

Stonesensing¹

Evoking Meaning with Stones

A focusing game inspired by *Karesensui*,
the art of the Japanese stone garden.

Ram Eisenberg

¹ The game was developed for a landscape architecture focusing course taught by Ram Eisenberg & Dana Ganihar at the Technion, Israel, and adapted for the 2016 International Focusing conference in Cambridge, England.

Background

This game, anchored in the ancient Japanese art of evoking meaning with stones, is designed to heighten one's sense of the "meaning in the relationships of things-in-the-world", as with each move the "feel" of the situation radically changes in a way which is beyond words and concepts to describe.²

It can be useful as a playful introduction to Focusing and what is a felt sense. With more experienced focusers, it can be effective for experiencing patterns of response to changing situations, as with each turn one can explicate the felt sense of that particular instance / situation.

The game can be played with two, three, or four players. A basic game usually takes about 20 minutes, but as focusing goes, can be played much longer.



A game of three - at the focusing conference, Cambridge 2016.

see Abram 1996 ²

Basic Preparations

Stones

Collect a number of small stones, about 20-30 stones per game. Make sure they are of a variety of shapes and sizes but also of a similar “feel” or texture, so that they belong with each other. (The natural stones found in whatever location the game is played, are probably the best choice). The experience of playing with stones of a similar kind is rich and subtle. But one may also choose to use stones of different sources, such as in the game displayed. If you do so, place them in separate trays.



The largest stone should be no larger than 5-6cm. Place the stones on a plate of their own so they are easy to pass around.

Sand

You need enough sand to fill the tray about 10mm deep. Ideally the sand should be rather fine and very dry and clean, so it does not stick.



Tray

Use a simple round tray, about 30 cm in diameter, with a raised edge to give the sand a clear boundary. To avoid distractions, the edge should be minimal and plain (un-ornamented). An ordinary plate will do just fine.



Brush

If possible, have on hand a wide brush or comb to smooth the sand between turns. One can also use a fork to draw wavy patterns on the sand. If one doesn't have a brush, just gently shake the plate to smooth the sand out before beginning.



How to Play

Divide players into groups of two, three, or four (three is optimal). The players decide who goes first and in what order they will take turns.

Each group of players receives a plate of neatly brushed sand and a collection of stones.

The first player chooses a stone and carefully places it in the sand, looking for a placing that "feels right". While it is their turn, s/he can reconsider the choice and adjust the placing of the stone, until it feels right.

The second player "then, following the request of the first stone,"³ chooses a second stone and places it in the tray. The art is in paying very close attention to "the request of the first stone". (In Gendlinian terms we may say "a sensitivity to the implicit carrying forward of the situation").

And so on: each player in turn adds a stone to the tray. Each player may make changes until it *feels right*, but only whilst it's their turn, and only to the choice and placement of their own new stone. Previously placed stones must be left as they are.

Things to notice

Take your time when choosing and placing the stones.

Notice that the situation keeps changing. Look for "the right response": Take your time to feel what is right.

How do you know?

If something does not feel right, stay with it. Try to describe it. Some response will come. Wait for it to present itself.

³ from the Sakuteiki chapter IX. "Setting stones", see more at the end.

Precepts

No 'going back'

Players are not allowed to move stones from previous turns, even if it's "their" stone. The only response available is to add a stone to the composition.

Rotating the tray

Players are encouraged to carefully rotate the game tray in their turn (both before and after the placing of their stone), to get a feel of the situation from different angles:

How does it feel?

What is the difference?

Sharing

It is possible to play silently, or to speak. Try both, see what feels right. In speaking, the player whose turn it is describes what is happening *right now*, as s/he responds to the situation. Other players remain silent and refrain from giving advice. They may encourage the player to describe *MORE* of what s/he is experiencing.

Once a player has placed their stone in its final position, others may share their "feel" of the placing, the process, etc.

Variations

One round

The game is played with just one round (and thus one stone) per player. This is the game's most condensed form. At the conclusion of each round, the sand is cleared and brushed and the game begins again, with the players taking turns in placing the first stone.

Until It Stops

The players continue to add stones until they all feel that it is "complete". This form of the game is more difficult, because as the complexity increases with more stones, it requires careful attention to notice when it is time to stop. If the moment is passed, the 'feel of rightness' begins to diminish.

Disturbance⁴

It may be useful for the master of the game to willfully **disrupt** the composition at some point, introducing a radical change of the situation. This can be a very valuable experience for the players, but it is best done only after the players have had some practice.

Disturbance can be introduced in various ways: The simplest is by poking the sand, but one can also throw a stone in, add some dirt, etc. Be careful with *introducing disturbance*, as it can raise a lot of "stuff".

Once introducing disturbance, take time for all players to explicate their responses. Questions worth asking:

What happened?

What is your felt response?

What do you want to do now?

