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Kami shrine at Muroii, Japan

Portals to the Spirit World: Connecting to the Chi of Creation

by Tom Bender

Our culture has begun to make a quiet, yet fundamental change—acknowledging the existence and importance of chi, or life force energy, and its ability to nurture our health and well-being. Chi is no longer a philosophical concept of foreign spiritual traditions; millions of people in our own culture have already experienced chi energy through the introduction of various body work techniques. Acupuncture, energy healing, laying-on-of-hands, and related practices of working with bodily chi energy have been shown effective enough in promoting healing that they are now covered by many health insurance policies.

In November 1997, the National Institutes of Health released a strong endorsement of acupuncture, citing "very clear-cut evidence" of its efficacy. For a major governmental player in the U.S. medical establishment to make such an endorsement of a healing practice based on the manipulation of chi energy is remarkable—particularly since the panel noted that "there is no evidence that confirms [the existence of chi]." In the process of endorsing something denied by conventional scientific methodologies, the NIH is challenging the adequacy of those very methodologies!

It may seem that working with chi is relatively new and exotic, but the chi underlying acupuncture is the same energy utilized in tai chi, chi gung, aikido, and many martial arts and shamanic practices. It is also central to the design tradition of feng shui, which is used for locating and designing buildings in harmony with the energy of the land. For many centuries, Chinese feng shui practitioners have used a variety of energy-based principles and astrological information for aligning buildings with the chi of place, and they also have performed environmental modifications to improve local chi patterns. Chi (known as *ki* in Japanese) is also central to Japanese building and design.

The Nature of Power Places

Although Western science may still scoff at the idea of chi energy flowing between our bodies and our surroundings, traditions of working with Earth energies have been central to the sophisticated philosophies of many ancient cultures. Neolithic religious sites in Australia and around the world have retained their strong energetic power for many thousands of years. Traditional sites used by Hawaiian villagers for giving birth are located on nodes of healing energy in the Earth. In medieval Europe, churches and cathedrals were often located directly on top of previous pagan shrines, and contemporary dowsing measurements show that many of these sites are potent power spots.

There are many kinds of sacred places, and many reasons for holding places sacred. Some chi of place may come from topography, some from geophysical anomalies, and some from how we enhance the natural energy present. Some places themselves emit intense chi energy, and they inspire and nurture us with that energy. At certain "edge places"—high mountain lakes, surf-buffeted promontories, or ancient river canyons—where the primal forces of nature come together in intense and dramatic relationship, we can often feel the power of chi energy. Other places, through their intense beauty, move our hearts and awaken chi within us.

From time immemorial, people have sought out power places for inspiration, for healing, for guidance, and for the pure appreciation of their wonder. Places with special electromagnetic or chi energy have been held sacred in many cultures. Hawaiian birth centers, Irish megalithic mounds, Incan mountain shrines, Mediterranean oracular sites, and Native American vision-quest sites all testify to the ability of certain places to influence human activities.

The nearly universal belief in power places indicates that they have inherent value, but their many varied forms suggest

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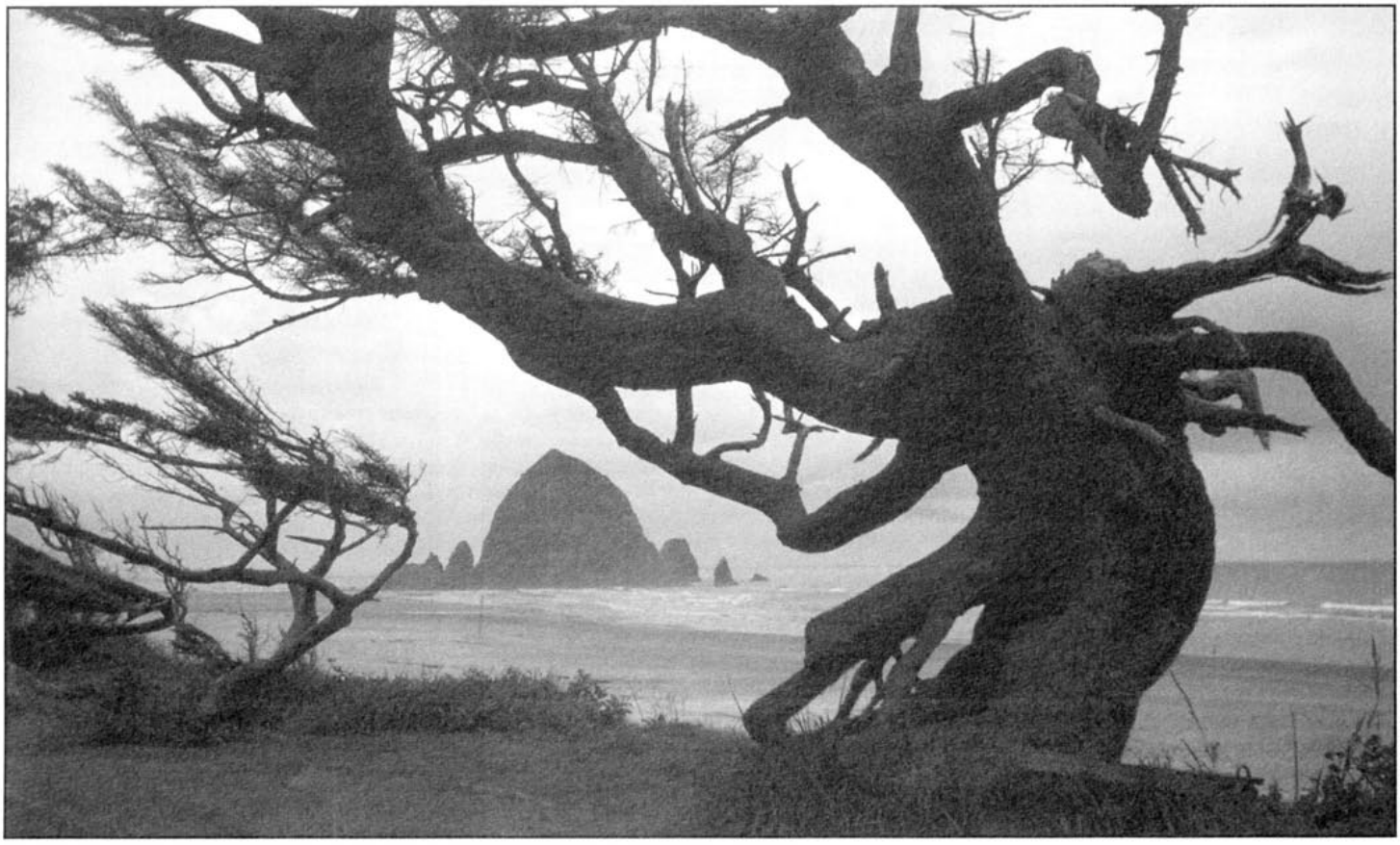

