children together in a traditional Hakka house. Since that time the style of living in the village has changed quite dramatically; just the memories remain.

At around the age of five I distinctly remember bringing home a ceramic water jar that I found in the rice field. I used this water jar as a pot to grow a plant. Soon after, one pot became several and my collection of ceramic objects grew. My collection was made up of rice bowls and dishes, but also ceremonial containers and broken pieces of ceramic debris. Years later, my collection has become a small ceramic wonderland to me.

Others have added to my collection over the years, including family members and friends who contributed functional wares. This part of the collection comes with both sweet and sad associations. The delight is that these gifts enhanced the collection with a rich variety of ceramic objects, and the sad side is that they trigger memories of a past time and a gradually disappearing lifestyle. With the development of my village, many traditional buildings have gone while others have been reconstructed. My collection increased as I rescued many of the historical pieces from old buildings before the excavator damaged them further.

I still have the very first rice bowl that I used as a child, it is very special although it is in pieces. The lotus flower shape of the rim can still be discerned as can the transparent green glaze colour of the bowl that looks like pure light green water. It evokes memories of the transparent, white rice grains that it would hold at dinner time. The significance of ceramics is therefore something that I feel very deeply. The associations with my sense of place and family are integral to why I work with clay. This association is enriched and deepened by the engagement with Buddhism.

Chan, the Chinese equivalent of Zen Buddhism, has some distinctive features; it is based on Buddhism but is also, as mention above, influenced by Confucianism and Taoism. The Taiwanese version of Buddhism was influenced by the Chinese Buddhist masters who arrived in Taiwan after the Chinese Cultural Revolution. The activities pursued in the practice and study of Taiwanese Buddhism like flower arranging, painting, calligraphy, the making of ceramics and the holding of tea ceremonies were strengthened by this confluence of Chan and Taiwanese Buddhism.

Another important aspect of Buddhist practice that is integral to this project is more evident in the legacy of Japanese Zen Buddhism. This too draws on an amalgam of sources stemming from the 8th century during the Tang dynasty when Chan Buddhism spread to Japan. Buddhism gradually influenced Japanese culture and slowly affected daily life. During this period Chinese Buddhism was adapted so that the Japanese developed Zen gardens attached to their temples. Interestingly, Ikebana flower design, the tea ceremony, and ceramic ware also developed specifically in response to the practices in the Buddhist temples. Though Chinese Chan was essential to the progress of Buddhism in Japan it nevertheless took on the characteristics and ideas of the Japanese culture to become Japanese Zen. Both Chinese Chan and Japanese Zen come from the same Buddhist root.

In China, Buddhism started to develop from the Tang dynasty and bloomed in the Sung dynasty. During this period, Sung Hui Zong(宋徽宗), the emperor, developed a great interest in Buddhist philosophy and studies and became the first emperor to nominate Buddhism as the national religion. With this support from Sung Hui Zong (宋徽宗), Buddhism became firmly established both in philosophical terms but also in its role in supporting the practice of art.[19] Under the Sung dynasty, Chan calligraphy, painting, sculpture, flower arranging, the tea ceremony, ceramic production, and landscape gardening were developed and refined. Buddhism in China grew peacefully within society until the Communist revolution.

In the 1940s, during the civil war in China, many Buddhist temples were damaged and Buddhist monks and nuns were forced to leave, many seeking refuge in monasteries far afield. During this time, some Buddhists escaped from China to Taiwan to continue their Buddhist studies. Included in this group was Master Sheng -Yen (聖嚴法師), who has been mentioned above, but also Master Hsing Yun (星雲法師), and Master Wei Chueh (惟覺法師) who were very influential in shaping Taiwanese Buddhism. The cultural and spiritual impact of this Chan Buddhism continues to live on in Taiwan. Based on its original development, the simple philosophy of Buddhism was adopted into Taiwanese daily life. During these years, Chan masters including Master Cheng Yen (證嚴法師), have devoted their lives to maintaining and strengthening Buddhism in Taiwan and protecting the ancient sutras for further generations.[20] Tradition is not easy to maintain in difficult times but these masters have persevered. The environmentalism contained in Buddhist philosophy is now more important than ever and reminds us that we need to stay in tune with the simple connections to the truth in life.

[19] Hugo Munsterberg, *Zen & Oriental Art* (Tokyo: The Charles E. Tuttle Company, Inc., 1993), p. 21.
[20] The four main strings of Buddhist Masters in Taiwan: East: Master Cheng Yen, West: Master Wei Chueh, South: Master Hsing Yun, North: Master Sheng-Yen.

As has been discussed briefly here, Buddhism developed differently in China, Japan and Taiwan. Similarly the cultural ceremonies and artefacts associated with the practice of Buddhism vary across borders. However, what is important here is that these various Buddhist practices come from the same root. The history of ceramics objects associated with some of these ceremonies and production will be the subject of the next section.

East Asian Ceramics and their legacy

In East Asia, ceramic wares including everything from dinnerware to ceremonial objects such as tea-cups and ceramic sculpture, are deeply enmeshed in the daily lives of ordinary people. Clay has been one of the important elements in Asian society and history and this history can be traced in China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. The first ceramic pot found in Japan was identified by archaeologists as a pot for cooking. This ceramic pot is considered to be around 10,000 to 12,700 years old.[21] Many ancient ceramic objects began to be discovered by people as modern industrial development went ahead.

These ancient ceramic objects provide one of the best historical contrasts with contemporary society. They help archaeologists and historians to explain better the lifestyles and conditions of previous times. Most excavations in China, Japan, Korean, and Taiwan unearth mainly functional wares and funerary objects. Since ancient times, humans made ceramic objects for daily use. According to historians, the earliest ceramic discovered anywhere was found in Europe and dates from the Ice Age of Europe around 12,000 to 37,000 years ago.[22] Since then many major areas around the world have been sites for ceramic discoveries. In East Asia, China has proven to be the most important site thus far for the discovery of ancient ceramics.

[21] Charlotte F. Speight and John Toki, *Hands in Clay*, 4th ed. (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1999), p. 41.
[22] Ibid., preface.

As noted above, these discoveries are very significant, but in Asian terms they also signify much about the role of Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism and how these belief systems were enacted in the lives of people. These ceramic objects therefore reveal and signify cultural practices of the time. The discovery of a range of ceramic ware has help to elaborate on, and explain the role of, activities like landscape gardening, calligraphy, painting, flower arrangement, and the tea ceremony.

Chan/Zen and landscape gardening

According to the Oriental art scholar, Hugo Munsterberg, Japanese garden design was influenced by both Buddhist philosophy and Chinese landscape painting from around the 12th century.[23] The Chan garden originated in the need for a place to further Buddhist study; a place for meditation and retreat for monks and nuns during their study. The garden is a place that is quiet and natural where they can refresh their minds and regenerate their thoughts.

The Zen garden, like all gardens, is an artificial creation but it differs from the standard Western idea of a garden in that it is not designed to mimic or replicate nature. Although it utilises and borrows materials from nature, the Zen garden is more directly concerned with symbolising rather than copying nature. The basic elements of the Zen garden structure include rocks, pebbles, water, trees, shrubs and moss. In early Japanese history, Zen gardens were only found in monasteries. Later, the Buddhist philosophy influenced common people and tea drinking culture developed. The noble families in Japan started to create natural scenery around tearooms in their houses. The Zen garden spread from Buddhist monasteries into society. So now there are two purposes to the Zen garden. Firstly, still within Buddhist monasteries, Zen Gardens are used to create a place for meditation, and secondly, with society more generally, Zen gardens are incorporated in tearooms where they provide a sense of peace and beauty.

[23] Munsterberg, *Zen & Oriental Art*, p. 128-29.

Fig. 1. *Ryōan-Ji*, Muromachi period (1336-1573), dry landscape garden, Kyoto, Japen.

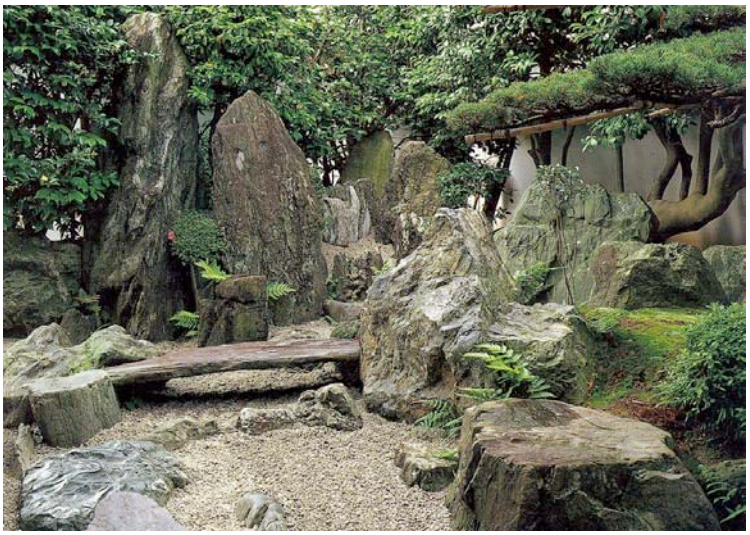

Fig. 2. *Daisen-in*, Muromachi period (1336-1573), dry landscape garden, Kyoto, Japan.

According to Shinichi Hisamatsu, the Zen garden may be divided into two kinds (fig. 1 & 2).[24] The first type is the garden attached to the Zen temple-monasteries, which can be viewed from the temple. In the main these gardens are dry landscape gardens, which use sand to represent rivers or the sea and stone to

[24] Shin'ichi Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, trans. Gishin Tokiwa (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1971), p. 82.

represent islands. The second type of Zen garden can also be found in temple monasteries but is more commonly found in tea gardens particularly those of the Royal family. These contain plants, water, stone, and grass and, although also known as dry landscape gardens, incorporate more natural elements in the design.

Today, the most famous dry garden can be found at Ryōan-ji in Kyoto (fig. 1) and was built during the Muromachi period (1336-1573). Another famous dry garden is Daitoku-ji. Although both Ryōan-ji and Daitoku-ji are dry gardens their design and shape are very different. In Ryōan-ji garden the linear pattern of the sand represents the sea waves and there are fifteen stones carefully laid out in groups of five, two, three, two, and three to represent islands in the sea. While Daitoku-ji garden is also a dry garden, its design is believed to stem from the work of two Masters of Sung ink landscape painting possibly Ma Yuan (馬遠) and Hsia Kuei (夏圭). As has been summarised by Munsterberg, the garden's,

> …main elements are the upright rocks representing cliffs and waterfalls, the flat horizontal stones indicating boats and bridges, the white sand symbolizing a stream, and a group of clipped trees that are supposed to suggest distant mountains.[25]

Both gardens therefore, although tightly designed and organised, are evocative of broader views of nature and the landscape. In the design of the Zen garden, the natural elements are carefully and meticulously placed to create a sense of harmony within nature itself but also, and more importantly, between humans and nature. For my final research project, I will create a Zen like ceramic garden informed by my understanding of Buddhist philosophy. It will be a Zen garden with human-made ceramic objects accompanied by found natural materials.

Today, the Zen garden has become one of the main garden styles in the world and represents a place of meditation not just within Buddhist temples but also for anyone more generally. As Munsterberg says, 'Japanese gardens represent an

[25] Munsterberg, *Zen & Oriental Art*, p. 130.

artistic arrangement of nature.'[26] This human interaction with nature creates an aesthetic and harmonious atmosphere by the combination of trees, water, rocks, and buildings. As humans we seem to have the need to be with calm, peaceful, and ordered things.

Tea ceremony and ceramic ware

As I mentioned in a previous chapter, I grew up in a traditional Hakka style house (fig. 3), the centre of the house is the ancestor room where the images of Buddha are displayed (fig. 4). As I remember from my childhood, every morning my grandmother cleaned the case desk and placed fresh tea for the Buddha and my ancestors in ceremonial cups. When I was little I did not know where the traditions came from, but years later watching my mother follow her mother's ways I realised that the tradition is based on the tea ceremony and is a way for the younger generation to show their respect for their ancestors. The act of serving fresh tea before lighting the incense for the Buddha and one's ancestors is an acknowledgment of one's origins and the debt one has to those who have gone before.

Fig. 3. *Lo family's ancestor house*, rebuild and finished in 2000, Followed the original structure and design, Chia-Ting, Taiwan, Photographer, I-Chih Lo, 2008.

[26] Ibid., p. 127.

Fig. 4. *Inside of ancestor house*, Chia-Tung, Taiwan, Photographer, I-Chih Lo, 2008.

Tea in Chinese history was not only for drinking; it plays a spiritual role in the culture. Tea leaves were initially used as medicine and later became a popular beverage. Tea drinking has a long history in China. Around the 8th century a Buddhist priest named Lu Wu wrote a book about tea called *Cha Ching*.[27] Since tea drinking is an activity developed from Buddhism, when Buddhism spread into Japan, tea culture also went.

Hisamatsu writes, 'among the various kinds of architecture, none expresses Zen as well as the architecture of the tea room.'[28] When the Tea ceremony spread from Buddhist monasteries to the common people it became an important activity in Japanese society. The tea ceremony is also deeply related to calligraphy and ink painting. According to Suzuki, the 'Zen temple is the headquarters of the tea ceremony.'[29]

[27] Sen'õ Tanaka, *The Tea Ceremony*, Revised ed. (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1998), p. 27. *Cha Ching* is the authoritative text on Chinese tea.
[28] Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, p. 73.
[29] William Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), p. 353.

Calligraphy and ink painting

Here, I would like to share a story of my first Chinese calligraphy class. I remember vividly it was a hot summer season when I was in third grade of elementary school. A Chinese calligraphy class was offered as an extra and after school class. I had always imagined that one day I would write graceful Chinese calligraphy words and paint beautiful Chinese paintings.[30] My dream led me to sign up for this class. My curious attitude maintained my interest but the process of learning was quite a challenge for a ten-year-old student. Imagine a hot summer day without air conditioning in the room with thirty ten-year-old students. A piece of rice paper lay on the table in front of me, a Chinese brush was full with black ink. With the teacher's help I finally settled my mind and started my first stroke. All of a sudden, a drop of sweat from my forehead fell onto the rice paper. I tried to wipe the sweat away with the Chinese brush that was still in my hand. Seconds later my beautiful piece of rice paper was awash with Chinese black ink. To continue after this event took a great deal of settling and calming.

This was my first real experience of learning to calm my mind before being able to focus on a task. Now when I look back, I admire my Chinese calligraphy teacher who had the patience and compassion to enjoy teaching ten-year-old students. On reflection, I can see that by learning Chinese calligraphy I was also learning how to meditate in line with Buddhist teaching. Learning to settle the mind is an essential first step both for meditation and to enable the creative process. Calligraphy and ink painting cannot be separated from Buddhism. According to Tanaka, the development of calligraphy, painting and pottery as fine art have their origin in the practices of Zen Buddhism.[31] As I have just demonstrated with my own experience, calligraphy can act as a Buddhist meditation training process. Ink painting is a further development of calligraphy.

The scrolls of calligraphies and paintings were traditionally hung in the temple. A Japanese priest named Rikyū in the 15th century began to decorate his tea room

[30] Chinese calligraphy is the foundation of Chinese brush paintings.
[31] Tanaka, *The Tea Ceremony*, p. 83.

with his teacher's calligraphy to create an environment reminiscent of the temple.[32] Since that time calligraphy and ink paintings became an essential feature of tea room design. The scrolls therefore provide a very material link between the temple and the tearoom but this link is further enhanced by the process of calligraphy writing. In Buddhist thinking, as discussed above, the mind has to be settled and focussed as a preliminary stage. Then only can the calligrapher do justice to his task. In producing a beautiful piece of work the maker is therefore practicing his Buddhist faith. As Suzuki asserts the highest level of attainment in the practice of calligraphy is when the mind and brush become one. As he describes it, the artist will know the highest level has been reached,

> …when every brush-stroke he makes is directly connected with his inner spirit, unhampered by extraneous matters such as concepts, etc. In this case, his brush is his own arm extended; more than that, it is his spirit, and in its every movement as it is traced on paper this spirit is felt.[33]

Hisamatsu extends this idea when he describes the level of Nothingness in the process of calligraphy. He writes, 'When one holds the brush poised over the paper, there, already, space is established as one's Self, that is, as the space of Nothingness'.[34] The moment of complete absorption in making the calligraphic mark on the paper is therefore very much a part of the Buddhist sense of meditation.

Flower arrangement

Another key component of Buddhist practice is the art of flower arranging. There is an ancient story about the relationship between the lotus flower and the birth of the Buddha. According to legend, before Buddha's birth, his mother had a dream about lotus flowers. One day she dreamed of a white elephant coming in to her room and in its trunk it carried a white lotus flower. A few days later, she was pregnant. On the day of delivery, the field was full of all kind of blooming flowers;

[32] Ibid.
[33] Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, p. 339.
[34] Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, p. 73.

among those flowers lotus blossoms predominated.[35] This legend established an inseparable relationship between flowers and Buddhism. There are many other stories involving flowers in Buddhist teachings but this is the earliest one.