⁴Process Model fans may recognize that the disturbance is parallel to Gendlin's concept of EN-zero.

Endless

This option is for advanced players, as it can go on for quite some time, and requires extended concentration. It also requires deeper trays.

The master of the game comes by, every round or every once in a while, and adds a little sand to the tray – gradually covering the accumulating stones as the game continues....

*Every bad feeling
is potential energy
toward a more right way of being,
if
you give it space
to move toward its rightness.⁵*

Eugene Gendlin, 2000. ⁵

On the Secret of Evoking Meaning with Stones

作庭記 – Sakuteiki / 前栽秘抄 - Senzai hishō

Written documentation of the art of evoking meaning with stones is found in what is perhaps the oldest text on gardening: The **Sakuteiki**, written by Tachibana no Toshitsuna at the end of the 11th century (1028–1094), at the height of the Heian era (794–1192) in Japan. The book was originally called **Senzai Hishō** - Secret talks of gardening.

Unlike western thinking, A secret in the Buddhist tradition is not something hidden, but rather something which requires a “key” to be understood; it is given by a master to a student when the student is ready. In the following quote, Tachibana mourns the fact that already at his time he has no living master to learn from:

...“I have recorded here, without attempting to judge what is good and what is bad, what I have heard over the years concerning the erecting of rocks.

The priest En No enjari acquired the secrets of rock setting by mutual transmission. I am in possession of his scriptures.

Even though I have studied and understood its main principles, its aesthetic meaning is so inexhaustible that I frequently fail to grasp it. Nor is anyone still alive today who knows all there is to know about the subject” ...

Then he goes on to transmit some of that ancient knowledge.

An example on the next page is on following the request of stones:

石を立てる- ishi wo tateru - The art of erecting rocks

(Sakuteiki, Ch. IX. *Setting stones*)

"When setting stones, first bring a number of different stones, both large and small, to the garden and site, and temporarily set them out on the ground. Set those that will be standing stones with their "heads" upright, and those that will be reclining stones with their best side facing out.

...Choose a particularly splendid stone and set it as the Main Stone. Then, following the request of the first stone, set others accordingly".

The instruction to "follow the request of the first stone" is not metaphorical. It requires a certain sense, that enables one to pay attention to some kind of a "wanting" in the world, which to Tachibana is very real.

哀れ- Aware ("ah-wah-ray")

The central term necessary to understand Heian aesthetics is "Aware" (pronounced: "ah-wah- ray"): a sensibility and responsiveness towards something alive.⁶ The Japanese-gardens scholar Gunther Nitschke writes of the Heian term 物の哀れ - mono-no-ah-wah-ray:

"The normal rendering of mono-no-aware as 'the emotional quality of things' fails, in my opinion, to do justice to the true meaning of the original. 'Things' have no emotion. According to Heian thinking, however, rocks, flowers and trees possess their own 'being' and their own sensitivity. To be sensitive to their sensitivity is a prerequisite of Heian art". (Nitschke, 1999)

⁶ Aware appears 1018 times in the Heian classic "Tale of Genji".

I believe there was a time when full artistic expression was in the ability to listen to, and find meaning in the *things of nature* "as they are". It is the same sensitivity displayed by every human child playing imagination games in sand and dirt, collecting a stone or a pine cone for its beauty, not its usefulness. It is the sensitivity that being an artist requires. But such an art is difficult to recognize in our over-conceptualized conception of what is art.

In Heian era Japan this sensitivity was elevated to an art form. But I believe it goes back much earlier (as evidenced by the Shizen of Shime Nawa stones in early Shintu temples). This particular aesthetics, has culminated in the Japanese art of *ishi wo tateru* - the placing of stones in the stone garden (*Karesensui*), and *Ikabena*, the Japanese art of flower arrangement, also known as *kadō* - the "way of flowers".

In the light of Gendlin's philosophy, I think that "Aware" may be reinterpreted as a "felt sense" of the meaning implicit in nature. It is time we rediscover it.

References

- Abram, D. (1996). *The spell of the sensuous: Perception and language in more-than-human world*. New York, Ny: Pantheon
- Gendlin, E. T. (1997). *A Process Model*. New York: The Focusing Institute.
- Gendlin, E. T. (2000). *When you feel the body from inside, there is a door*.
- Kenkichi, Ono & Edwards, Walter (2010). *Japanese Garden Dictionary: A Glossary for Japanese Gardens and Their History*. <http://www.nabunken.go.jp/org/>
- Nitschke, Günther (1999). *Japanese Gardens, Right Angle and Natural Form*. Köln: Taschen
- Sugiyama, Shigetsugu (2005). *Encyclopedia of Shinto*. Retrieved 2015-2-10.
- Takei, J. & Keane, M. P (2001). *Sakuteiki, Visions of the Japanese Garden*, A modern translation. Boston, Massachusetts, Tuttle Publishing .