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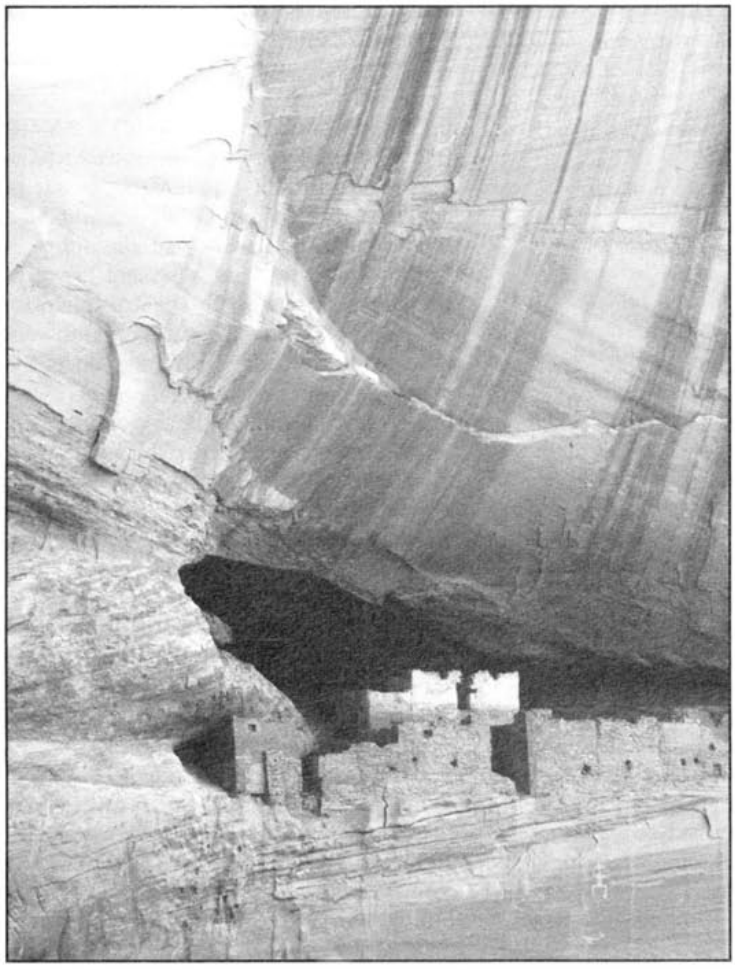
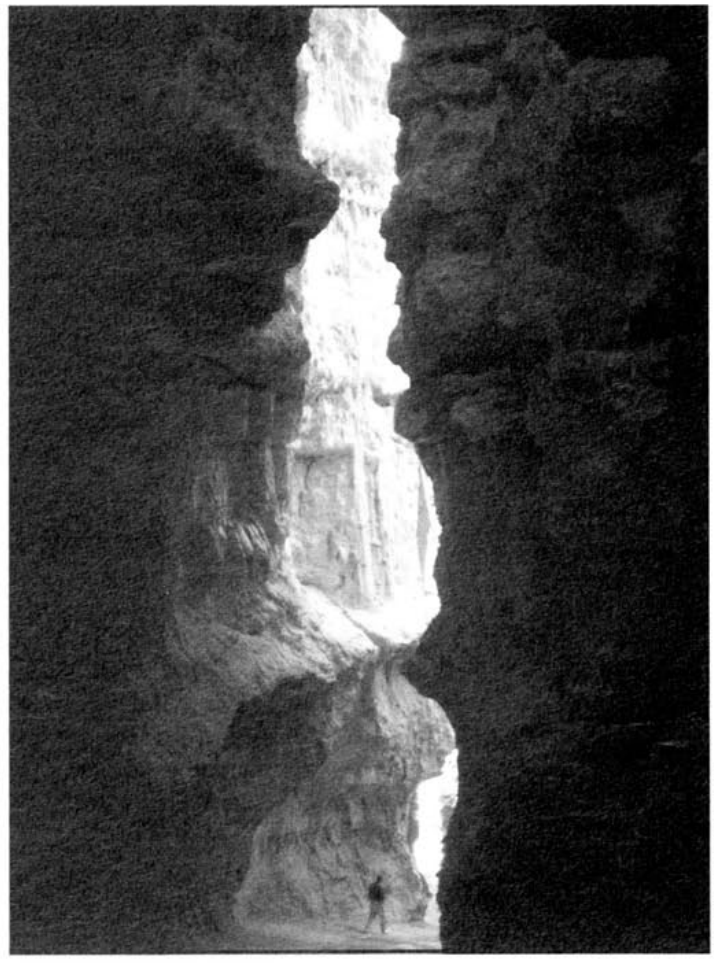
The primal power of nature is made visible at certain edge places, such as surf-buffeted promonitories.



The White House ruin at Canyon de Chelly, Chinle, Arizona



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"Wall Street" canyon at Bryce Canyon National Park, Utah

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ABOVE: ***A Mayan pyramid at Palenque embodies the form and power of a sacred volcano.***
BELOW: ***Vision serpents and gods decorate a pyramid, indicating its role as a spirit portal.***

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that their significance may lie as much in our attitudes towards the places as in the places themselves. Some places—active volcanoes, roaring waterfalls, and forests of towering trees—have probably been held sacred because of their impressive size, intimidating power, and raw energy. At such natural places of power, our hearts are moved, our spirits are made full, our dreams become more powerful, and our lives are reaffirmed.

Part of the power of these places is that they draw us apart from our everyday lives and into awareness of the primal forces of Creation. Some places are foreign to us, so we naturally respond to them with fresh eyes and astonished hearts. Other places are held sacred because our human activities don't dominate them; these places allow us to shed the habitual self-centeredness of our actions and dreams.

One of the fundamental benefits associated with power spots is that they provide portals into the realm of spirit and facilitate transpersonal communication. Native Americans, Mayans, Siberians, and people of many other cultures have developed shamanic methodologies for communicating with the spirit world and the chi flowing through all life. Australian Aboriginals have refined to high levels the use of different natural sites to open unique and specific connections to the spiritual realm. Many African cultures, including the Yoruba and the Dagara, use personal ritual interaction with the energies of sacred places to access ancestral spirits and other beings in the non-physical realms.

In this article, I will offer a few examples from other cultures that stand out for their remarkable use of chi-based design principles for opening portals to the spirit world. The great Maya kingdoms of Mesoamerica created ceremonial centers for sharing the energy of the spirit world through public ritual, trance, dance, and embodiment of ancestors and gods. On the other side of the world, the ancient Khmers of Cambodia built a vast complex of temples, palaces, and irrigation canals that demonstrate how landscaping and buildings can be used to enhance our connections with the ancestors and the spirit world. These ancient traditions can be learned from and melded into a living tradition for our own culture.

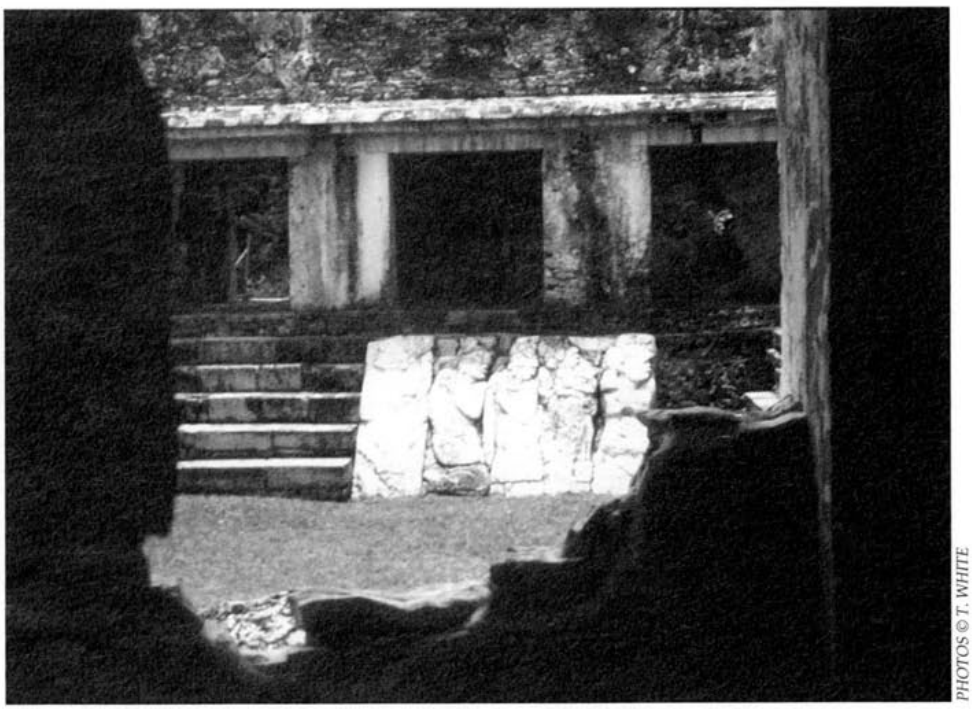
Maya Portals to the Spirit World

Breakthroughs in deciphering the Maya written language in the last ten years have been transforming our understanding of both the nature of their ritual centers and the events that transpired in their kingdoms. A picture is emerging of a society living in amazing intimacy with the spirit world, where the soul and the supernatural were integral and celebrated in all aspects of the people's lives.

For the Maya, the most important interactions were those between the innate souls of people and the essences of material objects or other living beings. In the Maya world, all things made by the gods during Creation were considered alive and imbued with sacred force and inner souls. *Ch'ulel*, *itz* or *k'awil*—terms referring in different ways to chi energies—were central to their language and culture. It is hardly surprising that they called their kings *ch'ul ahaw*, or "lords of the life-force."

The Maya believed sacredness was especially concentrated at natural power spots, such as mountains and caves, but they also believed that people could generate a complementary matrix of power points through the regular performance of rituals.

A ball player stands watch at Palenque.