In China, carefully arranged bunches of flowers were used as a kind of ritual offering during Buddhist ceremonies. The Buddhists would pay their respect to Buddha by presenting fresh flowers. The unique, natural beauty of flowers provided a calm and peaceful environment in the ceremony. Since then flowers have continued to play an important role in Buddhism. Gradually this tradition has spread from the Buddhist temple to society more generally.

In Chan/Zen, flower arranging emphasizes the balance of natural beauty and human harmony with nature. In the old days, flowers were picked according to the current season following Nature's cycle, reinforcing a respectful and appreciative attitude of Nature. Today, when we talk about flower arranging in Asian society, we mainly think of Japanese flower arrangement, which is also related to Chan/Zen Buddhism. The Japanese attention to the purity and order of Zen gardens to manage the aesthetics in both a physical and spiritual sense is also applied to the arranging of flowers. This approach has influenced other cultures and therefore art and artists around the world.

Ceramics

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the ceramic discoveries from excavations in China are mainly in two categories: functional wares and funeral objects. In 2005, my friends and I visited the tea-pot city in China called, Yixing. We originally planned for a one night stay but ended up staying for three nights. The ceramic resources in Yixing are amazing, the whole city functions like a factory with energy. Though I have visited some other cities in China where the primary industry is ceramics I always feel a sense of excitement as there are new things to be discovered and new approaches to be investigated. A Ceramic city is like

[35] Hsing-Yun, "佛教與花的因緣 " *普門學報=Universal Gate Buddhist Journal* 1, no. 12 (2002).

Disneyland for me, once I enter it. I want to discover it all. In this trip, since I was able to use my native tongue to communicate with the local people in Yixing, the reduced language distance between us was an advantage. We had the opportunity of seeing the Dragon kiln (前墅古龍窯) which was built during the Ming dynasty around 15th century and it is still in use today firing ceramic objects (fig. 5).

Fig. 5. *Dragon Kiln (前墅古龍窯)*, 1368-1644, Yixing, China, photographer, Chung-Yuan Kuo, 2005.

There are so many ceramic shops in the town, yet there is one unique place that my friends and I visited almost every day. During the last day of our trip the owner showed us his precious items. That was my first experience of touching and feeling ceramic objects which are usually only found in text books or display cabinets in the museums. We saw the purple sand teapots made by the teapot masters during the 18th century in China. People believe the purple sand teapot is the best quality teapot among all others. This is because the unique quality of purple sand will provide the best condition during the process of tea making. Other than the purple sand teapots, the shop owner also showed us Sung dynasty ceramic ware that included Ding ware (定窯), Ru ware (汝窯), Guan ware (官窯), Ge (哥窯) ware and Jun ware (鈞窯), and Qing dynasty ceramic

objects as well as some other antique items. Whether all of these objects were authentic or not, in that moment I was deeply touched by them and believed that they were real, especially, when the owner allowed me to hold the Ding ware (定窯) bowl. At that moment, as I held the thin lightweight bowl, with its pure semi-matt white glaze, I felt as though my soul was one with that piece of fine art. I had a vision of the Sung pottery making process in my mind and wondered about the numbers of pots that were made before this very fine one was produced (fig. 7).

A simple ceramic object may appear as though it is easily made, but the simplicity belies the technical expertise of the maker. It takes natural talent, together with finely honed skills, to create one beautiful piece. Just as the finest calligraphy is made by the focussed, and unified, attention of the mind and the body, so it is with pottery making. The process of making ceramics, the moulding and shaping through to the firing, together with the understanding of the material, its limitations and its possibilities, has an affinity with the Buddhist approach to learning from nature and trusting in nature's way.

Ceramics in China has a long history, from the Neolithic age to Qin dynasty; from Han dynasty to Qing dynasty. Among these dynasties, the most interesting time for me is the Sung dynasty. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, during the Sung dynasty there were five major kinds of kilns that produced porcelain ware. These mainly produced goods for the imperial place, this is especially true of Guan ware.[36] The lotus plant patterns were often applied either in the shapes or designs of ceramic objects (See for example fig. 6). The popularity of lotus patterns can be related to the religion of the emperor Sung Hui Zong (宋徽宗) who appointed Buddhism as the national religion in this period (See for example of fig. 8). Among the Chinese emperors, Emperor Sung was among the few who were interested in fine art and Buddhist study. Because of this, the Chinese art from this period has an aesthetic quality that is still revered today. The presence and significance of the lotus vocabulary extends to many Buddhist sutras and

[36] Emmanuel Cooper, *Ten Thousand Years of Pottery*, 4th ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 63-66.

some other ceremonial materials and objects. Today, in Chinese Buddhist society the lotus flower is the symbol of Buddhism.

Fig. 6. *Large Ding Notched Bowl*,
Northern Sung Dynasty, 11th century,
D. 20.3 cm (8 in.), Ding kilns,
Quyang county, Hebei province,
New Orleans Museum of Art.

Fig. 7. *Ding Ware,* Sung Dynasty, 11th century,
D. 20cm, discovered during China trip, Jingdezhen,
photographer, Chung-Yuan Kuo, 2005.

Fig. 8. *Pair of Qingbai Saucers,* Northern Sung Dynasty, 11th century, D. 13.6 cm (5 3/8 in.), Jingdezhen kiln, Jiangxi Province, New Orleans Museum of Art.

To me the process of clay making is a kind of meditation – from wedging, throwing, forming the shape to drying, glazing the objects until completeness the firing. The whole process of making is time consuming; it could be a couple of months or a year to complete the whole process of finishing. As Beittel says, 'Pottery is a proper microcosm of world and life for our meditation as action.'[37] The process of making brings the body and mind together, the mind becomes pure and accompanies the body to achieve the clay potential in a natural way after human emotions are transferred to the objects. Because of this transformation art becomes alive and carries on.

As I write my research exegesis and look at my ceramic works as a whole, I realise I am following nature's way in creating my works. As I grew up in a tropical climate, it was not until my early twenties that I had the opportunity of seeing the full blooming of cherry flowers. I visited Japan with my family and, in a moment that I remember very distinctly, the temporary nature of their rare beauty affected me deeply. My previous experience of seeing the blossoms had only been through calendar pictures. Suddenly, a picture came to reality. It was a

[37] Kenneth R. Beittel, *Zen and the Art of Pottery*, 2nd ed. (New York, Tokyo: Weatherhill Inc., 1992), p. 39.

moment of truth, a moment of beauty, a moment of permanency, and in that moment it is all true. I like the scenery of the early spring season when cherry flowers bloom into their full beauty and send a message telling people that spring is coming. I also like the late autumn season when leaves are falling from trees preparing for the dormant period for next year. Petal and leaf are the two basic forms in my current ceramic artwork. I use these simple shapes to explore simplicity of forms in nature. I want to test the boundaries of what can be achieved in clay as well as challenge my capabilities as an artist.

My ceramic artwork also is inspired by the French painter, Claude Monet. His paintings of *Waterlilies* in particular motivated me to transform the actual plants into ceramic form. During my years in Chicago, I often visited The Art Institute of Chicago. In the museum, which is full of art collections and histories, I was attracted by Monet's paintings, their calmness and softness. I think that was the time when Monet's *Waterlilies* walked into my heart silently (See for example of fig. 10). At this stage I was not aware that Monet first saw Japanese art at age sixteen and that years later, at age thirty, he purchased Japanese woodcuts.[38] Asian influences more generally have been identified in relation to Monet's gardens at Giverny. Jacquelynn Baas, for example, suggests a possible link between a contemporary edition of the travels of Marco Polo and Monet's gardens. In *Concerning the Kingdoms and Marvels of the East* the translator Henry Yule, commented on Polo's response to Buddhism and the search for 'something else' by describing a particular lake as being "of immeasurable expanse, overspread with innumerable red and white lotus flowers, of various sizes, some blooming, some fading."[39] In this description, a lake of lotus flowers is represented as a miniature plant world. At the same time, while some lotus flowers were presented in their full blooming beauty others were decaying away and descending silently into the water. The lifecycle of these plants in a lake of lotus blossoms clearly reflects human lifecycle. These moments of the life and

[38] Jacquelynn Baas, *Smile of the Buddha: Eastern Philosophy and Western Art from Monet to Today* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California press, 2005), p. 20.
[39] Ibid., p. 22.

death of lotus flowers were captured in Monet's paintings. A Chan/Zen philosophy is evoked spontaneously by Monet's paint brush.

This understanding of the Asian influences in Monet's waterlily paintings has influenced my ceramic work. The translation of plant forms into ceramic ware is informed by a similar understanding of the nature of plants and their life-cycle. I was drawn to Monet's work instinctively but that connection has now been explained through time and investigation. Baas, the author of *Smile of the Buddha,* writes:

> Geffroy was not the only contemporary writer to perceive Buddhism in the art of Claude Monet. The art historian Louis Gillet wrote soon after Monet's death: "It is perhaps necessary to see in [Monet's art] the sole European work which is truly related to Chinese thought, to the vague hymns of the Far East on the waters and the mists and the passing of things, on detachment, on nirvana, on the religion of the Lotus."[40]

Now I understand the importance of Monet's transformation of natural plants into his artistic work. I can see how this relationship has been an influence in my artwork.

If people are asked when the flower of the waterlily opens, they would probably reply 'In the morning'. But the real answer is 'at midnight'. The waterlily flowers start to open their petals around midnight and gradually fall open before the morning sun comes out. How do I know this? By accident, I discovered this phenomenon from viewing the Broad-leaved Epiphyllum at night with my childhood friends during the Chinese New Year in my hometown. [41] This night-time phenomenon is amazing in the night-time. It generates completely different feelings from the daylight. Under the moonlight, in the quiet and peaceful small country village, the waterlily flowers in the pond of the traditional Hakka house (fig. 9) remind me of the paintings of Monet's *Waterlilies.* Although these flowers are in very different places, and obviously from different periods of time the waterlilies speak the same language of nature. It could be a coincidence, but I

[40] Ibid., p. 25.
[41] Broad-leaved epiphyllum has a flower only open at night for one night only and has fragrant smell when the flower opened.

believe that it is the beauty of nature that recalls my memory and brings these two pictures together.

Fig. 9. *Yang family's ancestor house,* Qing dynasty, 17th century, Chia-Tung, Taiwan, early morning view, photographer, I-Chih Lo, 2008.

Fig. 10. Claude Monet, *Water Lilies,* 1906, 87.6 x 92.7 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago.

Ceramic installation

Ceramicists in China tell stories about ancient Chinese glaze recipes which have been lost for some time but then rediscovered accidentally. Once rediscovered they are used again and valued as links with the past. Such stories serve as a reminder of the need to connect the old with the new. Responding to contemporary circumstances does not mean overtaking the old tradition. The installation artwork (that will be discussed further in Chapter 5) is new in the sense of it being a new Zen garden within an exhibition space but it is simultaneously very old in its connection with the tradition of Zen gardens. What is also new in the installation is the fact that it is the product of my engagement with the current response to environmental and societal issues. Accepting new ideas does not mean that history is ignored. As long as this new work comes after the full study of history with respect for old work, and an understanding of tradition, then this new work is the continuation of old life. Tradition is still there. The changes to tradition are because of the needs of the society. The acceptance of change is something that Sheng-Yen also speaks of when he advises that Buddhism needs to follow the current changes because new problems occur and they are different from before.[42]

The Chan/Zen ceramic garden that will be created as part of this research utilises ceramic materials to express my inner feelings. These feelings, as explained throughout this project, are developed through my experience of the Buddhist faith and therefore I believe that such a garden can also have the potential to provide an environment where a soul could regenerate. Ceramics, similarly to other practices of fine art, can act as therapy and assist in healing the human spirit. Different from other fine arts, ceramics has the intimate touch of feeling the clay.

From the beginning two parallel lines merge to become one, your mind and ceramic material. This is the process of ceramic making. The clay process is a

[42] Sheng-Yen, *The Spiritual Environmental Protection (聖嚴法師心靈環保)*, p. 168-171.

mini version of human life. In the process of clay making, from the imagination, follows discouragement, heart break, disappointment and defeat. But from this a truth is realized. Ceramicists accept the beauties of cracks, imperfection, failure, and from this distil the ability to accept the imperfect. The understanding of the role of the imperfect contributes to a sound philosophical approach to life.

Years ago, when I picked up my first broken piece of ceramics, I looked at the piece and thought that I would rather have the whole perfect bowl. Years later, when I look at this same ceramic piece again, I can see the whole perfect bowl distinctly through the power of my imagination. The acceptance of the imperfect as perfect occurred in that moment and stays with me through my life journey.

Chapter 3 Approaching Environmental Values

To some it may seem that the focus on the environment, the interest in long term sustainability and the minimisation of pollution and the harmful effects of human activity are recent phenomena. However, as noted above, there is a deep concern for the environment embedded in Buddhist philosophy. It is this Buddhist approach to caring for the land which is the focus of this chapter, particularly as it informs and influences the practice of making ceramics. The teachings of Sheng-Yen, are integral to this discussion. Therefore, in this chapter I will discuss two of Sheng-Yen's ideas on environmental protection that are most relevant factors to my research project. The two subjects are natural environmental protection (自然環保) and spiritual environmental protection (心靈環保).

The way in which natural and spiritual health are intertwined and interdependent is easily explained through the progress of Buddhism itself and its basic tenets. Around 907-960, due to political strife and social issues in China, Buddhist temples were relocated from the cultural centres to the mountain areas. From this time on it became very important for the Buddhists to become self-sustaining. Vegetables and fruit trees were grown around the temple. This self-sustaining life style has been maintained ever since. Life in the quite, natural environment of the mountains has helped the Buddhists concentrate their minds, meditate and focus on their spiritual health.

According to Buddha, birth marks the start of the suffering process for humans. Birth itself can cause suffering, just as life and death are also suffering. The ways by which to avoid suffering and gain happiness has been the main subject of Buddhist teaching since its inception. According to Buddhist teaching, compassion and wisdom are the two major keys to mitigate suffering. The question, therefore, for those who follow Buddhist teaching is how to realise true compassion and wisdom. Buddhist teaching, naturally enough, suggests that we follow the Buddhist way. Every religion, including Buddhism, endeavours to teach

people how to follow the right path in search of a better life. Although Buddhism, unlike many other religions, believes that every living being on this earth is equal. No one is greater than any other. Every living being relies on each other to live; each individual has an equally important value in this universe. This is a particularly significant premise which underpins the Buddhist approach to the environment.

Currently there are major environmental issues that we are facing. It is our responsibility to face them seriously and take care of them while we can. There is a united effort required here as while one individual can achieve results, much more can be achieved where there is a combined effort on the part of many. I have always believed, a small hand can do a small thing and a big hand can do much more with the hearts of many connected to it. The key point here is how to follow through on our knowledge of what needs to be done and effect change. Today, there still are still many people, whether intentionally or not, ignoring the problem. The values of society must be addressed so that all people can become aware of the problems we face.

Sheng-Yen, through his teachings of Chan/Zen Buddhism, is a strong advocate for environmental protection. From the Buddhist point of view, the medicine we need for the earth is in our mind. Sheng-Yen advises his followers to focus on developing a pure heart as the first step in the process of addressing the issues in order to save this world.[43] Accordingly, people must actively and consciously engage the senses of wisdom and compassion to draw out the true inner selflessness. Sheng-Yen asserts that it is only by seeing the suffering of others as our own suffering and feeling others' happiness as our own true happiness that we can become truly wise.[44] For my part, I wonder how many times I have made mistakes without knowing the consequences of my actions. It is not about believing in some sort of utopia, but simply the desire to achieve a better

[43] Ibid., p. 3-4.
[44] Ibid., p. 77-143.

approach to life. I am just an ordinary person and acknowledge that emotions have led my actions.

According to Sheng-Yen's teaching, honesty or the lack of it, is a serious problem in society.[45] Research shows us that, on average people lie almost every day of our lives.[46] This is a significant hurdle to overcome in order to develop a pure heart and may in fact be a greater problem now than previously when standing by a verbal agreement was a point of honour whereas now a verbal promise can be rejected at any time. Even though more students are now educated in schools compared to the past, there is no significant improvement in the morals of society. To provide education is not a difficult task but to raise the moral level of human beings is not easy. According to Sheng-Yen, the improvements necessary in the quality of human beings will only occur when we enhance and develop the quality of education.[47] We should expect some moral education in society and we should expect moral behaviour in society.

To find our inner truth is the basic step in order to save our environment. A healthy natural environment comes from healthy humans. Buddhist teaching is aimed at developing these healthy humans so that, like Buddha himself, we can strive to reach enlightenment. In Buddhist study mistakes are allowed to be made under some circumstances so long as we learn from them and commit to future improvements. At this point in time we need to learn from our experience in using the earth's resources for industrial and technological development. This development has brought a better quality of life for many, but not all, people. At the same time, however, it has come at a great cost to the natural environment. Business imperatives have neglected the natural environment for the sake of increased profits and expansion. This is not always the case but people whether

[45] Ibid., p. 81.
[46] University of Massachusetts at Amherst, "Umass Researcher Finds Most People Lie in Everyday Conversation," Science Daily, http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2002/06/020611070813.htm. (accessed 4/27/2008)
[47] Sheng-Yen, *The Spiritual Environmental Protection (聖嚴法師心靈環保)*, p. 81.

intentionally or not have made unbalanced decisions when it comes to the benefit of communities and the environment.