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Mayan plazas were seen as portals into the Primordial Sea and the spirit world.

Temples were frequently built in the image of a mountain or *witz*, the volcano—both of which were considered powerful gateways for the vital forces of Creation—and interior spaces, representing caves, were often used as places for conjuring the ancestors.

To the Maya, "nothing important is just made. It also has to be born."[1] The things we create need to have life-force energy and intention put into them, or they remain "dead," like much of what we surround ourselves with today. Buildings and ritual spaces made by human beings had to have their inner souls—their *ch'ulel*—put into them during dedication ceremonies that included the depositing of sacred objects below the floors. Once the rituals had established energetic linkages to the spirit world, those ceremonial spaces became sacred portals to that world. Tombs, such as that of King Pakal at Uxmal, had "spirit channels" built in so that the spirits of the dead could continue to communicate with the living in attached temples. A sacred precinct was often entered by a ceremonial path—*sak beh*, or "white road"—which corresponded to the Milky Way and provided access across the stellar realm to the spirit world.

The name glyphs and sculptural motifs on Maya ceremonial structures indicate the shamanic nature of those structures. Fixed portals to the spirit world were called *pib nah*. *Kunul* were conjuring or bewitching places. *Waybil* were dreaming rooms, and *kyxan sum* were sculptural representations of the umbilicus connecting individuals on Earth to the spirit world. It is said that the kings, shamans, and warriors, who held power at these centers, could enter and leave the spirit world at will, manipulate its forces, and bring its wisdom to their community.[2]

We also know that visionary rituals involving the whole community were a central part of Maya life. Unlike many other cultures, in which trance journeys are often done in seclusion, the Maya trances were performed by the rulers in public, and celebrated and affirmed by the entire community. Through a combination of dance, drumming, song, sleep deprivation, and use of psychoactive substances, both individuals and large groups entered altered states that allowed personal transformation and communication with the Otherworld.

In Maya public architecture, the plazas and courtyards were almost more important than the buildings surrounding them. The small interior spaces in the buildings barely had room for images of the gods and ancestors, and the regalia and equipment needed for ceremonies, although some rooms were used for individual ceremony. By marking the boundaries of plazas and courtyards, the buildings acted as ceremonial definers of space for the rituals, dances, and processions at the heart of Maya life. Plazas were seen as portals opening into the spirit world—the Primordial Sea.

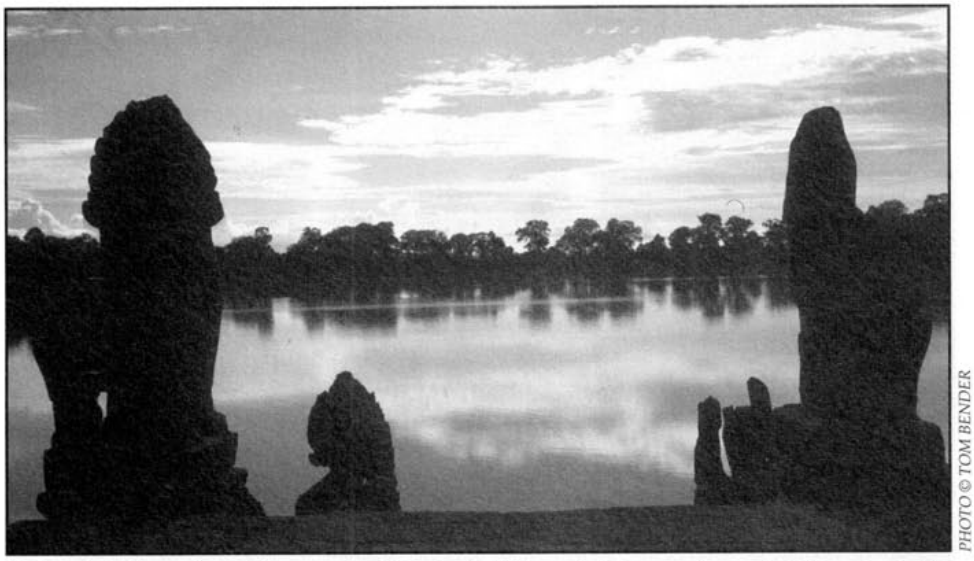
Maya ceremonial ball courts represented the crack in the Earth where humankind had emerged from the underworld. The Maya used this crack to access the Inner Earth in order to contact their ancestors and consult oracular deities. The transfer of power to new rulers took place in the ball court, in the presence of beings materialized from the spirit world. The Maya also negotiated treaties, sealed alliances, and sacrificed captured kings there.

In *The Code of Kings*, Schele and Mathews write: "When the Maya materialized their gods and ancestors through these portals, the spiritual beings left residual energy in the buildings and the objects that opened the portals. Thus very old buildings, very sacred rituals, and very powerful people affected this energy in proportionally greater ways, so that the oldest portals contained the most intense *k'ulel* of all. As astrological and dynastic changes occurred, the Maya kept deactivating, rebuilding, and reactivating these portals for hundreds of years, so that their buildings were like onions—layer after layer accumulated over the sacred core."[3]

It is difficult for us today to fully comprehend the impact that the spirit world had on the everyday lives of the Maya. But the dramatic, richly decorated ritual centers remain as testimony to the Maya relationship with that world and suggest that such portals can be created in our own lives.

Khmer Causeways to Ancestral Wisdom

Monuments in the Khmer capital of Angkor in Cambodia demonstrate how chi-based design can be used to promote dimensions of power far beyond the reach of today's conventional design concepts. The Khmers created a unique and integrated complex of sculptures, temples, local shrines,



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Networks of canals and reservoirs distributed life-sustaining water and chi energy in the ancient kingdom of Angkor, Cambodia. **Naga** *railings represent "serpent energy" or life force.*

PHOTO © TOM BENDER

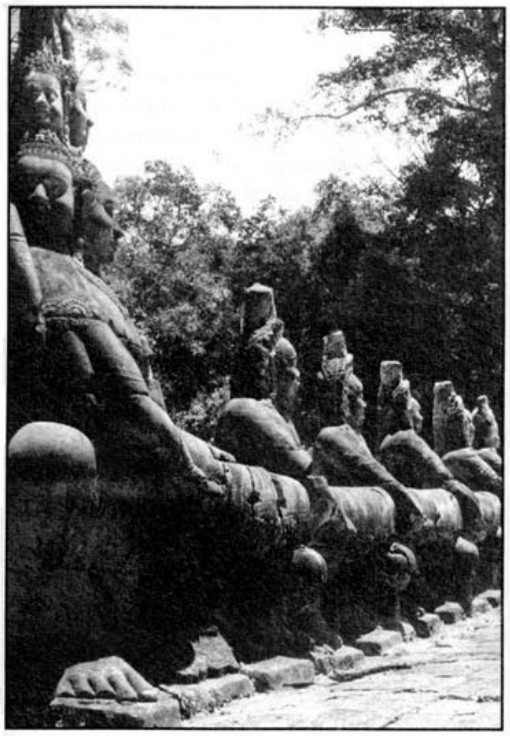
royal cities, and palaces, including reservoirs and irrigation canals that not only provided transportation routes throughout the kingdom and water for the fields but also infused the entire network with chi energy. In fact, chi was considered of such central importance to the Khmers that their kings and priests consciously channeled the creative power flowing from other energetic dimensions of existence into the water network, so that it would permeate their entire physical world.

Angkor and its complex of temples, such as the central Bayon temple and Angkor Wat (the funerary complex of King Suryavarman II), were all part of the water/chi network connecting the people to the ancestors and gods. Agricultural productivity in the Mekong region was tied to the seasonal nature of the rains. The Khmers worked out sophisticated systems of reservoirs and irrigation canals that stored water when rivers flooded and then redistributed it during the dry season. The canals, levees, and waterworks were executed on a scale that dwarfed the monuments and shrines of Angkor, which are themselves of impressive size.[4]

The Khmers succeeded in creating powerful symbolic embodiments of their spiritual beliefs. One of the central themes of Khmer art and mythology was the seven-headed (seven-chakra) hooded cobra, or *naga*, who plays a central role in the Hindu creation story. The story involves a tug-of-war between the gods and the demons, who alternately pulled on the serpent Vasuki encircling Mt. Mandara. This caused the mountain to revolve like a giant churn in the primal void, or Sea of Milk, drawing forth the *amrita*—the nectar of the gods.

In the layout of the Khmer structures and waterworks, the temples and the royal palaces represented this central mountain, and the causeways approaching the gates of the palaces and temples were lined with giant balustrades depicting the gods, demons, and snakes churning the Sea of Milk. Through their ritual interaction with the spirit world, the rulers and priests charged the surrounding reservoirs and canals with chi, and then they distributed the chi-charged water to nourish the fields and people.

The Khmers believed that, after death, their kings were merely "on the other side," where they were able to help their descendants and their subjects. The efforts exerted by the Khmers to make their funerary temples a part of the "chi-irrigation" system were thus more than symbolic.[5] The rulers' tombs and temples provided a direct means for people to tap into the wisdom of their ancestors, living on the "other side." From this viewpoint, the wonderfully coherent



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Devas ***tugging on giant*** **nagas** ***and churning the Sea of Milk form stone causeways leading to the great funerary monuments of Angkor Wat.***

Angkor complex can be seen as one of the most powerful and effective examples of cultural or psychic infrastructure that have ever been created.

Once we understand the vital role of chi in healing and sustaining life, many of the peculiarities of design in Khmer culture are suddenly explained. In most cultures, a room inside a temple represents either a "holy-of-holies"—a home for the gods, goddesses, or other spiritual powers—or a place for congregating, worship, meditation, or other religious activities. Khmer temples represent a different configuration. Their interiors are neither spaces that people walk into nor the property of some transcendent being. Instead, they bear graphic testimony to the belief that there is a finer, richer spiritual existence behind the surface of everything in this world.

The doorways into many Khmer temples and monuments have been given unusual treatments. The molding bands at the bases of the walls, and the pilaster capitals and ornamental entablature above the openings are abruptly sliced off on either side of the openings. Almost invariably, there is a second layer of pilasters and entablature, within the opening, that is far more richly and finely ornamented, with an almost "vibrational" layering of pattern. The same type of abrupt separation occurs on the terraces and stairways approaching the doorways. The effect is as if the sophisticated ornamental banding and sculptural surfaces of the temple have been sliced through—almost as if cut by a knife—and slid apart, in order to reveal an "inner temple" decorated in more delicate, finely ornamented layers. Thus, entering the temple provides a symbolic connection with the inner "energy" body that transfuses all of Creation.

In Khmer culture, the creation of funerary temples and sculptures dedicated to individuals was not, as often thought, directed at self-aggrandizement or an attempt to gain individual merit. Cambodian images of persons living or dead were energized to contain the "essence" or vital principle of the individual. Once consecrated, these images acted as bridges between the living, on this side of the veil, and deceased persons on the other side.

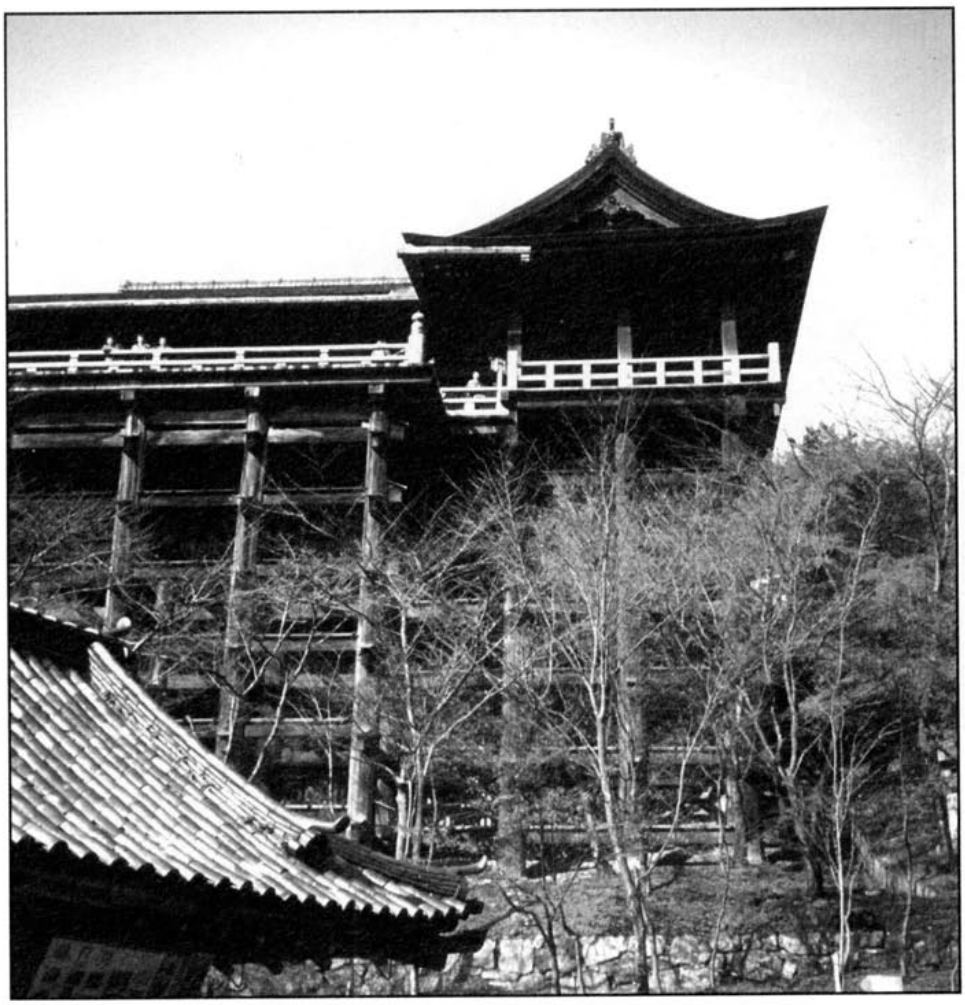
The giant sculpted faces of the king facing the four directions, on the central Bayon temple and the gateways of the royal city, were not, as often described, images of a "Big Brother" watching every movement of his subjects. As in the vast majority of Khmer sculptures, the king's eyes are actually half closed in trance or meditation. These images represent the king in his sacred role of channeling chi, or breath of life energy, from the energy dimensions of existence to the material one—and sending it to all corners of the kingdom.

A Khmer temple, then, acted as a kind of architectural "body" substituted for the flesh and bones previously inhabited by the king, now transformed into a "cosmic person." Through the temple, the king's subjects could continue to maintain their connection with his soul and access his wisdom.[6] Bodily remains, sculptures, or paintings of the king—if present at the temple—were ritually energized to strengthen the connection to his soul in the spirit world.

A similar system of spirit world guidance for distribution of irrigation water was still in place in Bali in the 1970s when the Green Revolution was introduced. John Stephen Lansing's computer studies done there in the 1980s demonstrated that the water temples were essential and highly successful elements in balancing the needs of water users.[7]

The Principles of Place Energetics

At their most fundamental levels, chi-based design systems have been focused on the identification and enhancement of power spots endowed with favorable chi energy. For example, temple records in Japan describe the use of divination or dowsing in selecting the location of temples and other religious structures. The goal was to locate them on the most favorable power spots of Earth energy. One of the most dramatic examples of this can be seen at the Kiyomizu Temple in Kyoto. Building the temple at the most favorable power spot, on the edge of a steep hillside, required construction of a massive timber substructure. The substantial effort involved in the project has proved its merit: those who visit this temple leave with their spirits uplifted, their minds at peace, and their hearts full. Over the generations, the popularity and fortunes of the



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A massive substructure ensured optimum siting of the Kiyomizu Shrine in Kyoto, Japan.

Kiyomizu Temple have remained strong, while those of many other temples throughout the region have fluctuated.

Contemporary work in our own culture by architects and designers consciously manipulating chi has not yet reached the levels of refinement found in Mesoamerica or Asia, but we are currently developing new traditions suited to our own cultural conditions. With the great diversity of chi-related techniques available to us from various traditions, I feel it is more important to understand and utilize specific elements than to simply transpose foreign systems.

As a result of today's advanced telecommunication and global transportation systems, we have an unparalleled opportunity to integrate the wisdom of all ages and all cultures. As we learn more about how we relate to our surroundings, we can open ourselves to the wisdom of all traditions and glean from each what can enhance our unique situations.

Most builders today probably don't need to know a "Nine Star Ki" from a "Yellow River Chart," but they may find it useful to know how to clear old chi from a space, to balance or enhance existing Earth energy, or to create a gateway for connecting with the ancestors. Studying the accumulated wisdom of cultures more experienced in working with chi is important to us because it can suggest ways to enhance the flow of chi energies in our lives and communities. However, it is important to remember that the basic principles of any system based on subtle energy are only partially recorded in its manuals or taught by its masters.