Here, I can cite an example from my hometown where industrial development won over the natural environment. My hometown was a small traditional agricultural village in southern Taiwan. When I was in elementary school I remember vividly that favourite after school activities were fishing, catching frogs, dragging for prawns and swimming in a clear water pond on a hot summer day. Those days are gone now, not because they are just a part of my childhood memory, but because the natural environment is now polluted by industrial development. Business development was necessary for the survival of my small village, but it could have been done in such a way that would benefit the community and still protect the natural environment. For example, development could have come from tourism as the village has some historical buildings form the Qing Dynasty. This sort of development would have needed a long-term view rather than responding to the immediate pressures of a quick result. This story is not uncommon, many other villages have been similarly affected. It is now with hindsight though that people may be able to learn from these mistakes and take a better approach to planning for the future.

Environmental conservation has been an important issue and has been discussed around the world. This topic is important and urgent for all living beings on earth. How can we as humans use our wisdom wisely and do the right things? Many scientists and environmental experts are trying to find solutions and prevent human environmental damage for the future. According to Sheng-Yen from a Buddhist point of view environmental protection starts from our hearts and minds. The true awakening from our deep pure hearts and minds are the fundamental solutions. Environmental protection does not only appeal to people who try to use less water or less paper or try to plant more trees, but the true awakening with pure hearts.[48] There are many ways to start our actions to improve the situation and minimise harm to the environment. In this universe, I

[48] Ibid., p. 72.

am an average person, in the issue of environmental protection I choose to follow the path that has already been created and suggested by the experts.

In the West environmentalism has been a concern since the nineteenth century. In the 1960s alternative culture movements gave emphasis to our need to preserve the planet. The publication of Rachel Carson's text, *Silent Spring* was especially significant is setting the philosophical tone of the movement. In more recent times the threat of global warming has increased awareness of environmental issues. Two thinkers whose work underpin much of the contemporary discourse and are relevant to the specifics of this research are Henry David Thoreau and Aldo Leopold. Thoreau looked for a simple relationship with nature believing people should live as close to it as possible. In *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) Leopold stressed the respect that humankind needed to show towards nature and that it is unethical to harm nature.[49] These simple principles align with the Buddhist philosophy that is the focus of discussion here.

While environmental problems can be seen to be caused by governments and industry, I believe, like many environmentalists, there is a personal responsibility to work at the individual level to bring about change through ethical personal practices. In my arts practice this philosophy translates to the very careful use and re-use of all materials. My philosophy about following the Buddhist approach is that the right and appropriate way already exists. It is also a good way. Sometimes the incessant discussion becomes useless in the situation of solving problems. It is our responsibility as humans to know how to use resources wisely and reply to the problem directly.

I have learned from experience about how our needs, desires and wants affect our relationship with the environment. It is a difficult thing to learn but I do not regret it because my desire for accumulating things has reduced and I have gained a new approach to living. This experience has come from what has

[49] Philip Carfaro, "Thoreau, Leopold, and Carson: Toward an Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Ethics*, Vol 22 (2001):3-16.

happened in my life. Now, I consider my attitude towards environmental protection has led me in a natural way and I see things in a moderate way. I realised that a substantial change had occurred following the deaths of my father and older brother. The moment of realisation came when I saw the remains of their bodies after the cremation process. I looked at their skeletons and asked myself about what I was actually seeing. After a high temperature firing the skeleton becomes fragile and easy to put into a cinerary urn. The two hours firing process transforms the human body into something that can be placed within a small urn. What is life? At that moment of introspection, I asked myself this question but also wondered whether it is really possible to know the answer.

The images of my father and brother still remain in my memory. While memories of their bodies become vague as time goes by, there are moments when I can see their smiles and expressions as vividly as if they are here with me. Even though a number of years have passed and I have experienced many things without them I feel fulfilment of simple enjoyment knowing that I can still visit them in the Buddhist temple in my hometown. This knowledge and experience has made me realize that true happiness comes from a serious attitude towards life. This same attitude is also important to the current environmental issues that we are facing. It is only by acknowledging that each generation lives on in us and prepares the way for the next generations to come that our true attitude about life and the need improve the natural and spiritual environment can be realised.

Cause and consequence

In Buddhist teachings we believe that if we do good things we will gain good results and similarly, if we are do bad things we will have bad results. Buddhists believe there is a certain amount of good deeds in our lifetime. In this life we should take the opportunity to do more to build a store of good deeds. There is a parallel in terms of current environmental issues. From a Buddhist point of view the good deeds that we do for individuals are as valued as the good that we do for the environment. There is therefore a natural affinity between the individual

and the environment in Buddhist philosophy. We need to take action for the environment now.

The Buddhist point of view about material life is that it teaches Buddhists to limit themselves to the basic daily needs for living. It is not necessary to consider needs other than basic needs. I agree with Buddhist teaching: the lower our material needs, the easier it is to satisfy our pure heart. An ideal way to start for an environmentally friendly person is to try to live a simple life. The process may be difficult initially for many people but in the end we would have a better chance to ensure our future. After all some of us only start to appreciate things after we lose them so it is necessary to appreciate the environment now so that we do not repeat the mistakes made previously. Wasting materials is another common mistake. Because people need more materials to satisfy their desires, factories produce more products to meet the demand. A cycle of want and desire starts.

Though I am Buddhist I have always believed that every religion has the same goal to teach each follower to become a better person. I have attended Christian services too as I have accompanied my roommate to her church on Sundays. On one occasion the priest's sermon was about how we need to be aware of our 'blessings' and appreciate where we are in the world. The priest used the analogy of winning a lottery to indicate his view that people living in some countries have already won the lottery. In his sermon, he maintained that the people living in Australia were the grand prize winners compared to the people who live in Africa. His words touched my heart deeply. People who live in a better situation often do not appreciate their surroundings. Not until they have experienced other ways of living do some of them realize how lucky they are. Among these people, I have realized I am one of them. There were times in my life when I was living with uncontrolled emotions but by practising Buddhism I have been assisted in finding the way to appreciate my situation. As D. T. Suzuki, an influential Zen scholar, says,

> To see directly into one's original Nature, this is Zen. Even if you are well learned in hundreds of the Sutras and Sastras, you still remain an ignoramus in Buddhism when you have not yet seen into your original Nature.[50]

Life-changing experiences enable this connection with one's original nature. Now I look at imperfect factors in another perspective and my vision has improved.

The Buddhist point of view on these sorts of personal developments is to position them in relation to caring for our world in more general terms. We, as humans, cannot change what has already happened, but we have the ability to prevent destruction by humankind from occurring in the future. Buddhists maintain that there should be no barriers between people of different colours, religions or backgrounds, the primary concern of all people has to be united in the protection our only living environment. As Harvey states,

> In various Buddhist texts, the environment is held to respond to the state of human morality, it is not seen as a neutral stage on which humans merely strut, nor a sterile container unaffected by human actions. This clearly has ecological ramifications: humans cannot ignore the effect of their actions on their environment.[51]

The link between spiritual health and environmental health is therefore very clear. Pollution, for example, as a human-made condition is something that we are morally obliged to address and correct. The knowledge and wisdom that we gain from experience must be applied to plans for the future protection of the environment.

In discussing a Buddhist response to climate change, Shi Wuling suggests the following points to characterize the Buddhist attitude.

> Do no harm. Do what is good. Purify the mind.
> If you cannot purify the mind, then do no harm and do what is good.
> If you cannot do what is good, at the very least, do no harm.[52]

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[50] Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, p. 103.
[51] Peter Harvey, "Avoiding Unintended Harm to the Environment and the Buddhist Ethic of Intention (1)," 14 (2007), http://www.buddhistethics.org/14/harvey-article.html. (accessed 12/5/2007)
[52] Wuling Shi, "A Buddhist Response to Climate Change, Part 1,"

When there are so many voices and so much discussion and little action, this attitude provides us with the best way to focus our personal action to do our duty to the environment. Shi Wuling suggests a very basic approach for people to minimise their impact on their environment and contribute to improving the situation. Simply doing “no harm” to the Earth can be important.

Shi Wuling’s advice is very much in keeping with traditional Buddhist philosophy, specifically the concept of *Wu-Wei (無為)*. Wu-Wei is the Chinese term meaning that a lot can be achieved by doing nothing at a particular level. Here doing nothing refers to the choice to take no further action at a particular point in time according to the current circumstances. For example, rather than forcing people to change their attitude about environmental protection, Shi Wuling wisely suggests that the very best way to start is simply for people to do no harm.[53] The Buddhist commitment to a personal philosophy of minimal harm grows with the number of individuals adopting the principle. Eventually, social change is possible through mass movement. In practice this corresponds to contemporary perspectives on the preservation of the environment where global attention has been directed towards this issue. The Kyoto Agreement, the research by Al Gore, the huge amount of publicity and the number of international symposia directed toward the issue recognises its importance in contemporary life, indeed for the existence of life at all.

The Buddhist life style

In Taiwan, Sheng-Yen, has encouraged Buddhists to live a simple life style. He argues that by living a simple life, people are already protecting the environment.[54] Personally I agree strongly with Sheng-Yen’s recommendation about living a simple life in both a material and spiritual way. I started my simple life by living with the outside forces. There are times when money or lack of it

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http://www.abuddhistperspective-org/journal/2008/4/7/a-buddhist-response-climate-change-part-1.html. (accessed 27/4/2008)

[53] Ibid.

[54] Sheng-Yen, *The Spiritual Environmental Protection (聖嚴法師心靈環保)*, p. 30.

creates a huge pressure and I am forced into reappraising my spending and thinking through which items in my life I can eliminate from my daily desires. It did not take me too much time to make my decision but this process was not easy for me when my living style forced me to shift to a lower daily desire needs. Now, when I look back, this experience has been valuable in a way that money cannot buy. I have realized that having a high level of satisfaction in terms of materialism has impaired my spiritual growth. Since changing my attitudes to material possessions and desires my spiritualism has improved. The financial problems create a new living style for me and also take my spiritual thinking to another level. In Buddhist training it is often said that when you come to a critical situation in your life, if there is no way for you to continue on then turn your mind around and look at a positive way and a way will appear naturally. I have learned that the less material desire I have, the less pollution I produce; the less I need to be satisfied, the easier it is to achieve a level of happiness. Buddhism has always advocated simple living as the path to happiness, and now I have come to understand it.

The essence of my own position is stated in an old Buddhist teaching. A Chinese master of the T'ang dynasty, Zengetsu, wrote the following advice for his pupils. He made several very important points about Zen/Chan practice which apply to me too.

> Living in the world yet not forming attachments to the dust of the world is the way of a true Zen student.
>
> Poverty is your treasure. Never exchange it for an easy life.
>
> Modesty is the foundation of all virtues. Let your neighbours discover you before you make yourself known to them
>
> Live with cause and leave results to the great law of the universe. Pass each day in peaceful contemplation.[55]

[55] Wuling Shi, "No Attachment to Dust," http://www.abuddhistperspective.org/display/Search?searchQuery=no+attachment+to+dust&moduleId=1283087. (accessed 24/4/2008)

A simple living style has been practised in Buddhist temples since the beginning. As discussed in Chapter 1 the eightfold path is the way to achieve Sheng-Yen's spiritual environmental protection. If the eightfold path can be followed successfully then our dreams will not be too far away. I remember there was a time when I was sitting in the temple listening to a Buddhist lecture given by the Buddhist master. The lecture made me feel confident that I could follow all the directions. But then I realized that there were times when I forgot my good intentions, sometimes as soon as I left the temple. This caused me to question whether this happened to other Buddhists and whether believers of other faiths also have the same loss of commitment. When I asked my master about how it was possible to be more consistent, the master just smiled and told me not to worry. He said that I am on the right track because I am aware of mistakes and that to recognise this is already an improvement in Buddhist practice. He also said; "one day, in your heart when you cannot distinguish between the temple and other places, then it is your time to come to the enlightenment level for the eightfold path."[56]

Care for other beings

From the Buddhist perspective, all living beings are no different from one another. Humans have the responsibility to practise the virtues of harmlessness, compassion, and equanimity. When these virtues are naturally part of our everyday lives then we will have the true human qualities of wisdom, compassion and kindness to utilise with all other living beings. In one of Sheng-Yen's lectures entitled *Zen and Compassion*, he advises:

> Actually, compassion, in Buddhism means unconditional love. Love means concern for the welfare of others (not romantic love), and unconditional means without regard for recognition, reward, or receiving anything in return.[57]

In this lecture Sheng-Yen described how there are three levels of compassion. The first level is compassion for the families and friends. The second level is

[56] Li-Feng Lo in conversation with Master Chuan-Hsiao(傳孝法師), 7/ 11/ 1995.
[57] Sheng-Yen, "Zen and Compassion," *Chan Magazine* 2002, np.

compassion for the strangers and enemies. In this level we are still distinguishing between the self (the one who is compassionate), the act of compassion itself, and the one who is the object of that compassion. At the third level, compassion occurs naturally, with no sense of self, or of others, or of being compassionate.[58] One day, when we reach the third level of compassion, then we can truly live in harmony with nature and other living beings.

Buddhism teaches its followers that all living beings are equal therefore all living beings, whether human or not, go through the same cycles of birth and rebirth. We as humans may be reborn as humans or some other living forms in our future life. From the Buddhist perspective, good deeds will bring us to a good karma and vice versa. The karma that we accumulate from our current life determines our next life.

Living in harmony with nature

The two most important elements for all living beings to survive on the earth are water and air. In living nature, humans exploit the natural resources more than any other species and are also the most wasteful and immoderate species. We as humans are playing a role as the most dominate species in this world. There is nothing wrong about being clever, but without wisdom, cleverness can lead humans in an incorrect direction. I reflect upon living in a world thirty years ago, when there were more rice farms than concrete buildings; when there was more fresh air than polluted air; when people were closer to one another. There are so many “what ifs” in my mind and I start to look for answers. From the logical perspective, today is better than yesterday and tomorrow will be better than today. And it looks like we as humans are the winners over all, but are we?

Environmental problems have most frequently been created because humans have sought better lives without thinking of the cost to the environment. Initial plans may present as good ideas, but because of human greed, problems occur

[58] Ibid.

beyond the level that our intelligence can handle. Indeed, while the quality of life has been improving in many countries over the last decades, at the same time the moral level of humanity seems not to have advanced at all. One thing that is undeniable is that religions have always played an important role in the communication of moral values. Followers of most faiths are taught to be respectful and useful people in their communities. If this is extended to a concern for their social and cultural environment then it is only a small step to see a respect for nature as implicit in their teachings. Religion can bring humans back to the basic understanding of humans as part of a total living environment.

The middle way (From an artist's point of view)

A recent article in *Ceramic Review* entitled 'Planet Earth' suggests that individual potters need to find their own solution to 'going green'. In a list that spans the alphabet from A to Z twenty-six suggestions were made for potters to follow. Below are a few suggestions that I have been following and hope that I will continue to follow in the future when I am working with clay. I wish to dedicate my responsibility as an integrated element of life on Earth by following these conservation techniques.

A is for the wonderful aqueous cream. Buy from the chemist rather than fancy hand cream. It is just as good if not better for softening and protecting hands and a large tub costs very little.

K is for kilns; pack them so they are as full as possible.

R is for reclaim; reclaim all clay. Although fresh clay is relatively cheap, it is to be mined, processed, packed and transported, but reclaim cleverly, when wet, wrap it in cloth to dry evenly, it saves time and effort.

U is for you – take responsibility, even if this means a little extra trouble, such as not leaving your kiln or any other electrical equipment on standby.

Y is for why biscuit fire when you can raw glaze and once fire it will cut costs dramatically.[59]

[59] Sandy Brown, "Planet Earth," *Ceramic Review* 2007, p. 32-34.

Brown’s advice here is to put in place simple actions to good effect. These are small but important steps in our efforts to live in harmony with Nature. As discussed above, particularly in reference to the thinking of Shi Wuling, it is often the simple, most straightforward, of approaches that present as good solutions. This is also a good way to start environmental protection. My philosophy about environmental conservation is: when I cannot find my own way, I sometimes follow other people’s lead.

In human affairs power is often located in economic, government and scientific areas. So actions to environmental issues are sought in those areas first. But the answers may come in other ways. Art and education are areas of human endeavour where the results are not necessarily clear, but the results can be shown in the next generation. Interest in the environment can be created and transferred by artists and educators. We should not give up on education because of seemingly low returns, but should protect education. Artists are part of the history we inherit. The ideas of artists in environmental issues are an important contribution to the future we are teaching our children to have.