Frequently, the specific rules and practices of these systems were based on unstated assumptions that were integral to the specific cultures. In a totally different culture, such as ours, it is necessary to first acknowledge the fundamental assumptions of chi-based design.

Chi-based design is fundamentally concerned with developing harmonious relationships between our personal chi energy and the chi energy of places. By calling our attention to the cycles of change inherent in the energy moving through our surroundings and our lives, chi-based principles suggest ways to bring our lives in harmony with those changes and help us find nurture within the life that surrounds us.

What follows is a list of some chi-based design principles—adapted from ancient traditions—with comments regarding their relative significance today. Additional principles can be found in my books, *Building with the Breath of Life* and *Silence, Song and Shadows* (both by Fire River Press). Individuals may prefer to develop their own, customized lists. Moreover, as our understanding of these principles of design deepens, our lists will doubtlessly change. Different situations benefit most from different actions, and our energy may be best put where we sense it will be most effective.

• Life force energy, or chi, underlies and flows through all Creation.

The cutting-edge scientific research of Rupert Sheldrake, James Lovelock, and others suggests that our bodies and the physical world around us are essentially patterns of matter that have gelled around specific matrices of chi energy. In essence, chi—in combination with intention—forms the subtle energy template upon which our material world takes shape in its many wonderful variations. Our energy bodies are even more primal than our physical ones, and this is why energy processes and relationships have profound influences on us.

When working in the realm of chi, we experience ourselves as nodes in interconnecting fields of energy—rather than as discrete individuals. Through our dreams, meditations, and trances, we can walk in the fields of incipient form where things and events take shape. Sometimes, we may find ourselves so deeply interlinked with others that our thoughts and memories are one.

As we consider ourselves ongoing parts of creation, rather than apart from it, we develop radically different attitudes toward the possibilities we foreclose or create for the future. Suddenly, we find we want to ensure the health of our relationships—with ourselves, with each other, and with the rest of Creation.

• Chi exists in all people, places, and things, and maintaining a healthy flow of chi is vital to the well-being of all.

Chi is not a static force stored in the ground or in our bodies—the breath of life, or chi, pervades all people, places, and things, and it is vital to all their interactions. Our bodily energy fields extend beyond our skins, as do those of other life forms; when our fields meet, they interact. In a similar way, we interact with the larger flows of energy around Earth.

The visible light that fuels photosynthesis and supports all life on Earth constitutes

but a minute fraction of the sun's energy intercepted by our planet. As these solar energies interact with the energy in Earth's atmosphere and mantle, they create force fields of electromagnetic energy—forces that can be seen in the ionized gas effects of the northern and southern lights, the aurora borealis and the aurora australis.

We do not yet know if "chi energies" consist of pulsed electromagnetic fields, or if they are other forms of "Earth energy." For now, we only know that the patterns and juxtaposition of earth forms, waterways, and materials within Earth's mantle have created places that concentrate or disperse the natural chi of place as well as electromagnetic energy, and that these places, in turn, affect the chi energy of visitors. These places with powerful chi open our hearts to resonate and connect with the bountiful energies flowing through all life.

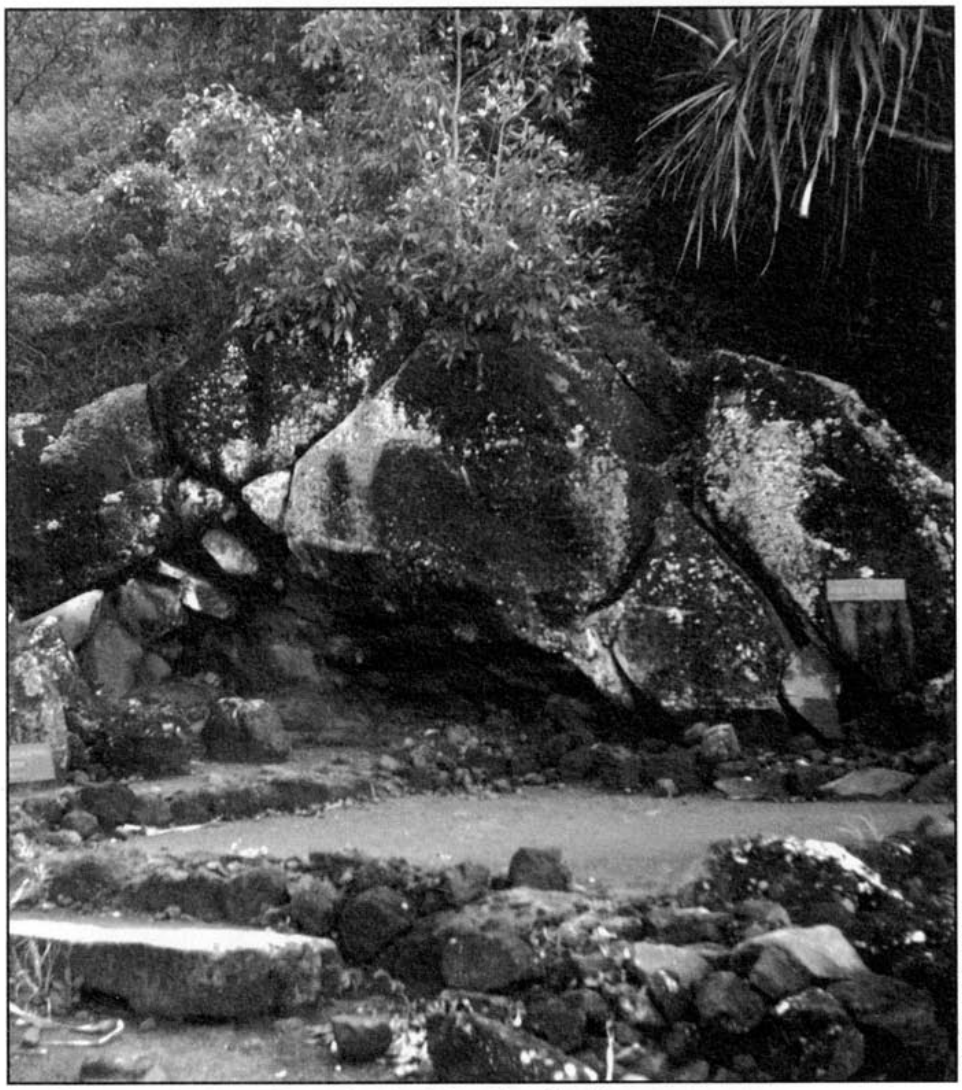
Acupuncture and chi gung have shown us that when chi energy is flowing naturally through our bodies, it enhances our health. When chi is blocked by emotional barriers, artificial building materials, electromagnetic devices, or consumption practices based on taking rather than giving, disease can manifest from the realm of chi into the realm of matter. Maintaining a healthy flow of chi energy through our bodies and surroundings seems to be vital to supporting our physical, emotional, and spiritual health.

Working with the chi in our surroundings is different from working with our inner chi in meditation. Meditation practices in most spiritual traditions focus on going inward, cutting off from the outer world, and seeking personal nurture from an inner space. In contrast, working with chi in our surroundings focuses on opening outward and connecting with other life.

Each form of life is a different facet of the jewel of Creation and has particular characteristics that give it unique perceptions, power, and relationships with the rest of existence. By opening psychically to these different life forms through trance and ritual, we can experience their unique nature—and we can share some of their powers. This ability to connect with all Creation on an energetic level deepens our resonance and harmony with the song of life, and provides wisdom that can help guide us through life.

• Our individual health and welfare are intimately connected to the well-being of all Creation.

What happens inside our bodies depends upon food and air from the world outside our skins, and that world depends on us as a source of CO_2 and food. The health and well-being of inside and outside cannot be separated. To ensure a healthy world for ourselves, we need to champion the needs of the ecological systems that support our lives—that nurture our spiritual and emotional health, as well as our physical bodies. We must make the well-being of all life an integral goal of our designing.



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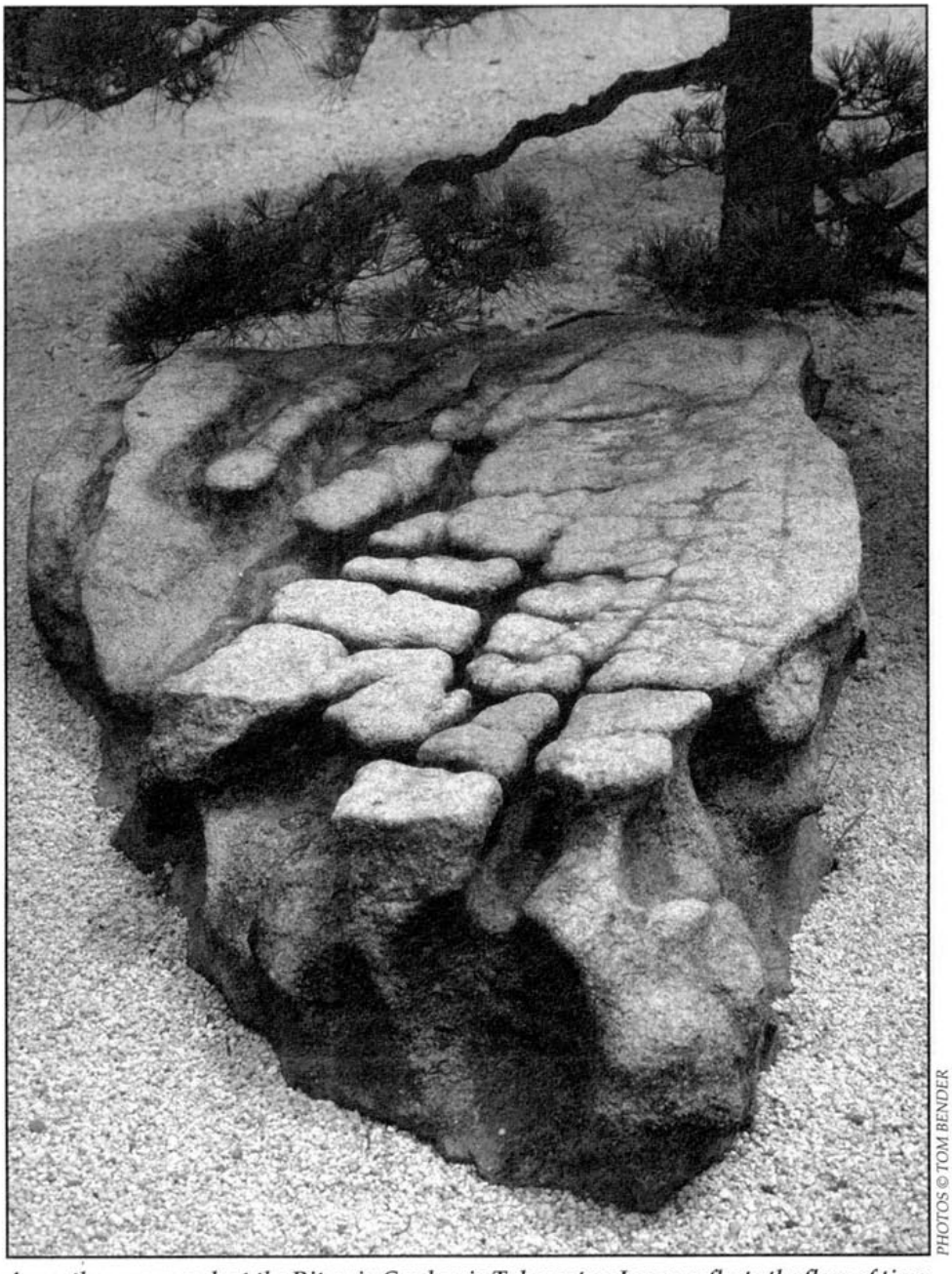
Birthing stones in Hawaii associated with nodes of healing energy

When our numbers and our appetites press too hard on the Earth, and our actions deprive other life of its existence, we increase our own poverty. When we create landscapes filled only with visually appealing ornamental plants, we thoughtlessly eliminate "weeds" that are the essential food or shelter for birds, butterflies, beetles, and spiders—or medicines that may be vital to our health. Wilderness areas are more than just reservoirs of unknown foods, pharmaceuticals, and DNA. Our planet is a celebration of the richness and beauty of Creation—the fewer the voices, the more diminished the song.

Ensuring the health of all Creation requires major reductions in our resource consumption. Our human-built environment already consumes two-thirds of all the energy used on this planet—for construction, heating, and lighting of buildings, and as fuel for our transportation habits. With more than half of the net photosynthesis on our planet going into human uses, we need to significantly change our values and actions in order to ensure the survival of the natural systems upon which we depend. We need to allow the rest of nature room to seek its own goals.

Limiting our numbers and appetites is necessary to preserve the complex ecosystems that ultimately sustain us. We can radically reduce our resource consumption by building ecologically, using renewable resources, and improving efficiency in all parts of our society. Working in harmony with natural processes can significantly reduce our demands on the rest of Creation. It has been demonstrated in a wide range of test houses, offices, factories, and land-use patterns that we already have the technol-



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A weather-worn rock at the Ritsurin Garden, in Takamatsu, Japan, reflects the flow of time.

ogy needed to reduce current levels of energy and resource use by eighty to ninety percent in most climates.[8]

• **Living in harmony with a coherent cosmology enhances both our lives and our surroundings.**

Every age and culture has a different view of the universe and humanity's place in it. The hierarchical order of a Chinese city, the sacred geometries of Islamic ornament, and the technological power of a modern skyscraper all reflect unique views of the universe, consistent with the cosmologies of their builders. In turn, such creations sustain and empower those cosmologies.

Our surroundings act as mirrors, reflecting the values, dreams, fears, and fascinations of the individuals and societies that have shaped them. We can sometimes read places like dreams or books, pointing out, item by item, the values and intentions of those who created and shaped them. Shaping surroundings to reflect values usually occurs unconsciously and haphazardly, but in those rare times when society is undergoing fundamental change, we have unique opportunities to act consciously and establish new sources of health and well-being.

Fortunately, a new sense of the cosmos—and our role in it—is emerging. As we connect globally with other human societies and other life forms, we are coming to acknowledge the energetic nature of our universe, to embrace values of sustainability, and to enhance our connection with all life—even with life beyond the physical plane. Out of that, a new cosmology is emerging, which in turn is bringing forth the making of qualitatively different surroundings.

• **Sacredness is central to meaningful lives and an enduring society.**

We need to hold places sacred so that we can connect with the immense power of Creation in nature. Allowing the energy of sacred places to open our hearts, fill us, and connect us with the power of nature can give us an inner source of peace, nurture, and connectedness. By holding a place sacred, we grant power to that place and acknowledge its ability to remind us of certain relationships and their value to us. For example, Chinese pagodas and Japanese temples are designed to communicate a sense of balance and peace with nature. The movement and echoing sound of water rushing down beside the steps of the Kiyomizu Temple turn a common stairway into an exhilarating experience of walking down a waterfall. As our surroundings come to reflect the emotional, intellectual, and spiritual core of our beliefs, they imbue our lives with an increased power of belief.

The natural power and beauty of places can be enhanced by the introduction of chi-based buildings that reflect particularly powerful visions of our universe and our place in it. The Chess Pavilion, perched among the clouds on the granite shoulder of Hua Shan in China, conveys an unsurpassed sense of "life among the gods." Zen gardens in Japan convey a feeling of mindful action and inner stillness. These various places are suggestive of the special powers that can, on occasion, be evoked through buildings, gardens, and landscapes.

Places, as well as people, draw sustenance from how they are held in our hearts. A cathedral is sustained by the living faith of its community. Without that faith, the building is unable to give back to the community, and then the building is soon abandoned, unloved and unmaintained. Eventually, it begins to crumble, and the community also falls into dereliction.

Our chi alters the chi of places we use, and the chi of places, in turn, alters our own. In addition, the good or bad energy uses of a place linger to affect subsequent users. Thus, our interactions with a place are cumulative. We need to be aware of this dialog in both design and our lives.

Because places retain the reverberations of events long past, chi can be invested in places through acts of commitment, care, and honoring. At the Naiku Shrine in Ise,

Japan, over 1400 years of sacred work have imbued every stone with such purity and mindfulness of action that the building draws one's breath away in awe. The skilled work, the materials, and the sense of purpose that go into the continued rebuilding of all its structures every twenty years provide ongoing sustenance for the spiritual beliefs of the builders as well as the sacredness of the building. The cumulative patina from centuries of ritual practice adds to the power of the shrine to affect our lives.