We need to allow art, culture and education to develop. It is a parallel process that allows a better life. We cannot control the arts, but we can develop with them. Living in harmony with nature and other living beings is the highest goal of Buddhism. In the past, there was a period of time, when I woke up in the morning and started my daily routine without being aware of the consequences of my actions. I realised later that I had created a lot of garbage over time. From the start of the day - making coffee, having breakfast, brushing teeth, shopping, and making lunch and dinner - each activity added waste to the environment. As long as I am alive, I will produce my share of pollution on the Earth, but it is necessary to be conscious of this fact and actively try to minimise waste. There is a limit on how much pollution the world can take and all humans need to be aware of this. In one of the Dalai Lama’s talk about how humans need to adjust their needs in

respect to nature, he said: 'Everything has its limit. Too much consumption or effort to make money is no good. Neither is too much contentment.'[60]

To limit the desire for material needs is a good starting point on the path to improving one's interaction with the environment. Sheng-Yen reiterates this point in his advice to Buddhists in Taiwan and around the world.

> Take what you need rather than what you want for your daily life living, lower your desire and try to live in a simple life, when you are satisfied by and enjoy the simple things, the environment will eventually improve and our efforts will become one with nature. [61]

Becoming one with nature is a concept that has been approached here from a number of viewpoints. Although there are specific factors to consider in the choice of materials and processes, the artist is in fact no different from any other person in the sense of caring for the environment. The ability to truly care comes from recognising one's responsibilities as a human. As Shi Wuling has pointed out,

> As caring members of society, it is our responsibility to practice the virtues of harmlessness, compassion, and equanimity. These virtues lie deep within us, within our true nature. This true nature is the same as that of all Buddhas. The true nature of Buddhas – their very essence – is loving-kindness, altruism, and tranquillity. These qualities lie at the core of their being, and ours.[62]

To build a house needs the co-operation of all kinds of people. To protect the Earth requires even more co-operation. The core of environmental protection is the true awakening from our inner hearts; when the hearts become pure then the air will become fresh. If we treat the earth as our own house then we would like this house to become a home for us.

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[60] Dalai Lama, "Universal Responsibility and the Environment," The Government of Tibet in Exile, http://www.tibet.com/Eco/dleco2.html

[61] Sheng-Yen, *The Spiritual Environmental Protection (聖嚴法師心靈環保)*, p. 54-55 & 65-74.

[62] Wuling Shi, "To Touch Our Wisdom," http://www.abuddhistperspective.org/journal/2008/1/25/to-touch-our-wisdom.html. (accessed 28/4/2008)

Chapter 4 Contemporary Art

As this study is informed by both environmental concerns and spiritual issues it is appropriate to consider those artists and arts practices engaged in either of these issues separately or, like me, together. This chapter therefore, will investigate the works of late twentieth century and contemporary environmental artists whose engagement with nature has influenced my ideas and approach.

Andy Goldsworthy is a well-known environmental artist. An integral aspect of his work relevant to this research is the use of found natural materials. Goldsworthy's work involves the use of natural materials in such a way that they record and reflect on the passage of time in the environment. Most often, the natural materials that Goldsworthy uses to create his work are still alive, and during the life of the artwork will grow or decay, for example, leaves will change colour, snow melts and the petals will fall from flowers. Thus the passing of time is a dominant concern. Similarly this concern is evident in the work of Richard Long. As Long explains, 'Time passes, a place remains.'[63] Elsewhere Long elaborates on how this affects his work; 'A walk moves through life, it is physical but afterwards invisible. A sculpture is still, a stopping place, visible.' [64] Environmental artists like Goldsworthy and Long pursue very similar directions while creating fundamentally distinct works. Both artists use photography or video to record their artworks and both artists emphasize the passing of time as limiting and controlling the life of their artworks. In Goldsworthy's work, photographs are the documents that make his work visible, while the passage of time has made the work itself invisible.

There is a deep respect for the natural environment in Goldsworthy and Long's work. Both artists use and reposition natural materials from the environment, yet

[63] Richard Long cited in Martin Golding, "Thoughts on Richard Long," *Modern Painters* 3, no. 1 (1990): p. 50-53.
[64] Richard Long cited in John Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, 4th ed. (New York, London: Abbeville Press, 2006), p. 42.

they do so with great care, very conscious of their impact on the natural environment. Finding the right location for the work is of paramount importance. From mountains to lakes and deserts, the forces of nature challenge these artists to create site-specific works. The process of making is as fascinating as the end result. The making of Goldsworthy's *Ice sculpture*, for example, as detailed in a video production, shows him responding to the characteristics and aesthetics of the material.[65] The temperature was such that Goldsworthy had to awake before the sun rose in order to capture the perfect outdoor conditions for joining the ice cubes together and crafting his ice sculpture. By working in an uncertain outdoor environment there are so many factors to deal with and nothing is ever really under the total control of the artist. Goldsworthy's works are a recognition of the need to follow Nature's ways. His works implicitly incorporate Nature's lifecycle. The essential materiality of the works conveys his respect and appreciation of nature while at the same time alluding to important conservation issues.

When Goldsworthy started making leaf works, he utilised only wind-fall leaves gathered from the ground. Later he started to use fresh leaves from trees, but acknowledges that he must do so judiciously. As Goldsworthy says, 'I am careful about what I take. A few leaves from each tree.'[66] Fresh leaves, of course, bring a different quality to the work. An apposite example is *Beech leaves laid over a pool*, 1999, (fig. 11). The tenderness of fresh leaves has a pliability and lushness very different from the dryer leaves of wind-fall. The vivid colours of the seasonal leaves are used to create and represent the rhythm of the seasonal changes. Just as single days merge into a season, each single leaf, with its own unique qualities merges into one contained idea of seasonal change. It is as though the leaves form a community, each contributing to the sense of peacefulness. The Beech leaves, ranging in colour from red to orange to yellow, to light green and dark green, are arranged so that the differences in the colour are highlighted. They are all from the same type of tree, and yet arranged in this way, they

[65] Thomas Riedelsheimer, "Andy Goldsworthy: Rivers and Tides Working with Time," (USA: New Video, 2004).
[66] Terry Friedman and Andy Goldsworthy, eds., *Hand to Earth: Andy Goldsworthy Sculpture 1976-1990* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2004), p. 99.

challenge the viewer's expectations and perceptions of natural forms and Nature's beauty.

Fig. 11. Andy Goldsworthy, *Beech leaves laid over a pool*, *rained overnight river rose washing the leaves downstream* Scaur Water, Dumfriesshire , 30 October 1999.

Unlike Goldsworthy, I introduce an element of fire and therefore permanence into my site-specific installations. Clay, itself, is a natural element but to transform it into something that is permanent the material must undergo a firing process. This is an important issue in my current work, which, like that of Goldsworthy, acknowledges the nature of impermanence and permanence. Buddhist teaching explains human life in relation to the belief in permanence and the process of learning that everything is impermanent. After living beings complete their lifecycle their presence is kept alive in the memory of others and so the mental image lives on in the future challenging perceptions of permanence or impermanence. This is something that I consciously try to capture and express in my work. Perhaps it is time itself that can be captured in my work and yet at the same time evoke a sense of timelessness. In pursuing this quality of timelessness questions arise about how it is elicited in the mind of the viewer and whether the end product is therefore more important than the process of making.

The nature of time, its passage, and timelessness are integral elements of Goldsworthy's work and indeed of the work of all artists who create ephemeral work. It is somewhat ironic that what is intentionally ephemeral becomes permanent through the medium of photography. Goldsworthy chooses photography as the way to document his work, recording the process of making and the transitions that take place in its life. The photographs, therefore, become the core of his work. These can be revisited later on and can act as challenges to inspire the next work. While Goldsworthy's works decay, the photographs remain.

The real time of life and death is also, of course, the actual subject matter. In Goldsworthy's *Hole series* the artist reflects on his first experience of the death of a close relative and the emotions about this death. He felt that this death could be represented as a hole in the darkness, the natural forms could be used to evoke the strange beauty of death.[67] This is convincingly portrayed in *Sumach leaves laid around a hole* (fig. 12) where the combined forces of death and decay are present in the vivid, beautiful leaves arranged around a black hole. In this work, Goldsworthy used the autumn leaves ranging in colour from yellow to red to reddish brown to create an intensity of form and colour around the blackness of the hole at the centre. The depth of the blackness surrounded by these vivid colours creates a deep sense of absence or loss. However, the leaves will dry out and then start to break down and be blown about by the wind, covering or perhaps filling the hole, means that the dark hole will also be transformed. Light can enter into the darkness of the hole and a sense of hope may be conveyed through the process of change. It is possible to see works such as Goldsworthy's *Sumach leaves* as evocative of the passage of time, the time that is needed to help with the process of healing.

[67] Riedelsheimer, "Andy Goldsworthy: Rivers and Tides Working with Time."

Fig. 12. Andy Goldsworthy,
Sumach leaves laid around a hole,
1998, Storm King Art Centre.

One measure of time is the changing of weather according to the seasons of the year and Goldsworthy's works display an understanding of, and sensitivity to, these seasonal forces. The external space is a contributing force in the work, shaping its presence, sometimes, as he says, 'a work is at its best when most threatened by the weather.'[68] The elements of the weather, whether it is rain, wind, sun, or snow make the work alive, and as the work is changed by the weather and decays or breaks apart, then nature and the work become one again. As Goldsworthy recognises, 'Working with nature means working on nature's terms.'[69] From an early age, Goldsworthy lived and worked on a farm and the impact of this experience has been immense. Similarly, when I was very young I spent a lot of time on a farm owned by my maternal grandparents. On this property my grandparents grew rice and raised chickens that ranged freely under a variety of fruit trees. I used to collect the rice straws and rearranged them into something that looked like artworks. Sometimes, I used the chicken feathers to decorate the work. In the farm fields there were so many natural

[68] Beardsley, *Earthworks and Beyond: Contemporary Art in the Landscape*, p. 223.
[69] Andy Goldsworthy, *Time*, 1st ed. (London: Thames & Hudson Ltd, 2000), p. 189.

materials readily available, that as a child my playground was a rich source of creativity.

Like Goldsworthy, this early experience seems to have stayed with me so that now I continue to introduce locally-found natural materials into my work. To me the found materials retain their connection to the place of origin and imbue the artwork with a native life connecting it to the environment where I have lived. By picking up a branch day-by-day from spaces near my studio, I document my own journey; a work is not just a work, it has a memory behind it, and a life within it. We rarely realize how much we have been affected by nature even if we have chosen to ignore Mother Nature's voice. I am myself a part of nature living within it, one day I will decay and eventually become one with nature. I am not a scientist nor an environmentalist, what I want to express in my research is my understanding of the world as an artist, and communicate my concern for the natural environment.

Richard Long is also a very influential environmental artist. Long made his first walking artwork in 1967. As a young artist, Long wanted to make nature the subject of his work in new ways. By choosing this very simple and basic method of walking to create his works he brought together physical action with natural materials in a revolutionary way. As Haldane asserts, 'Richard Long reintroduced natural landscape as a central theme of art, also making it both the location and the material of his sculpture.'[70] This mode of working has influenced other artists to work with nature in innovative ways and reinvigorated environmental art.

Walking has become Long's trademark (fig. 13).[71] The idea to use walking as a method of art making could not be more simple, yet it is an approach that makes Long a true environmental artist. As Long says, 'Walking as art provided an ideal means … [to] explore relationships between time, distance, geography and

[70] John Haldane, "Art's Natural Revolutionary," James Cohan Gallery, www.jamescohan.com/artists/richard-long/articles-and-reviews/. (accessed 12/5/2007)
[71] Richard Long, *Richard Long: Walking the Line* (London, New York: Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2002), preface.

measurement.'[72] The act of walking presents as a kind of training of the human body, which has both physical and spiritual dimensions. It is essentially a primitive method of working, elemental in its construct. There are no bright colours or fancy forms. The evidence of walking is present primarily in the forms of lines and circles compressed into the grass or shaped as stones have been displaced. These are simple and creative factors which have resulted in masterpieces. In some of Long's work, spectacular locations such as the Sahara Desert have been chosen to highlight his activity.

Fig. 13. Richard Long, *A Line Made by Walking*, 1967, England.

Nature is Long's studio, the outdoor landscape which is so rich and creates a sense of freedom inspires him to create his unique, simple and strong sculptural works. Growing up in the countryside surrounded by the natural environment has had a huge influence on Long. The arduous, challenging and physical commitment to creating his artwork through walking, also importantly, provides an opportunity for meditation. Long explains, 'place give me ideas…I get my energy from being out on the road or walking in the mountains.'[73] Long's

[72] Ibid., p. 68.
[73] Ibid., preface.

innovative approach to art-making recognises both space and time. Initially these were Long's major concerns but the location in nature means the environment has an essential presence and that therefore a respect for the environment becomes an unavoidable concern.

This respect for the environment is evident in the work of Goldsworthy and Long. Their work is a recognition of the basic tenet of environmental protection which is to try and minimise any harm to Mother Nature. This is a very broad concept but nevertheless an essential practice that everyone should try to follow in order to protect the natural environment. In terms of making artworks, this aim is perhaps more difficult but the consciousness of minimising harmful effects of processes and the selective use of materials which are sustainable, is very important.

Long's sculptures are created by carefully selecting natural materials that will change slowly over time. In some ways, his sculptures still have a presence of life long after Long has finished. In order to disseminate his ideas and work, Long uses texts, maps, and photographs as records of his land sculptures. At some stage the materials that Long uses may look permanent but they are actually temporary. Water will dry up, earth will eventually wear away, wood will decay, and nothing will really remain forever, except the memories and documentations. The photographs help to recall the memories of artworks and in this way the work becomes timeless. Long truly understands the characteristics of natural materials. He accepts the truth that natural materials will eventually decay but he also believes that the memory of his works will remain in his mind. Long's understanding of the ephemeral quality of natural materials allows him to express his broad vision of the landscape. In all his works materials are drawn from nearby sites so as not to upset the balance of nature; Long's art-works therefore are one with nature.

Of particular relevance here is the fact that Long has also investigated connections with Zen philosophy. In a number of his mud works he has used 'Chinese hexagrams as an underlying structure.' The work *Earth* (2002) is based

on the 'I-Ching symbol for Earth.'[74] As Moorhouse contends, the medium of the work is therefore 'aligned with its meaning'.[75] When asked whether he had studied Zen philosophy before, Long replied that he did not feel the need to undertake a deep study of Zen to appreciate the geometric forms in I-Ching. He feels that the geometric forms and the philosophy of I-Ching form part of the universal concern with understanding the 'dialogue between human-nature and nature-nature'.[76] The role of mud works is an interesting aspect of Long's oeuvre as, apart from bringing outdoor material into interior spaces (fig. 14), they also have a 'dynamism' about them that comes from the process of the artist manipulating and swirling the mud as it sets.[77]

Although Long has used a variety of natural materials he is most noted for his use of stones. According to Long, stone has a symbolic quality that represents the world itself.[78] During an interview with Patrick Elliot in 2007, Long was asked about the individuality of elemental materials. He responded: 'all stones are different, all fingerprints are different, all clouds are different, every splash is different, every walk is different, one never steps in the same river twice.'[79] Through this appreciation of the distinctiveness of each part of nature Long is able to respond to humanity's interaction with nature as something that is 'both timeless and universal'.[80] Long is also responsive to the fact that elements of nature have their own lifecycle and asserts that he likes the 'random chaos of nature, and working with and sometimes against that. In a sense, the geometry and measurement that feature in my work are like Platonic forms imposed on formless matter.'[81]

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[74] Ibid., p. 39.
[75] Ibid.
[76] Martin Gayford, "Master of Mud," *Apollo* 2007, p. 24.
[77] Ibid., p. 22.
[78] Kenneth Baker, "Richard Long's Art Can Be Viewed by All Who Take a Hike " James Cohan Gallery, www.jamescohan.com/artists/richard-long/articles-and-reviews. (accessed 19/11/2006)
[79] Richard Long, *Richard Long: Walking and Marking* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2007), p.55-57. Patrick Elliott is a senior curator at the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art. This interview took place on 7 March 2007.
[80] Long, *Richard Long: Walking the Line*, p. 43.
[81] John Haldane, "Art's Natural Revolutionary: The Scotsman," (2007), http://i1.exhibit-e.com/jamescohan/90e58c29.pdf. (accessed 19/11/2007)

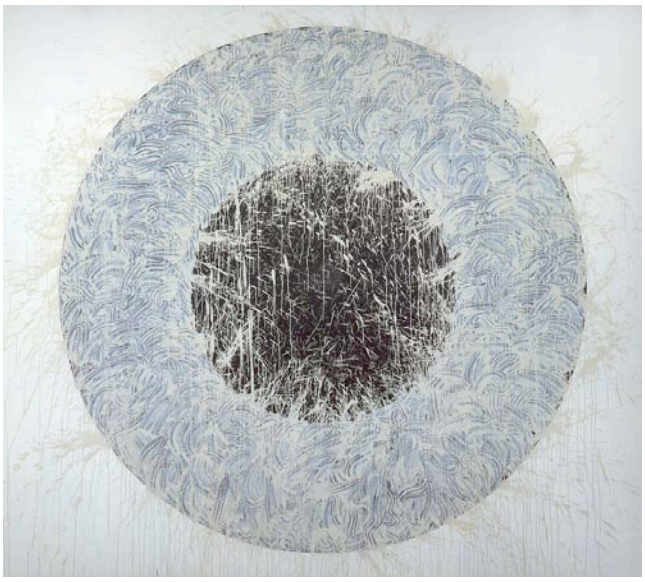

Fig. 14. Richard Long, *Untitled*, 1991, Galerie Tschudi Glarus.

Long's ideas and approaches resonate in my approach to art-making. In particular the idea that creating from nature implicitly acknowledges the unique qualities of every piece. For example, each of the clay petals and leaves in works such as *Conversation between Black and White I & II* are unique and have their own character. Their existence starts at the same stage as a ball of clay but some of them become individual leaves and some of them end up in the reclaimed clay bucket waiting for their next chance to be remade again, where a sort of reincarnation can take place. Not all of the clay leaves will survive the firing stages and those that do become stone-like ceramics.

A very different approach to art in the landscape can be seen in the work of Dale Chihuly, the internationally known glass artist. His magnificent glass works form a remarkable body of work both in terms of size and diversity. With a team to support him, Chihuly has extended the limits of what can be achieved in glass, in particular utilising glass as a sculptural material for large exterior works.

I still remember my first experience of seeing Chihuly's work *in situ*. It was at Garfield Park Conservatory in Chicago in 2001. At the time I felt as though language was not sufficient to express my feelings on seeing the work. I revisited

the exhibition many times and yet the initial impact did not lessen, each experience of the work felt like a first experience. I was aware of feeling amazed and full of admiration. In particular, I admired Chihuly's technical achievement in using glass in new and innovative ways and testing the limits of the material. Chihuly clearly understands the characteristics of glass and has the confidence to allow the hot glass to find its own shape naturally during the blowing process. At Garfield Park Conservatory, glass balls were placed in a pond, and so any movement of the water created peaceful rhythmic movement of the balls. Chiluly's glass is clearly man-made and dramatic, yet it interacts very neatly with the natural forms of plants and water.

In another area within the conservatory colourful glass plates were arranged in between the tropical banana trees. The colour and form of the glass plates complemented the natural forms of the plants. The most magnificent piece in the exhibition was Chihuly's blue chandelier, *Peacock Blue Tower,* which was placed in the front entry. The stunning transparent blue glass tubes were installed and arranged into a large, tall, narrow glass chandelier. The whole exhibition was in fact remarkable and a very clear statement about how nature and contemporary glass works could corroborate. Although this corroboration was carefully orchestrated it gave the appearance of a spontaneous merging of forms. Chihuly's glass works are playful and create the sense of a child-like imagination at play in a garden. Sometimes it feels unrestrained and sometimes it feels innocent. Sometimes it feels wild and sometimes it feels quiet.

Aspects of the Chicago exhibition had made their appearance in earlier works. For example, Chihuly's *Floats* appeared in 1991. According to Chihuly, the term 'Floats' comes from his working in Japan and seeing and being intrigued by 'the buoyant, blue-green glass floats entangled in the Japanese fishing nets'.[82] The floats have been variously placed in water, gardens and sandy expanses and are

[82] William Warmus, *The Essential Dale Chihuly*, ed. Harriet Whelchel (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2000), p. 74.

frequently arranged in groups so that they ‘transcend their unassuming shapes and transmit an aura of mystery to their surroundings’.[83]

Like Chihuly, some of my artworks are connected to memories of water and colour. I have memories from my childhood of playing with my brothers and cousins and racing our hand-made boats in a stream. Starting with the making of papers boats which would then be carefully placed on the little stream near home, we would chase after them as they got caught up in the flow of the water. Some of the paper boats made it through to the finishing line and some did not. My memory tells me that even then I was amazed by the fact that our little paper boats were carried away evenly and peacefully. Perhaps, this is similar to Chihuly’s memories of water and man-made objects.

There are so many kinds of memories that impact upon my work but another that has particular resonance was the childhood activity of arranging a bowl of rose petals for Buddha. Picking the fully opened roses from my grandmother’s garden I would then place the petals in a ceramic bowl. The light fragrant smell that arose from the bowl acted as a sign of my family’s respect for Buddha. As mentioned in a previous chapter, I grew up in a village where agriculture was the main activity. My childhood activities were immersed in nature, I remember feeling very close to Nature. This feeling for Nature provides a clear link between my work as an artist and the artists discussed here in this research project. There is an old Chinese saying about Nature that reads:

> 自然是, 文人騷客永遠的題材, 亂中有序的景致, 在繁複中有簡單的美.

In English, this roughly translates to:

> Nature is forever the scholar and poet’s topic, in the chaos of the world, order can be found: the simple beauty of nature can be found in the complicated world.

This understanding of Nature underpins another old Chinese story. In this story an analogy is made between a waterlily and a young girl. The story is told to

[83] Ibid.

make the point that even though the girl lives in a less than ideal environment she can still grow up to be beautiful. This is like the waterlily growing in a pond filled with silt, yet sitting on top of the water the waterlily will grow clean, pure and beautiful.

Chihuly's *Floats* are like waterlilies placed on the surface of the water. The glass balls have been placed in ponds, such as at the conservatory, and in rivers in the landscape and they gently respond to the natural flow of the water. Similar to Chihuly's glass *Floats* the ceramic leaves and petals that I have made are positioned on a material surface yet in an imaginative sense I see them as floating and, in this imaginative space, linked to messages to my loved ones in my memories.

In his 'Chandeliers' series, '*Chihuly over Venice'*, fourteen chandeliers were placed in the city of Venice, many of which were suspended over the canals. The viewers, making their way around Venice, would encounter these incredibly thin, fragile and colourful Chandeliers. Those chandeliers placed near the water created a 'breathtaking panorama at night as they dominate[d] the maze of watery, palazzo-lined canals'.[84] Each chandelier was made up of hundreds of smaller parts, which is, as Chuhily has claimed, his preferred manner of constructing work (fig. 15). As Chihuly says: 'My philosophy is: When one is good, a dozen is better.'[85]

[84] Ibid., p. 90.
[85] Margaret L. Kaplan, ed., *Chihuly: 365 Days* (Abrams, 2008), 364.

Fig. 15. Dale Chihuly, *Rio delle Torreselle Chandelier*, 1996, 7'x8', Venice, Italy.

This working method allows Chihuly to play with the scale of a work, enlarging it or revising it as he sees fit.[86] The mathematics of working with scale and number appeals to me, and like Chuhily, I prefer to use small pieces to build up large pieces of artwork. In some ways there are basic concepts that link mathematics, art and life. We start with one unit and add, subtract and match as we go along, like an endlessly evolving puzzle.

As a professional artist, Chihuly accepts the condition of the material that he chooses to use and extends its potential by fully exploring colour, transparency, density, size, shape, and form. To watch a video recording of Chihuly at work is to see two aspects to the process. Often there is the energy he has with his team which is almost like watching a group of young people at play, and then there are the times where Chihuly is shown as quiet and reflective. Both sides of Chihuly, the quiet and the energetic, are evident in his work. This pairing of different

[86] Warmus, *The Essential Dale Chihuly*, p. 109.

qualities has been extended by Donald Kuspit, in his analysis of Chihuly's work as the bringing together of Eastern and Western ideas. According to Kuspit, 'Chihuhly's glass art extends the Eastern attempt to harmonize with nature, applying the accommodation of opposites with one another, even their convertibility into each other, to the relationship between the Oriental and the Western attitudes to life'.[87] This endeavour to harmonise with nature (See for example fig. 16) is underpinned by material issues. Just as glass has an inescapable fragility, so too does the environment; both need to be handled with care.

Fig. 16. Dale Chihuly, *Polyvitro Floats*, 2003, Franklin Park Conservatory, Columbus, Ohio.

The work of Chris Drury is also significant in this research. Drury was born in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) and graduated from Camberwell School of Art in London. Over the past twenty-five years he has used different media, materials and variation of scale in order to create a range of environmental art. From the *Medicine Wheel* (1982-83) to the *Chamber series* and to the recent *Mushrooms /Clouds* (2008), his art shows a strong relationship with nature. As Drury himself

[87] Donald Kuspit, *Chihuly* (Seattle: Portland Press, 1997), p. 35.

explains, his art explores the concepts of nature and culture and inner and outer while also engaging with the interplay of microcosm and macrocosm.[88]

In *Medicine Wheel* (fig. 17), Drury uses natural objects collected daily for one year. He says: 'as I bent down to pick up those two lapwing feathers, I realized instantly that I should make a work by doing just that: picking something up off the earth every day for a year to make an object calendar'.[89] Drury feels his life is interwoven with nature. He creates an object calendar, a time memory for a year, silently recording one year of his life journey. According to Drury, in his *Medicine Wheel* he was able to track 'time, cycles seasons and place'.[90] It also recorded his inner year by reflecting his happiness and tragedies (his father died during this year). He says, 'this piece was a critical turning point in my work'.[91] This is where he started to change from representational work to abstraction so that he could express his ideas and stories. Drury explains his approach as wanting to respond to the 'world with openness, not from a fixed point of view. So I began using the very stuff of the world.'[92] This very stuff of the world can also be seen as a significant statement about conservation. By using only locally found natural materials in an artwork, the artist has, in a very basic way, helped the Earth.

[88] Chris Drury, "Starting Points: An Experience of Landscape," http://www.chrisdrury.co.uk/cv.html. (accessed 7/4/2008)
[89] Chris Drury and Kay Syrad, *Chris Drury: Silent Spaces* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), p. 17.
[90] Drury, "Starting Points: An Experience of Landscape." (accessed 7/4/2008)
[91] Drury and Syrad, *Chris Drury: Silent Spaces*, p. 7.
[92] Ibid.

Fig. 17. Chris Drury, *Medicine Wheel*, 16th August 1982 - 15th August 1983, natural objects.

Similarly to Drury, I started picking up natural materials and playing with them when I was very young. But not until my Master's studies in Chicago did I become more serious and focused on introducing the natural material into my artwork. I have a great interest in natural materials particularly in plants materials. I still remember the time when I was waiting in my grandmother's garden for the roses to opens up because the moment to collect fully opened roses is when the first petal falls. Permanence and impermanence occur together at that moment and are balanced naturally. Drury too has reflected on this moment and connects it with his understanding of Zen Buddhism. As Drury says: 'In Zen, an understanding of the eternal movement of nature is essential to a respect for nature. Here, impermanence might also be called movement; permanence, stillness.'[93] In Buddhist teaching there are no permanent objects, all objects will eventually decay; only the memories will remain. A level of enlightenment in Buddhist study is reached when an understanding of the relationship between permanence and impermanence is attained.

[93] Ibid., p. 10.

The years of living on the outskirts of Chicago gave me further opportunity to study the natural land. The university I studied at is located within a sculpture park. It contains a large number of contemporary sculptures by artists such as: Mary Miss, Mark di Suvero, John Henry and many more. This semi-rural environment provided the opportunity for me to collect the natural / native materials during my studies in the US. The years in the US were the turning point for me and my work. The open fields around Chicago have a very different geography than my country, Taiwan. The landscape outside the city of Chicago comprises vast open fields. The land seems without end, it presents a horizontal display. The landscape in Taiwan by comparison is a vertical presentation with surrounding mountains. In Chicago, the sun and moon feel much closer and larger in size. The native plants in the open fields are flamboyantly beautiful. The moments of harmony between nature and human culture appear peacefully in the open land of the landscape.

I have continued picking up the natural materials around where I stay and combining them with my ceramic work for my installations. There are several reasons behind this. The most important reason is that I cannot refuse Nature's beauties. In my eyes, Nature has her simple, unique, naïve, honest character from which I try to learn. Drury collects his materials very carefully over a space of time but he is also conscious of the role of chance and feels that objects are 'allowed to come' to him rather than him 'consciously looking for objects.'[94] Drury is also keenly aware of the conservation issues that arise in his encounters with nature, as he sees it,

> Human culture is part of the process of nature. The problem is that we are divided. There is a perpetual duality. This is so deeply ingrained in the human psyche that we will never change our self-destructive habits until we understand that division. Only in this understanding will our actions change. Without this we will always act with disregard.[95]

[94] Ibid., p. 7.
[95] John K. Grande, *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2004), p. 236.

Drury, like the other artists discussed here, takes a very serious attitude to his work and its role in communicating a message about respect and passion for the natural environment. In an interview where he was asked about the process of taking something from nature Drury replied, 'It's OK to touch nature, but of course the degree to which you do so is crucial.'[96] This degree of taking is called finding a 'balance'. As soon as we find this point then we could live in harmony with nature and ourselves again.

In Drury's work we can see that he deals with repetition. As Drury notes, 'repeating an action is close to chanting a mantra or being in a perpetual meditative state.'[97] This process is shown in much of his work, particularly in *Medicine Wheel* (1983), *Four Spheres* (1984), *Shimanto River Spheres* (1997) (fig. 18) and also is in his recent exhibition at Nevada Museum of Art *Chris Drury: Mushrooms / Clouds* in 2008. Similar to Drury, I am attracted to the process of repetition. A simple unit repeated over and over, forms a simple pattern, and as Drury remarks, is evocative of the act of meditation. This repeated pattern also aligns with the cycle of life in nature. The influence of Chan/Zen Buddhism in Drury's work is very significant. He trusts in the power of nature to imbue his work with meaning as he says,

> An artist is a communicator, but to be an artist one must first be a human being: that is to say, whole, undivided, if that is possible. From such a position there is no division between man, art, and nature. The world is perceived as it is. Personally I have nothing to communicate, consciously, or unconsciously; the work simply reflects the moving from moment to moment in the world as it is, and so it is nature itself that communicates.[98]

By documenting his journey in collecting and arranging the parts of works such as in the *Medicine Wheel* Drury understands that nature will speak for itself. This is a very important realisation which informs my work as well. Even though I am recording a personal statement of my journey in terms of both research and life

[96] Mel Gooding and William Furlong, *Song of the Earth* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002), p. 84.
[97] Drury and Syrad, *Chris Drury: Silent Spaces*, p. 243.
[98] Ibid., p. 6.

during nearly four years in Australia I realise that my work is just part of a much larger engagement with nature and conservation. As Drury says: 'Our lives are a process of nature'.[99] In this process of nature, there are four years of my footprint in Australia. The four years of study have enriched my knowledge of art and life and offered valuable experiences in both my professional and personal life.

Fig. 18. Chris Drury, *Shimanto River Spheres*, 1997, bamboo, ginkgo leaves, vine, moss, and seed, Higashitsuno-mura, Kochi Prefecture, Japan.

Another artist whose work and ideas impact upon this research is Nils-Udo. Originally a painter, since 1972, Nils-Udo has seen himself as a photographer and the sculptor. Nils-Udo uses petals, berries, flowers, stones and many other natural materials along with non-natural materials if necessary to create his environmental art. Nils-Udo thinks that as humans we have responsibilities to the world. We cannot close our eyes and pretend there is nothing happening in the real world. He believes people are not facing the truth. In fact, he says people lie to themselves.[100] Nils-Udo looks at himself as part of nature: 'As a part of nature, I lived and worked day after day in its rhythms, by its conditions. Life and work became a unity. I was at peace with myself.'[101] Nils-Udo's environmental artworks (fig. 19 & 20) are a Utopian dream with beautifully coloured flowers and

[99] Grande, *Art Nature Dialogues: Interviews with Environmental Artists*, p. 236.
[100] Ibid., p. 101.
[101] Ibid., p. 96.

brightly coloured leaves. He sees himself responding realistically to the world and its problems but wants to do so with optimism for the future and create artworks that, 'Utopia like, fuse life and art into each other.'[102] He explains this more fully in relation to the process of looking to nature to find hope.

> Nature is still complete and inexhaustible in her most remote refuges, her magic still real. At any time, meaning any season, in all weathers, in things great and small. Always. Potential Utopias are under every stone, on every leaf and behind every tree, in the clouds and in the wind. Sensations are omnipresent. As a realist I only need to grasp them. To redeem them from their anonymity. Through the idiotic and ineradicable belief in Utopia. Pitting poetry against the inhuman river of time.[103]

Just as Nils-Udo is looking for a Utopian world in his environmental art so too am I. In particular, I link this to the Buddhist level of enlightenment, as discussed previously, that allows understanding beyond the surface of life, or in Buddhist terms to 'see the mountain as a mountain again'. I aim to express this in my ceramic installation art. If the Western world is chasing after the Utopian dream then the Eastern world, in search of reaching the level of enlightenment, is chasing after the notion of 'seeing the water as water again'.[104] Utopia will happen in the human world when a true understanding between nature and human culture occurs.

Some of Nils-Udo's sculptures were created with living plants in them. The process involves horticultural concepts and action in his artworks. This living environmental sculpture can be related to the Chan/Zen landscape design as discussed in Chapter 2 particularly in those that have been shaped by the Sung scholar landscape paintings. It can be suggested that there are two types of spirits in Nils-Udo's work. In the work of 1993 (fig. 19) for example, the beauty of the berries and sunflowers is realised even though the end of their life is already determined, this is the spirit of life at its end. By comparison the work of 2000 (fig.