Chi energy can be focused by the inspired construction of shrines and buildings that call attention to places that profoundly affect us. Through the process of honoring and celebrating places that we value, we surround ourselves with an atmosphere of joy, love, and respect that enhances self-esteem, respect for others, and love of life. In the case of European cathedrals that were built on older sacred sites, we can see that what prompted people to originally choose a place may not have as much impact on its enduring energy as the act of "holding the place sacred." It is the act of regularly affirming sacredness, and opening ourselves to the connections it engenders, that becomes enshrined in a sacred place.

In a similar way, places of important historical or cultural context can bear witness to the values we hold high. There are many examples of how the act of holding something sacred can imbue a place with sacredness, such as the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., which honors the emancipation of slaves, and the Taj Mahal in India, which celebrates the great love of a king for his wife. The intensity of our emotional responses to those places continues to imbue them with human energy.

Other places, by placing a limit on our actions, remind us of the necessity to limit our dreams and use of power. By excluding people from its inner precincts and reserving that place for the spirits, the Ise Shrine of Japan provides a potent reminder of the value of saying "no" to our limitless desires. Through the act of holding special places sacred and inviolable, we affirm the primacy of the values they embody.

It is sometimes assumed that our secular society doesn't recognize sacred places—until we visit one of our national wildlife preserves. The sound and beauty of the teeming life there can be incredibly joyful and inspiring, but what makes the place sacred is the fact that we have held other life sacred and inviolate.

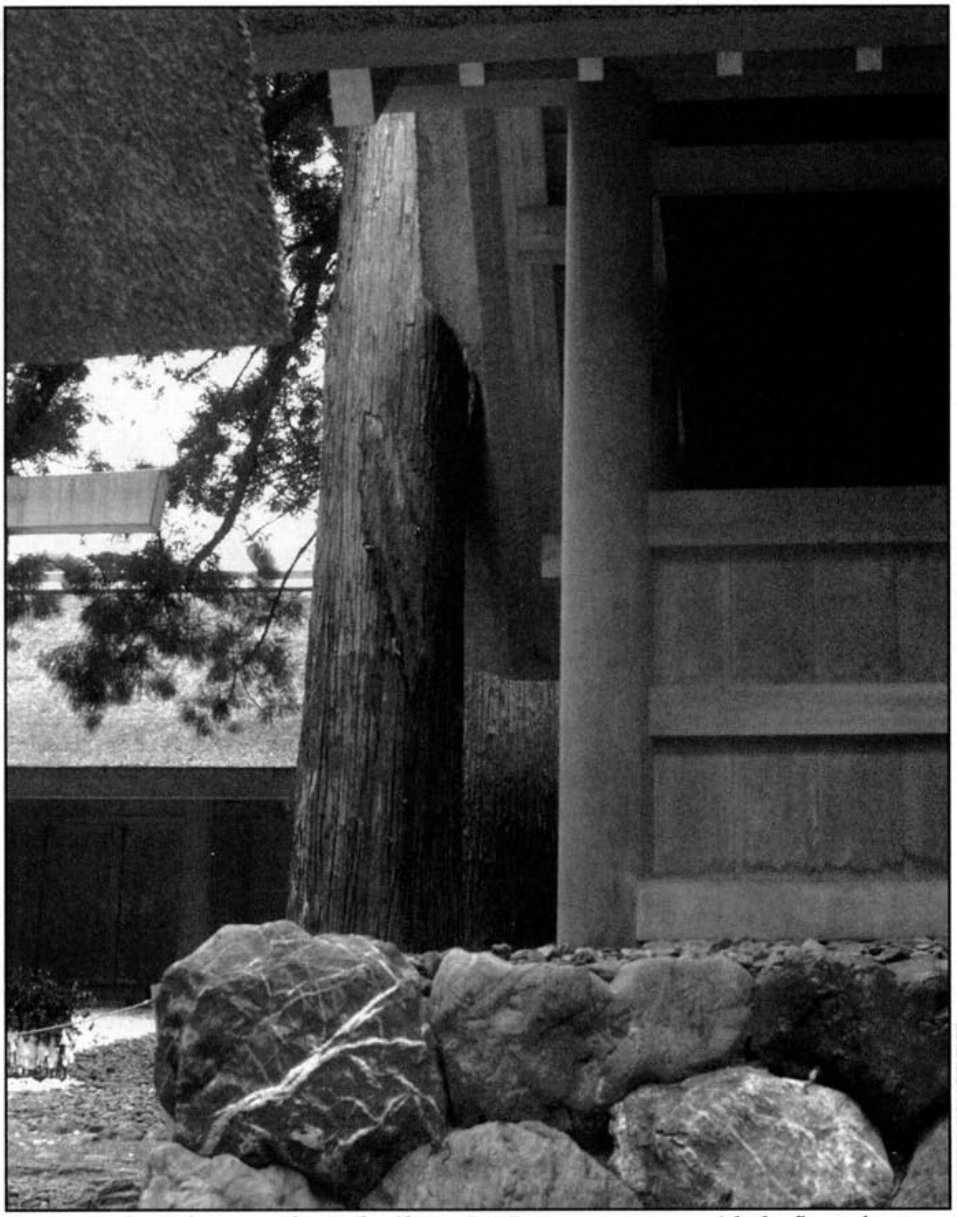


PHOTO © TOM BENDER

Ancient rocks and trees at the Naiku Shrine, Ise, Japan, connect us with the flow of nature.

• **Our relationship with the past and the future—with our ancestors and our descendants—is important to the quality of our interactions with our surroundings.**

When we care only for the present and ignore the future, we reduce the likelihood of even having a future. Many traditional cultures encourage people to consider the impact of each action on as many as seven generations into the future. Now that we are confronted with the results of a society that has often disregarded the long-range cost of its actions, we can see the wisdom of such a perspective.

Some cultures consider seven generations from a slightly differently perspective; they look at three past and three future generations, in addition to the present. Recognition of the gifts from past generations instills in us a certain humility, an awareness of the shoulders upon which we stand, and a sense of gratitude. It provides us with the realization that our achievements do not belong to us alone and that we have an obligation to pass on equivalent gifts to our descendants.

Our growing understanding of chi energetics reveals that the principle of seven generations is not mere metaphor. As we have seen with the Khmer, many cultures assert that our deceased ancestors are actually with us in the present and that we can call upon ancestral energies for help, guidance, and healing energy. After centuries of denying the continuity of spirit, our culture is finally opening to shamanic and other spiritual traditions that encourage contact between embodied people and those spirits whose existence is not on the material plane.

Linking Globally, Acting Locally

Chi-based design teaches us that, in order to be whole and healthy, we need to reopen the doors to the spirits, to our ances-