[102] Ibid., p. 101.
[103] Nicola Hodges, ed., *Art and the Natural Environment* (London: Academy Group LTD, 1994), p. 59.
[104] Yi Wu, *Chan Yu Lao Zhuang (禪與老莊)* (Taipei: San Min Shu Ju, 1976), p. 176.

20) realises the beauty of life that will go on, at least for the present, this is the spirit of a life-cycle not yet completed. In these works Nils-Udo combines natural material taken from another source, say from the fields, with growing material of the work itself. In the different forms brought together in this way there are different meanings but collectively they send the same messages of nature's beauties, the natural way to return to nature. As McGrath says: 'Nils-Udo's works return the material used to where it came from - the natural landscape.'[105] This practice is closely aligned with the Buddhist philosophy on nature and life, we as humans come from nature and eventually will return back to nature.

Fig. 19. Nils Udo, *Untitled,* 1993, sunflower heads, rose berries, Danube marshlands, Bavaria, Germany.

[105] Dorothy McGrath, *Landscape Art* (Mexico Atrium International de Mēxico, 2002), p. 102.

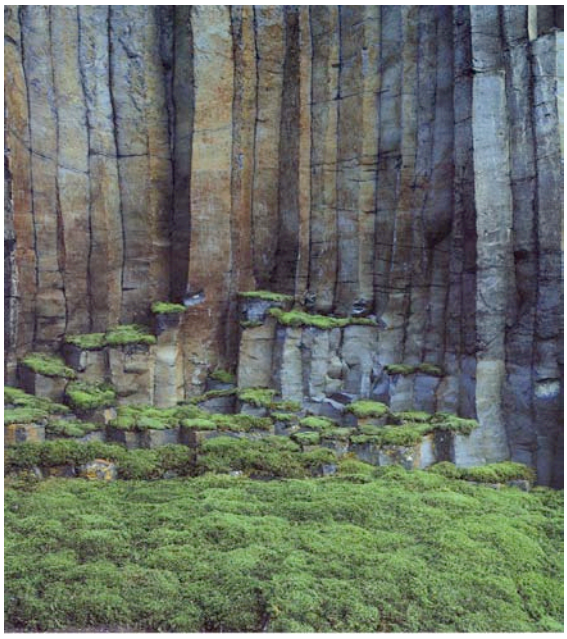

Fig. 20. Nils Udo, *Untitled*, 2000, Basalt columns, moss, Auvergne, France.

Like many environmental artists, Nils-Udo uses photography to record his art. For Nils-Udo, as for most artists, the 'photographic record provides a trace' of the work.[106] This notion of a trace I see as in operation in my decision to use ceramics as a flat arrangement of forms on a surface rather than as more traditional sculptural forms. I have often been asked about this less traditional approach to ceramics, for example why would I arrange ceramic petals on the wall. It is a mode of working that has developed over the years and that allows me to investigate the connections with the lifecycles in nature in a more comprehensive manner. In my ceramic art I position myself as an assistant in bridging my work to nature and telling nature's story. My job is to pull the ceramics together with the natural elements and to test my imagination so that a unified framework is created. What really counts in my ceramic installations is the beauty of natural materials. The natural beauty of ceramics and the natural beauty of nature find their harmonious balance in the work.

[106] Hubert Besacier and Nils-Udo, *Nils-Udo: Art in Nature* (Paris: Flammarion, 2002), p. 145.

I use photography to record my ceramic works. Or I should say photographs are used to record my art and life. Through the images, the memory remains. Years later, even when my ceramic pieces may be broken, in the photographs, they will remain whole. Memories are enacted through the photographs and allow us to reflect on the cycles in life and art. The cycles will keep going. Photographs can also be part of the healing process maintaining a link to our lost ones. As Besacier says, 'photographs put us in direct contact with this factual and temporal reality, and at the same time they take us elsewhere'.[107] Photographs are locked into time.

The photographic recording of the environmental artist's work, is therefore itself a part of the process of time and acts as a recognition of the artist's engagement with time and the cycles of nature. The artist is an agent of the evolution in time and this affects the work. The artist is not a neutral part of the process but affects it fundamentally. As Nils-Udo says,

> Even when I work alongside nature, preparing my intrusions as gently as possible, they always remain a basic contradiction within themselves. My whole work rests on this contradiction. It does not escape the inherent destiny of our existence. It injures what it touches: nature's virginity.[108]

Nils-Udo's words acknowledge the special relationship between humans and nature that can also be found in Buddhist thinking. From the Buddhist point of view, all living beings are valued, there is no difference between one and another. Environmental artists make their work because their inner voice is calling them to do so. As people who have a deep affinity with nature, environmental artists can see the pureness of nature.

The final artist to consider here is Ruth Duckworth, a ceramicist originally from Germany but now living in the United States. Duckworth is an internationally known artist who is now 89 years of age, and still hard at work. Her garden has been her main inspiration and a resource for her artwork. In a 2004 video

[107] Ibid.
[108] Nils-Udo quote in John K. Grande, "Nils-Udo: Nature Works," *Sculpture* 1999, p. 18-25.

recording, she mentioned how nature has influenced her sculpture and ceramic works, but more than that she finds that, 'Nature is so sexy'.[109] This love of nature is present in her work.

Duckworth's sculptures are organic both in terms of form and ideas. From her early works to recent works, she has played with forms more than colours and slowly honed her ideas through repetition. From cups to vessels, to sculptures, to large-scale wall panels, there is a sense of a spontaneous enjoyment of organic forms. As Lauria has noted, 'the vessel form in its distended hollowness is both a metaphor and a vehicle for the organic feeling which runs through much of her work and which reflects Ruth Duckworth's own deep empathy for the natural world'.[110] (See for example fig. 21) Duckworth uses the coil method to build most of her clay sculptures. She likes the feeling of clay while she is working on it. She feels the coiling process has become a meditation for her.[111]

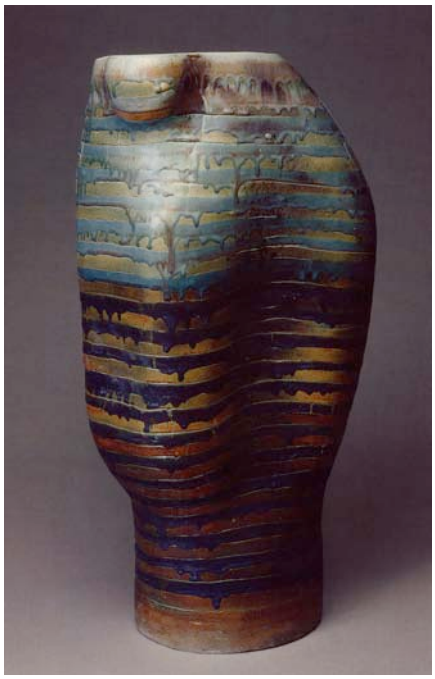

Fig. 21. Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled,* 1997*,* Porcelain, Glazed, 82.6 x 40.6 x 39.4 cm.

[109] Karen Carter, "Ruth Duckworth: A Life in Clay," (2002).
[110] Martin Puryear cited in Jo Lauria and Tony Birks, *Ruth Duckworth Modernist Sculptor* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2004), p. 6.
[111] Ibid., p. 39.

In certain ways, I relate very strongly to the work and ideas of Ruth Duckworth. The work I produced for this project uses the slapping method. Like Duckworth, I acknowledge that the process of making is very much a meditation. The process allows me to reflect on the practice of my Buddhist beliefs so that I can feel that I engaging with my inner soul. Through this engagement images and the voices of my loved ones are refreshed in my memories. It takes me back to an emotional level of imagination and the desire to reunite with them again.

An outstanding example of Duckworth's ability to extend the limits of ceramics can be seen in the huge *Earth, Water and Sky* (1968) (fig. 22). This work is quite extraordinary as it covers four walls and the ceiling of the entrance hall to the Geophysical Sciences Building at the University of Chicago. The colour of the murals on the wall range in colour from blue-greens through to ochres and represents the elements of the earth that she portrays as ripples, ridges and planes on the surface. The ceiling is coloured in a range of blues and white cloud like forms to create the sense of both near and deep space.[112] The space, while dealing with these elements of nature also speaks of 'fertility, regeneration and the cycles of life'.[113] As an artist, Duckworth aims to show her responsibility for, and sensitivity to, nature in her work. Her true feelings towards the natural world are demonstrated in her work yet she constantly asks herself,

> Can I, in my work, express what I feel about life? About being alive? About the earth and its creatures, its beauty and fragility? My life and work are relatively unimportant these days compared to the drama of a sick planet. The health of the planet and how to keep it intact is what matters most to me. The earth needs so much love and caring and not just from me. Can I express any of that in my work? I really don't know. [114]

[112] Ibid., p. 50.
[113] Thea Burger and Kim Coventry, "Ruth Duckworth: Stretching the Limits," *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 11 (1993): p. 3-7.
[114] James Alliance Renwick, "Ruth Duckworth Sculpture," http://www.epl.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=118&Itemid=217. (accessed 8/9/2006)

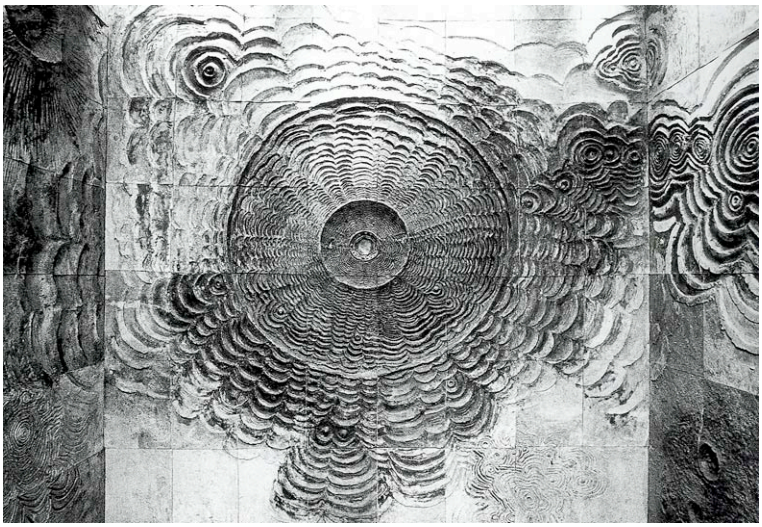

Fig. 22. Ruth Duckworth, *Earth, Water, and Sky,* 1968, H: 3.1 metres 37.161 square metres.

Duckworth is not alone, of course, when it comes to such concerns for the environment. All of the artists considered here have in one way or other responded to the environment, some like Nils-Udo and Duckworth have also verbally expressed their concerns in terms of conservation and the problems that humans have created. Duckworth's claim that Nature is sexy is a reminder that engaging with conservation issues does not have to be an onerous task, rather it can be one that has sensual rewards.[115] There is a vitality and enjoyable sense of purpose that comes from connecting with Nature. I am just one of many artists attracted by Nature, but I believe that this experience is deepened by an exploration of Buddhist teaching. Sheng-Yen, for example, in advocating for Spiritual Environment Protection, speaks of living a simple lifestyle in order to purify the mind. When the mind is pure then things will find their way to recover.[116] The issues raised by the works and ideas of the artists discussed here are engaged with nature, conservation and the spiritual connection between humans and nature in a variety of ways. Whether explicitly or implicitly, a connection with the Buddhist philosophy of living in harmony with nature, can be

[115] Carter, "Ruth Duckworth: A Life in Clay."
[116] Sheng-Yen, "The Four Kinds of Environmentalism." (accessed 3/7/2006)

noticed. If we look at environmental art from Eastern eyes, we could see it as a profitless endeavour. The community may see little purpose in artwork in this area either as a way to make money or make a statement about society. In the Western view, environmental art has existed since the 1960s. More and more artists are aware of environmental conservation and use their art to express their care and concern for the land. Beyond awareness of change to the natural environment, there is one more important issue. In the Buddhist terms as discussed previously there is the need for an awakening of our pure hearts in order to find the spiritual environment for our souls. The day when most people find their true hearts will be the day when culture and power of understanding merge together. Buddha said, give respect to others and others will respect you. When we can treat another's problem as our own problem and feel the other's pain as our own pain then the true happiness is not far away. I hope my compassion and wisdom will eventually lead me towards a better understanding of the relationship of the artist to nature and life.

Chapter 5 Studio Research Outcomes

As has been previously discussed there is a significant element of the autobiographical in the research. This is essentially because my decision to explore the potential of clay and its ability to convey the spiritual in line with Buddhist philosophy is deeply rooted in the fact that I grew up in a traditional Taiwanese country town in an agricultural region. In this village, as in many such traditional environments, there were gendered expectations of girls' behaviour. Growing up with three older brothers and male cousins, my childhood activities became male oriented. Since I was the youngest in the family, when it came to playing activities, I had little choice, I simply followed wherever the boys played.

My first experience of playing with 'dirt' was in the time before rice was due to be planted. I put my bare feet in the soft, smooth, warm earth of the rice farm. This was an unforgettable experience. And the price to pay for this experience was that my parents immediately prohibited me from playing outdoors for quite some time. The memory of 'dirt' play has been in my heart ever since. But it was not until my early twenties that I undertook a clay class in Taiwan.

Having grown up in the countryside, I had the advantage of access to the natural world. My hometown is located in southern Taiwan; it is near the Taiwan Straits and the Central Mountain Range. Because of my father's job in the government, I had the opportunity to visit the villages in my home district, which were close to the mountainside and enjoyed a view of the mountains. The cycles of the seasons and the simple style of living deeply influenced me as I grew up.

This life style meant that we spent a lot of time walking and it was on these treks that I discovered interesting natural materials such as stones, crystals, and various kinds of plants. Other people walking near me would comment on my habit of picking up 'useless' materials. But my father was the one who showed his support by helping me to collect things. His encouragement gave me the freedom to be myself.

The study of art is also a long journey and takes a lot of commitment and sacrifice on the part of the artist; in some ways this can be seen as similar to the lifestyle of Buddhist monks and nuns. The benefit for the monks and nuns from living in a simple way is that they become close to the essential nature of the environment. Through the circumstances of my life, including my decision to be an artist, and my study of Buddhism, I have come to appreciate and enjoy the qualities of simple living more as I have grown up. The process of human life is about accepting the shifting stages - one step at a time as life experiences accumulate and we learn from previous events.

My research project begins with a comparison between the natural cycle of seasons and the human lifecycle informed by the type of Buddhist philosophy current in Taiwanese culture. The key concern coming from this Buddhist study, as has been discussed above, is to address environmental values that arise through an understanding of life and lifecycles. As an artist, but also a practising Buddhist, it is my responsibility to assist in helping the Earth become healthier.

The sense of permanence and impermanence are two of the key subjects in my ceramic work. In the installations I introduce the local, natural plant materials that have such a unique beauty. To me, they are works of Nature. By using materials collected locally there are no costs incurred through transportation. This is in line with the concept of 'Food miles' which minimizes the need for transportation to avoid unnecessary costs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.[117] I arrived in Melbourne three years ago in cold July weather. Winter in Melbourne can be very cold and wet. My first impression of the city of Melbourne was the Plane trees on almost every city street. Plane leaves were on the ground and the seeds were hanging on the branches. A few months later, the new leaves sprouted. I kept some of the old leaves and added new leaves that I collected to make an installation work called *When two seasons meet [季節的傳承]* (fig. 23). During the transition from winter to spring, the new leaves are hidden behind the old leaf

[117] Sophie Gaballa and Asha Bee Abraham, "Food Miles in Australia: A Preliminary Study of Melbourne, Victoria.," (East Brunswick: CERES Community Environment Park, 2007), p. 2.

buds waiting for the warmth of the sun. In this work, I use a paper made from Yucca plant tissue to provide an environment for the Plane leaves and the clay petals to inhabit.

Fig. 23. Li-Feng Lo, *When two seasons meet [季節的傳承]*, 2005, porcelain clay, copper blue glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, Plane leaves, yucca paper, corsage pins, 475x91x5cm.

Autumn is the season for gathering plant materials. Two years ago, I lived across the street from a city garden. The window in my flat was facing the garden. When the leaves started to change their colours, it was the time for me to collect my resources for my project. I find the best way for me to work for my ceramic project is to have everything in hand before I begin work including the plant materials, ceramic tiles and equipment.

This process is similar to Chinese/Japanese flower design. It is based on my desire to create site specific work using seasonal materials. I named this work *Home of Eucalyptus [尤加利樹的家]* (fig. 24).

Fig. 24. Li-Feng Lo, *Home of Eucalyptus [尤加利樹的家]*, 2005, porcelain clay, copper red glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, eucalyptus leaves, yucca paper, corsage pins, 370x91x5cm.

In my studio research, I endeavour to find to utilise both asymmetry and symmetry and strike a sense of balance. The round shaped flowers represent the cycle of Nature in *Blue I [藍一]* (fig. 25) *and Blue II [藍二]* (fig. 26) of the *Blue series.* The cycle of Nature is sometimes smooth and sometimes rugged. The asymmetrical and symmetrical in natural philosophy seamlessly elide and reflect the natural ebb and flow of the human cycle.

In *Blue I [藍一]* (fig. 25) *and Blue II [藍二]* (fig. 26), I started from the centre and gradually laid out a parallel symmetry towards both ends. It was arranged carefully but at the same time I was mindful of the need to allow the plant materials to flow out naturally. In using natural materials, I am hoping to show that the natural way is the better way.

To me, blue represents the colour of hope in Nature. Blue is the colour of the skies and the colour associated with water that is clear and clean. Blue means growth and energy. Before I came to Australia, I knew about eucalypts through my botanical studies. After coming to Australia I realised the extent of eucalyptus trees and their significance as evergreens. Amongst the different types of eucalypts there is the beautiful blue gum. It is interesting too, that eucalypts having certain characteristics that means they appear as very blue when viewed from a distance. So I make the connection between blue and hope and the Australia eucalypts and use this imagery in my work.

This response to the specifics of time and place is very important. There are many times that I walk by some plant materials and plan on coming back later to pick them, but then in an instant I know that I must turn around and go back. In that moment, something tells me to collect these pieces of plants and trees before they disappear like a rainbow. The immediacy of my location has to be incorporated in my work. The best way to do this is by immersing myself in the new environment.

Clay is another natural material. The idea of combining ceramics and tree branches is to join them in a harmony of asymmetry and symmetry in order to

highlight the harmony that can exist between Nature and humans. *Blue I [藍一]* (fig. 25) *and Blue II [藍二]* (fig. 26) are the results of this idea.

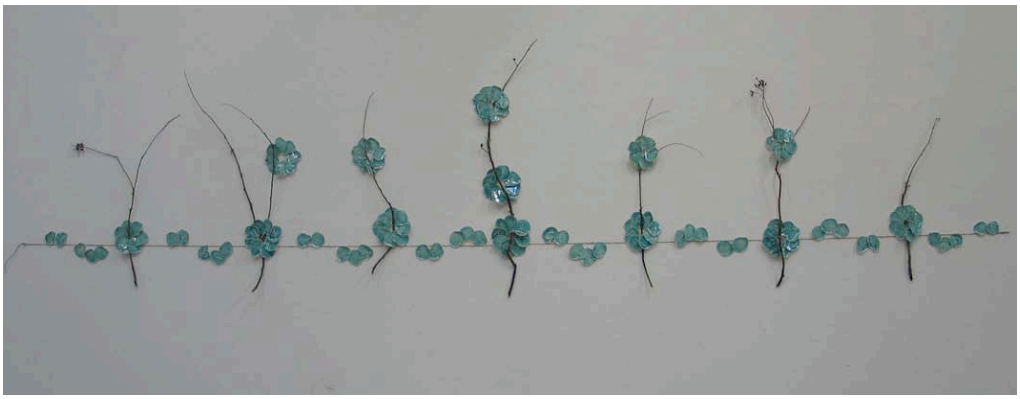

Fig. 25. Li-Feng Lo, *Blue I [藍一]*, 2006, porcelain clay, copper blue glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing ceramic tiles, eucalyptus branches, string, corsage pins, 420x110x5cm.

Nature cannot refuse the impact of human actions whether they be destructive or concerned with conservation. Sometimes I think humans are trying to challenge nature's limit either in a conscious or unconscious way. When nature comes under stress, saturated by humankind's actions, the consequence is silently released. We can see causes and results of our mistakes in Nature and take action to repair the damage we have caused.

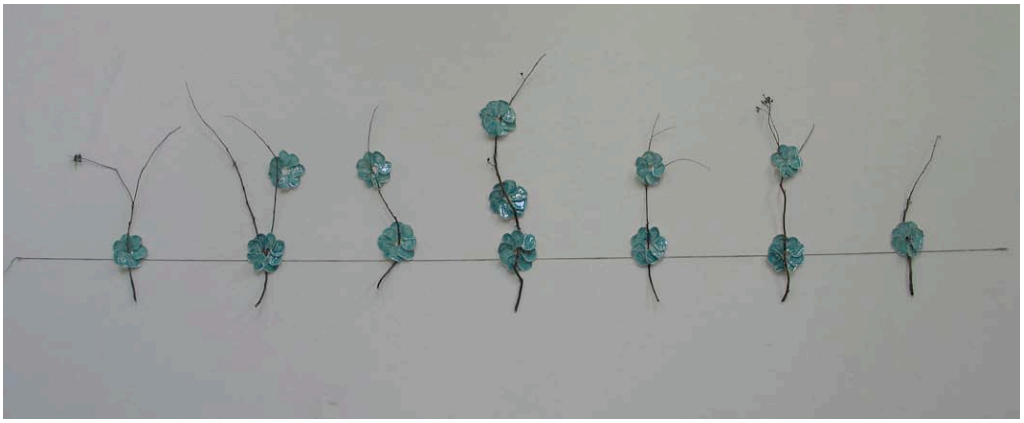

Fig. 26. Li-Feng Lo, *Blue II [藍二]*, 2006, porcelain clay, copper blue glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing ceramic tiles, eucalyptus branches, string, corsage pins, 420x110x5cm.

Black and white are the essential elements in Chinese painting – black image on white field. In general, white represents purity, naivety, and new life. Black represents a sense of mystery, maturity and old life. In this universe new lives come to this world and some old ones leave in the same moment. The cycles continue to repeat year after year giving nature and humans a way to find a balance.

In this work, I am using black and white ceramic tiles to create a Zen-like impression of my understanding of Buddhist philosophy in *no-mind* concept.

Conversation between Black and White - I [黑與白的對話之一] (fig. 27).

Conversation between Black and White - II [黑與白的對話之二] (fig. 28).

I used a cotton string to set an outline and a frame for the ceramic leaves. Each ceramic leaf has two small holes in both ends. I used pins to gather them together and pin them on the wooden wall. At first, I laid a row across the top and began from left to right. Then, I added a second layer and carefully chose leaves that had fitted perfectly next to each other. A few layers later a problem occurred. As each leaf had a different length I could not arrange them in my precise way. The more I wanted them to line up uniformly, the more likely I was not to succeed. There was a moment that I let go with my mind and randomly picked any leaf without much thinking. In the end, I realized when this work was finished, the *no-mind* arrangement made for a much better result. This was the moment I could feel my mind becoming one with the work.

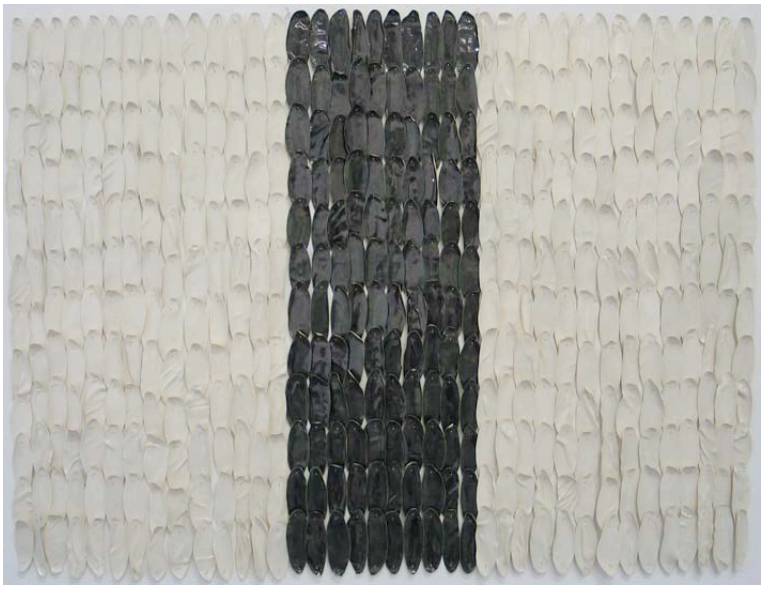

Fig. 27. Li-Feng Lo, *Conversation between Black and White I [黑與白的對話之一]*, 2006, porcelain clay, black and clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, pins, 120x90x2cm.

Fig. 28. Li-Feng Lo. *Conversation between Black and White II [黑與白的對話之二]*, 2006, porcelain clay, black and clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, pins, string, 120x90x2cm.

When I work in the studio I sometimes try to express my feeling about my work in Chinese. Below is the English translation of my statement about this work:

> My impression after taking down the work:
> Follow its natural character,

Each leaf has a different length.
One after another, long and short together, next to each other.
In the end, the common understanding achieved.
Rather than force them in the beginning, then follow the leaf's nature.

It was a day after a big storm in 2006, a perfect day for picking up plant materials. I am not familiar with the Melbourne area but I know there are some palm trees along St. Kilda beach. I brought a shopping bag with me and had a good harvest. Later on I created a work called *River [河]* (fig. 29).

This work is about my emotional response thinking about home after having been away for so many years. The ceramic petals represent me, flowing by the water of the river. My journey travels from the east to the west, in terms of culture and from the north to the south in terms of countries. In the depth of my heart, I hope one day, the river will eventually take me back to my starting point.

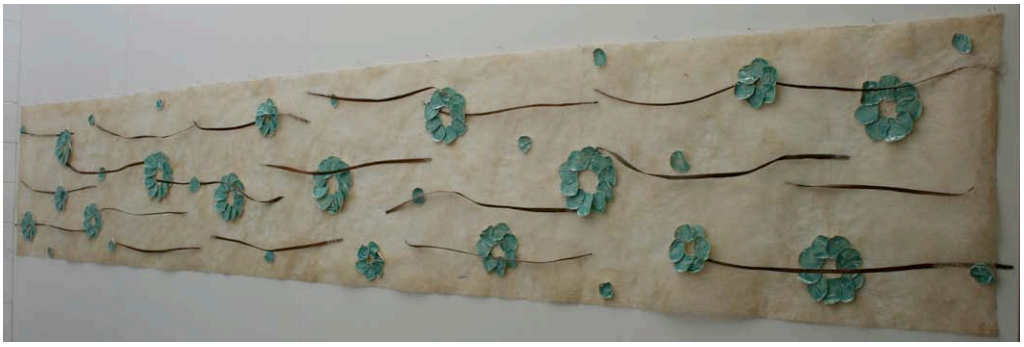

Fig. 29. Li-Feng Lo, *River [河]*, 2006, porcelain clay, copper blue glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, yucca paper, palm tree leaf, corsage pins, 580x91x2cm.

Fig. 30. Li-Feng Lo, *River [河]*, 2006, detail.

Satori I [頓悟一] (fig. 31) is a significant work in marking a point of time three years after the death of my father in 2003. The techniques employed in this work

were very familiar, but not until it was completed did I identify the ceramic surface with my father's skin when he was ill. The significance of the process was therefore a revelation. It was a quiet Sunday morning in my studio when the first rough tile was created (fig. 33). Tears flowed from my eyes. This tile has reminded me about my father when he was in the final stage of his cancer treatment. Due to so many medical reasons my father had to wear a diaper at that time; his skin was very fragile and easy to crack. As his daughter, I hoped that I could replace his pain and suffering. The crack from ceramic tiles may look pretty to others but the real meaning behind it was a daughter's memory of her father's suffering (fig. 32).

I realized that my thoughts of my father were released in this piece of clay. It took me three years to the first step of letting go of my sorrow about my father's death. The moment of Satori has arrived three years later.

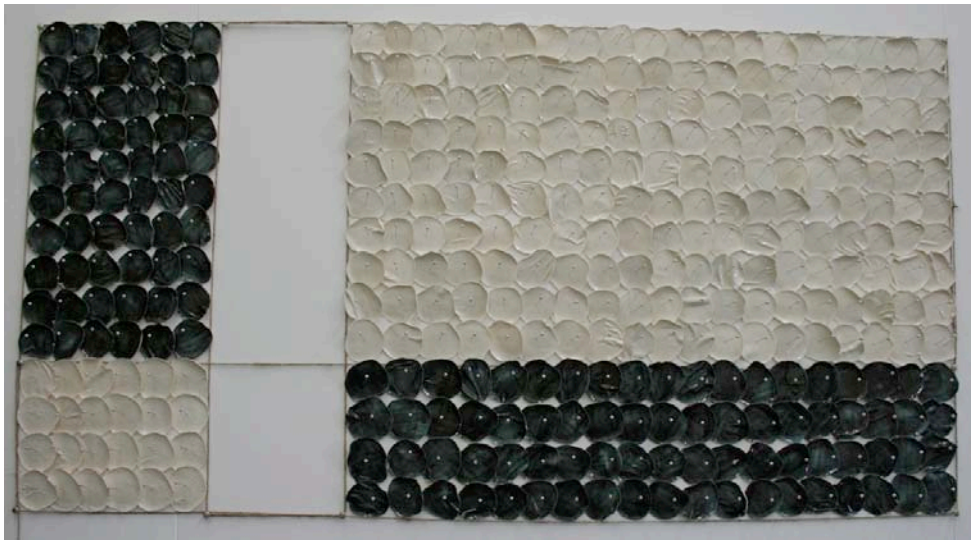

Fig. 31. Li-Feng Lo, *Satori I [頓悟一]*, 2006, porcelain clay, black and white glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, corsage pins, 150x90x2cm.

Fig. 32. Li-Feng Lo, *Satori I [頓悟一]*, 2006, detail.

Fig. 33. Li-Feng Lo, *Satori I [頓悟一]*, detail.

Simplicity has always been an important factor in my art. This is related to growing up in a small country village where I learnt to appreciate the source of simple things. I like simple and regular colours and shapes. This is my first outdoor site specific piece in ceramics that I created at the university campus. The white ceramic tiles are constructed into several different lengths of garlands with fishing line. I placed those garlands together to form a circle called *Circle I [圓一]* (fig. 34). The second outdoor work, *Circle II [圓二]* (fig. 35) came after I dismantled the *Circle I [圓一]* I took each ceramic garland to from a circle itself and placed them on the ground from large size to small size to represent the

walking clouds in the sky. Shin'chi Hisamatsu said in the book of *Zen and the fine arts,*

> The ultimate Simplicity is "not a single thing," or the One. If, as the negation of holiness results the freedom of non-holiness, then simplicity as the negation of clutter may be spoken of as being "boundless" – there is nothing limiting, as in a cloudless sky.[118]

The idea in placing ceramic work outdoors is to offer access to the public. As clay is part of the Earth it is natural for it to enjoy an outdoor environment. Because it is of ceramic material, however, it is fragile and needs to be handled carefully so that it can be enjoyed and touched.

Fig. 34. Li-Feng, Lo, *Circle I [圓一]*, 2007, porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, 90x90x2cm, Monash University / Caulfield Campus.

[118] Hisamatsu, *Zen and the Fine Arts*, p. 31.

Fig. 35. Li-Feng Lo, *Circle II [圓二]*, 2007, porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6, oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, glass beads, fishing line constructed, 192x50x2cm, Monash University / Caulfield Campus.

Fig. 36. Li-Feng Lo, *Circle II [圓二]*, 2007, detail.

Fig. 37. Li-Feng Lo, *Circle III [圓三]*, 2007. porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, glass beads, fishing line constructed, 200x80x1cm, Monash University / Caulfield Campus.

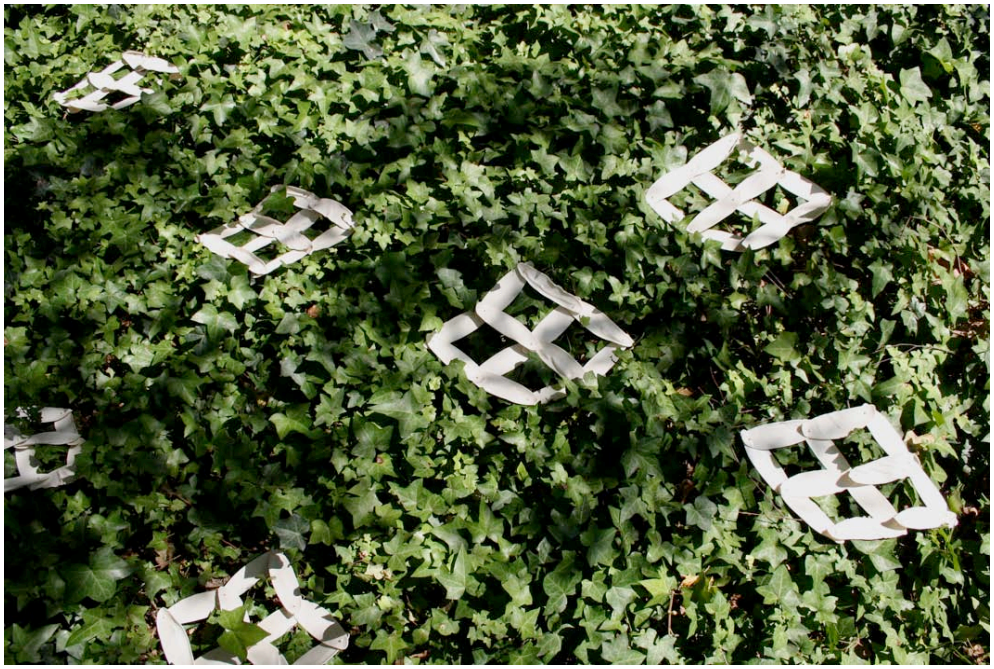

Fig. 38. Li-Feng Lo, *Square I [方一],* 2007. porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, glass beads, fishing line constructed, 120x60x1cm, Monash University / Caulfield Campus.

Fig. 39. Li-Feng Lo, *Square I [方一],* 2007, detail.

The long, distinctive shape of eucalyptus leaves has inspired me since I began living Melbourne nearly four years ago. Having collected so many eucalyptus leaves, one day an idea came into my mind. In *Square I [方一]* (fig. 38), I created the clay leaves to remind me of my journey to Melbourne. My university campus is often the place that I set up my outdoor installation work.

After finishing its lifecycle a leaf will almost certainly fall to the ground. In this work I joined several leaves together and placed them on the evergreen ground to create the starting point for them return to nature. They might rest in the ground forever or one day someone will discover them. Ceramics history is sometimes like a cooking recipe; there is a recipe and then you lose it for a while and later you discover it again.

The works *Wu-Wei I [無為一]* (fig. 40) and *Wu-Wei II [無為二]* (fig. 41) are created with the same idea about eucalyptus leaves. In construction I wanted to incorporate one of the Buddhist philosophies, *Wu-Wei,* and worked on a larger scale and present the feeling of draped materials. *Wu-Wei* means doing nothing therefore achieving everything. But here, it does not mean simply not doing anything from the beginning. The real meaning is that after a certain level of study, there is nothing else that we can control. Instead, we should let the work flow naturally following the characteristic of the materials.

Fig. 40. Li- Feng Lo, *Wu-Wei I (無為一)*, 2007, porcelain clay, black glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, glass beads, stainless wire, 71x39x1cm.

Fig. 41. Li-Feng Lo, *Wu-Wei II (無為二)*, 2007, porcelain clay, clear glaze cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, glass beads, stainless wire, 77x42x1cm.

Fig. 42. Li-Feng Lo, *Untitled I [無題一],* 2008, porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, birch branches, corsage pins, 525x95x5cm.

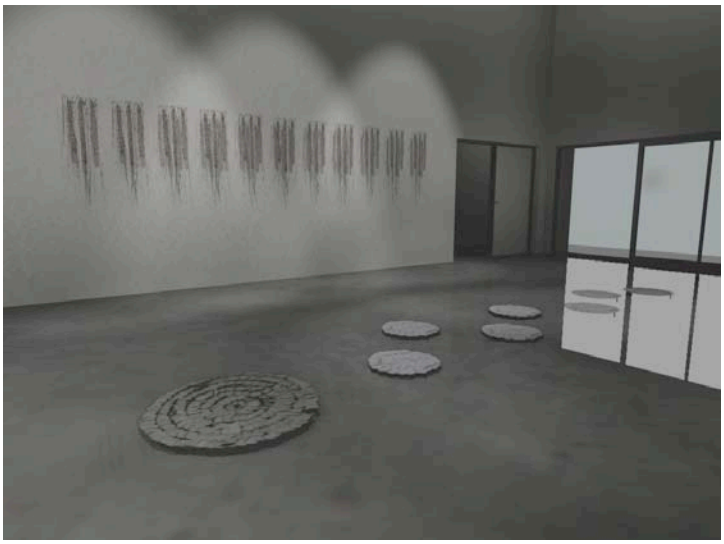

Fig. 43. Li-Feng Lo, *Untitled I [無題一],* 2008, gallery simulation view, detail.

There is a birch tree not far from my studio. I cannot remember when I started to collect the branches but I am attracted by their fine, soft, elongated forms. One branch became two and then three and my collection of birch branches has grown since then. In some ways those branches become alive to me. I started to think how I could bring them into my art.

The birch branches give me a feeling of the brush stroke in the painting and calligraphy in the Chinese scholars' paintings from the Sung Dynasty. The landscape scenery hiding behind the mist of blurred black and white strokes represents my inner feelings about the natural Chinese landscape. The mist in

the landscape paintings creates a dream-like feeling just as a veil blurs the images of the mountain or river. In the work, *Untitled I [無題一]* (fig. 43), I use birch branches and clay petals to create a ceramic version of a Chinese landscape. I want to create a Chan/Zen like garden in ceramic material combined with natural found materials in this research project. The Chan/Zen culture is where I grew up and it influences my art. I am carrying on the concept of Chan/Zen in my artwork; it occurs in my daily life naturally.

Fig. 44. Li-Feng Lo, *Circle IV [圓四]*, 2007. porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, fishing line constructed, 150x19x19cm.

The idea of the work *Circle IV [圓四]* (fig. 44) comes from Japanese paper origami and is inspired by the work of the glass sculptor, Dale Chihuly. I was introduced to the work of Chihuly by one of my previous professors in the United States. I became acquainted with his work and regularly viewed his recent work when I visited SOFA Chicago each year until 2005. I admire his strength and knowledge and the ability to extend the possibilities of glass as a material. In the same way I aimed to be taken out of my comfort zone in handling the material qualities of clay. Therefore, I am trying to emulate Chihuly's courage and achieve something similar in my discipline.

In *Circle IV [圓四]* (fig. 44) the aim is to achieve a paper-like quality in clay material. I practised making thinner clay leaves during the process of creating the work. Each ball contains about fifty cone-shaped clay elements. Each clay leaf was made by hand and my body became the machine for the clay. But my body is different from a machine because my human emotions are involved in my artwork.

In *Circle V [圓五]* (fig. 45), a circle is formed from small round shaped objects. When I look at these balls I can see the cycles in them. It is like the narrow edition of a small universe in clay but it also acts as a metaphor of human and natural cycles.

Fig. 45. Li-Feng Lo, *Circle V [圓五]*, 2007, porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, fishing line constructed, 50x50x19cm.

Bamboo plays an important role in my Chinese roots, from hunting for bamboo shoots for food, to the daily products for use, to the artwork of bamboo carving. Bamboo has therefore also taken on a metaphorical role for the Chinese in spiritual terms.

Bamboo to Chinese people is like eucalyptus to Australian people. Both plants are reflected in the cultures and take on a symbolic role. Bamboo often appears in Chinese scholar landscape paintings. It is one of the plant symbols in Chinese ink paintings. In Chinese culture, bamboo represents the character of modesty, an ideal way Chinese people should follow.

The bamboo I collected for *Untitled II [無題二]* (fig. 46) was from Caulfield racecourse near my university campus. I prefer to follow the natural way for collecting plant materials, that is to find the extra plant materials from households or gardens or from last year's growth. The bamboo materials in this work were from last year's growth and had already finished their physical lifecycle. In the installation work *Untitled II [無題二]*, I constructed bamboo frames for ceramic balls to flow on. The concept of this work is taken from the image of Buddha sitting on the lotus flower. I am using bamboo as a vehicle to carry ceramic balls through their journey.

Fig. 46. Li-Feng Lo, *Untitled II [無題二]*, 2007, porcelain clay, clear glaze, cone 6 oxidization firing, ceramic tiles, fishing line constructed, 210x25x25cm.

During the process of making, the clay creases are created naturally. I have been deeply attracted by those creases and could not find reasons for it. Recently I revisited the Asian collection at National Victoria Gallery, Melbourne. There are various Buddhist sculptures collected form different regions and countries all over the world. There is a sandstone sculpture standing in the front centre of the display room. The moment when I saw this sculpture, my memory took me back to years ago. I was reminded of the golden Buddha sculpture in my hometown and the Buddhist sculpture at The Art Institute of Chicago. These sculptures also have the creases on their clothes. Suddenly, I realized the seeds have already been planted in me years ago; they are just waiting for the right moment to sprout. This gives birth to *Untitled III [無題三]* (fig. 47).

Fig. 47. Li-Feng Lo, *Untitled III [無題三]*, 2008, stoneware clay, unglazed, cone 6 reduction firing, ceramic tiles, fishing line constructed, 115x20x20cm.

Fig. 48. Li-Feng Lo, *Untitled III [無題三]*, 2008, detail.

An experience at another art gallery was a motivation for *Acceptance [接受一]* (fig. 49). In March 2008, I visited an exhibition of Sidney Nolan's work at the Ian Potter Centre, National Gallery of Victoria. There was a quote from Sidney Nolan displayed on the wall that expressed a truth about his art-work. I was touched by his words.

Sidney Nolan said,

> When you are young you are given a good view of life because of your closeness to birth. You have birth impetus. Then you are placed in the acid. But there is something that balances this corrosion; closeness to death. Old painters can get feeling in their work that they could never get when they were young. They paint out until the last ten minutes because the rewards are still there.[119]

The first stage is at the beginning of study, you see that the mountain is mountain and water is water. This can be seen as the simple stage of representation. The second stage, during Zen study is that you see the mountain is not a mountain and water is not water. This is the confused state where a person's perceptions of reality are challenged. The final stage, after the enlightenment has been reached through study, is that the mountain is the mountain again and water is water again. In other words it is possible to understand that like a noumenon, some things can only be understood by the intellect rather than the senses. There is a similarity of art practice and Chen/Zen study in this perspective. 'The artist's internal experience of beauty may transform the environment. While she

[119] Barry Pearce, *Sidney Nolan* (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2007), p. 61.

is at work, inside and outside are not experienced as separate. The artist recognizes that the whole universe is one creative work of art.'[120] This relates to the concept in Buddhist philosophy of working towards the level of enlightenment. Buddhists believe that when humans came to this world, suffering started. Through Buddha's practices humans though can reach the enlightenment level and in the end our mind will become one with nature.

In *Acceptance [接受一]* (fig. 49), my emotions about my father's and brother's deaths was released most strongly. People often ask me why I particularly make leaves and not other natural forms. My answer always is, leaves are the first thing we notice when there is changing of the season and, when they are getting old, they return back to earth. This answer is not the complete version. The intimate reason is about my guilt for not spending more time with my father and brother before they passed away. Making leaves and the death of leaves reminds me of their deaths. I made each leaf by hand; each time when I throw the clay slabs on the table, it represents my regret in another way. When I slap the clay on the table it is like slapping myself. It is a way to redeem myself. Sometimes, I wonder, if there was someone who could sell time and I could buy it from them. In my own practice, accepting the truth of my relationship with my lost relatives is like seeing the mountain as mountain again.

[120] Sheng-Yen, *Subtle Wisdom: Understanding Suffering, Cultivating Compassion through Ch'an Buddhism*, p. 28.

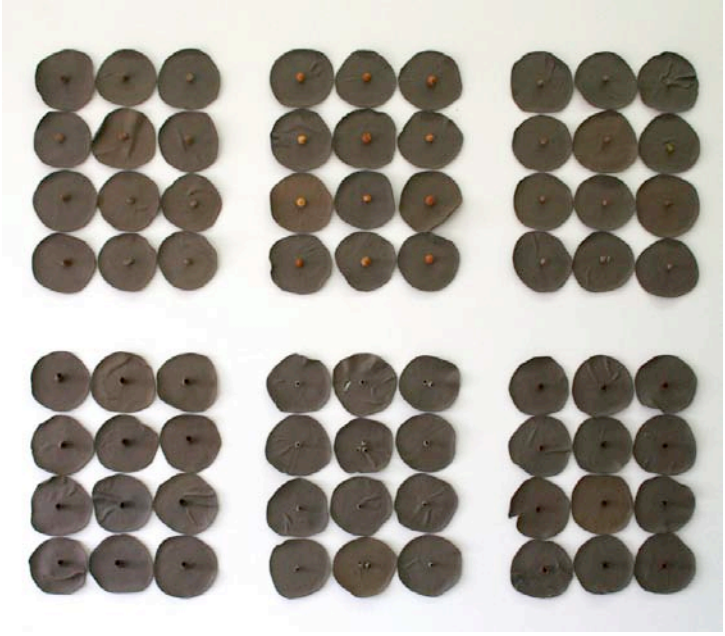

Fig. 49. Li-Feng Lo, *Acceptance I [接受一]*, 2008, stoneware clay, unglazed, cone 6 reduction firing, ceramic tiles, 95x70x2cm.

There is a Buddhist story about how a mother suffered after her only child passed away. She asked the Buddha what she should do to bring her child back. Buddha said to her there is a way. The Buddha asked her to find a family that had no death in that family and light an incense stick from this family. She asked around in her village but she could not find one. In the end, she understood. There is no family that has not had the experience of death. She finally let go of her sorrow and realized death is the condition among all human beings.

Accepting death is a painful process for human beings, in both physical and psychological ways, it challenges human emotions. The subject of how to go through the sorrow for loved ones has frequently been considered in Buddhist philosophy. The Buddhist concept of S*uddenly awaken (頓悟)*, helps Buddhists to see through the truth and let go of sorrow. Only when the soul is awakened can the mind overcome suffering enabling us to become healthier people in mind and body. This concept also applies to human society and the natural environment.

Humans can only truly awaken form selfishness when living in harmony with Nature.

Consider this artist's statement I wrote at the time of making *Acceptance I [接受一]*,

> Which one is more important in human life? The process or the result of life?
>
> The beautiful life comes from the process, the process makes life complete.
>
> Whether there are four seasons of spring, summer, autumn, and winter in the natural world or whether there are three stages of life, birth, life and death, each individual has their own cycle of life.
>
> In Buddhist study, a complete lifecycle is dependent on our mind.
>
> If we believe we have achieved the full circle of life, then there is just one season in life. It is the perfect circle of a full cycle.

In my work I strive to express my understanding of the Buddhist concept of emptiness. In *Acceptance II [接受二]* (in exhibition only), the clay leaves are simply made then just allow to dry naturally. This time, I have decided to present unfired clay work. In the exhibition visitors can take one of these simple clay leaves and place it in a container of water. By placing the clay leaves in the container the forms will break down and disintegrate. The form of the clay leaves will be transformed by the water and the material will becomes formless. But this work deals with the idea of both form and spirit. The act of placing a clay leaf in water allows the viewer to see that the form will change but something remains. The water and time have transformed the material. In a spiritual sense, I see this as something that has helped me to understand death and acted as an emotional release. Each clay leaf through the medium of water becomes ephemeral like a leaf in nature. Their stays were short but the spirit is timeless. As in the case of human cremation, it is when the process is finished that another cycle silently starts.

It is appropriate to end this examination of my artwork by citing a famous Zen Buddhist poem that expresses the true meaning of emptiness (空). This is the

enlightenment moment of the sixth patriarch, Hui-neng, during his Chan/Zen study.

The Bodhi is not like the tree,	菩提本無樹，
The mirror bright is nowhere shining;	明鏡亦非臺；
As there is nothing from the first,	本來無一物，
Where can the dust itself collect?[121]	何處惹塵埃。

[121] Barrett, ed., *Zen Buddhism Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, p. 79.

Conclusion

Like many other artists, Nature has been the most important resource for my study. In this research project, I have used ceramic materials along with natural materials to create a Chan/Zen like garden. This ceramic garden is just like a natural garden in that it provides a place for the soul and mind to meditate. In moving between the construct of a Chan/Zen garden and the environment beyond I aim to incorporate the idea that there are two parts to any human engagement with the environment. There is the external environment that we live in and the other is the internal environment that has the soul within. A healthy outside environment comes from a healthy spirit.

At one stage in my life, I refused to track my time because I felt that time was not important. When I reunited with the Buddha, I learned how to appreciate what I still have and see that I still have the ability to give. Through studying Buddhist philosophy I have come to know Buddha and what was unclear has become clear. I feel very comfortable in the Buddhist environment. I have been attracted to the Buddhists' simple style of living since I was young. The simple concept makes Buddhists appreciate nature and try to live in harmony with it. This is the reason that I want to use natural materials in my art.

Making this project has been a challenging experience. On a personal level the Buddhist philosophy has lead me to my lost relatives. This project has taken both me and my artwork into a different level of art practice. Here I would like to reiterate the words of Ruth Duckworth as they are particularly apposite to my own endeavours,

> Can I, in my work, express what I feel about life? About being alive? About the earth and its creatures, its beauty and fragility?...The health of the planet and how to keep it intact is what matters most to me.[122]

[122] Renwick, "Ruth Duckworth Sculpture." (accessed 8/9/2006)

In this research, I have, like Duckworth, been concerned about how artwork can express these links and concerns with the environment. The strength and beauty of so much environmental artwork comes from the simple act of using materials from the land. I like the simplicity of materials drawn from nature and I make simple forms in ceramics to create an artwork that embodies that simplicity and emulates its beauty.

By studying Buddhism, a philosophy of life and the inner spirit, an understanding of nature becomes open to investigation and application. This study has taught me how to see things from a broader perspective and use my wisdom and compassion for my future life and artwork. There is no re-run option for life and nature. Buddhism advises us to respect and care for what we have now and to minimise waste. This is the responsibility of everyone. In other words, environmental values are formed and strengthened by the process of reflection on the nature of life and its cycles. In my case this process has been facilitated by an investigation of Buddhist philosophy. This is tied to a personal journey in terms of life experiences, and also, and importantly here, as an artist in the creation of this research.

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