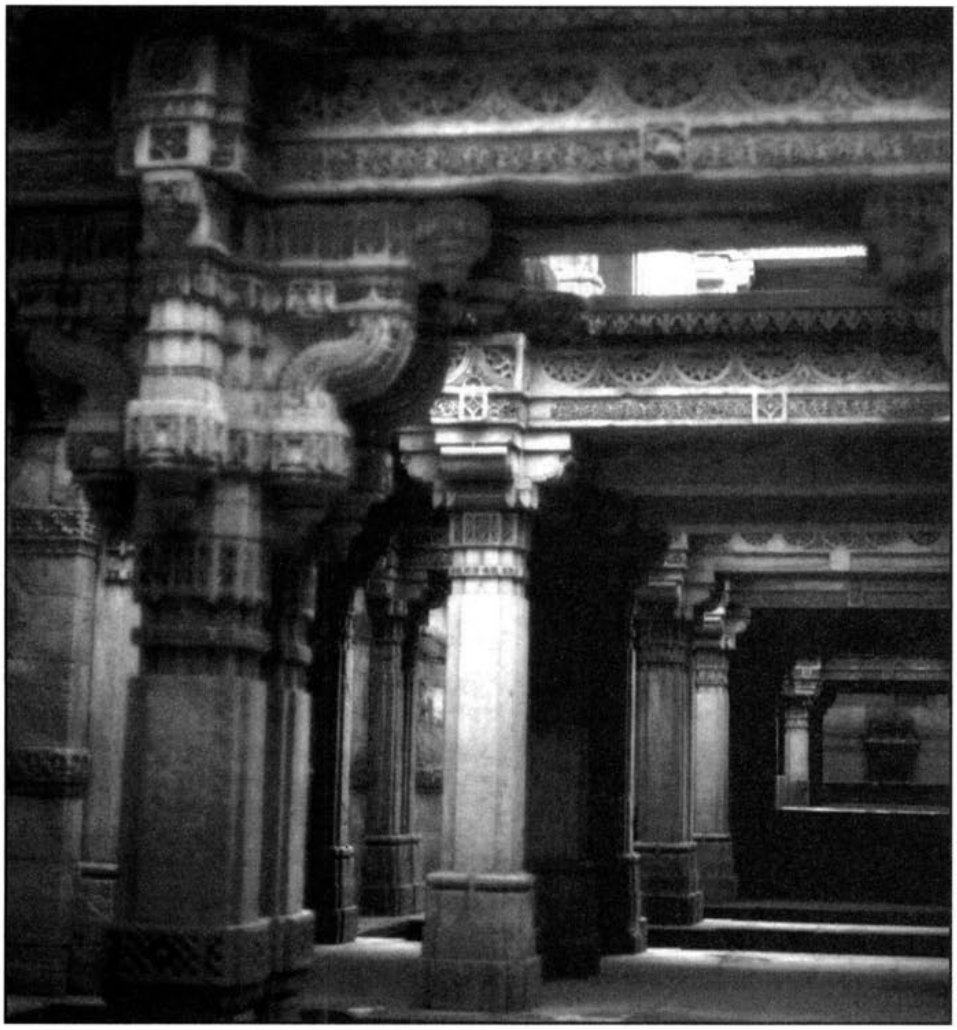


PHOTO © TOM BENDER

Encased in an elegant stone temple, a well in Adalej, India, nourishes both spirit and body.

tors, and to the non-material worlds, so that we can honor them and work together with them in order to manifest the great unfolding of Creation. The examples of the Maya and the Khmer show how places can be transformed through ritual and design into portals connecting the everyday world with the realms of energy and spirit. The lesson is not that we need to build costly monumental centers but that—through the creation of inspired physical structures and ritual celebrations—we can tap into the energy of a place and commune with Creation.

Great achievements in creating sacred places—such as the Chartres Cathedral in France, the Kiyomizu Temple in Japan, the Newgrange Mound in Ireland, and the Borabudur Temple in Java—may instill in us a profound sense of the creative power of the universe. Few of us have the fortunes of an absolute monarch, the real estate of Yosemite Valley, or the honed skills of a Zen master that would enable us to create monumental sacred places. Yet it is not those resources that are needed to transform our world—it is our inner resources and our connection with spirit. Each of us has enough resources to create a Zen rock garden or a spirit garden that can open our hearts.

One way that we can learn to open our souls to the special gifts and wisdom of our ancestors and of other life forms is to connect with their energy through the creation of shrines, gardens, spirit totems, and other gateways. It does not take massive buildings or great art to convey that we value and hold all life sacred. A simple marker stone, a string of prayer flags, or a small shrine can convey the values we honor.

Nourishing Our Spirits with Gardens

In a world where material wants are constantly promoted, it is easy to forget the needs of our spirits. Yet, when we ignore our spirits, we suffer. Our spirits don't need roofs to keep them dry, walls to protect them, or clothing to keep them warm, but they do require regular nurture. By focusing our attention primarily on the needs of spirit, gardens can provide us with an unrivaled opportunity to embody the principles of energetic design.

Gardens inspire and enliven our spirits. They may produce food for our bodies, but their primary purpose is the nourishment of our spirits. Gardens can take us outside of the material realm and allow us to connect in deep and wordless ways to nature and the entire web of Creation. They can connect us with the rhythms of the sun, the stars, and the seasons, and with the unique spirit of the places where we live. They can help us stay in touch with the cycles of life, death, and rebirth, with ancestors and descendants, and with the cosmologies we evolve. In short, a garden is a sanctuary where we can connect with the chi energy that sustains all life, where we can feel the infinite love that flows through and feeds all that exists.

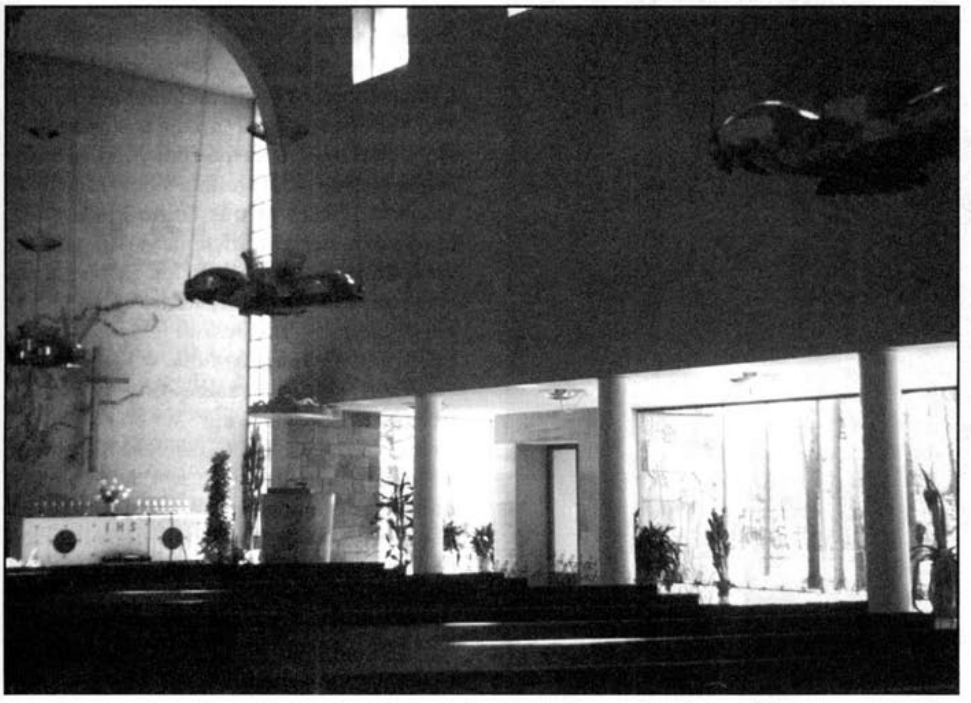
Communities need sacred places—spaces in which we can meditate in silence or find a moment of peace. In our increasingly urbanized world, we particularly need places that can restore our energy in deeper and more powerful ways. We need sacred places that enhance intuitive communication abilities, provide safe and supportive environments for accessing the spirit world, and sustain the flow of energy between this realm and the other.

Chi-based gardens around our buildings can help them blend into the native ecosystem, can provide room and food for other life forms, and can temper our microclimates. By providing habitat for other life forms, including birds, spiders, bats, and butterflies, gardens can nurture the rest of nature and our connection with it. Moreover, the act of making and giving a garden opens the hearts of donor and recipient alike, allowing chi to flow.

Creating special places that nourish our spirits has been an integral part of gardening throughout history, but it is an aspect of landscaping often neglected today. Providing spaces for individual and communal nurturing, grounding, and harmonizing, gardens can serve entire communities.

Shrines can also play a vital role in sustaining the chi of people and places. Shrines focus and accumulate chi in a place, making it easier for us to sense the powers of Creation and bring our own energy into resonance with those forces. By reinforcing the sense of the sacred around us, shrines nurture public community as well.

In northwest India, there is a wonderful tradition of wealthy landowners funding the construction of deep wells, and special shrines at the entrances to the wells—giving their communities both life-sustaining water and spiritual sustenance. During the dry season, the cool, shady stone galleries not only ease the job of hauling water but also



PHOTOS © TOM BENDER

The Resurrection Chapel in Turku, Finland, looks out into a garden and crematory forest, providing an affirmation of the cycles of life.

provide gathering places that nourish the spirit as well as the body.

Obviously, the creation of shrines and other special structures is not the only way to connect with the nourishing spirit flowing through Creation. Developing close relationships with other life forms transforms our existence, gives immense richness of meaning to our actions, and builds a community of support for all. We can learn from indigenous peoples who have long used rituals and ceremonies to connect with the powers of Creation, as well as to honor the other life that sustains their own

Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest, who traditionally worked closely with nature, found ways to fill their dwellings with the nurturing power of their spirit totems. By imbuing the structural posts of their dwellings with the imagery of the family totems, and by embodying the power of these totems through creating compelling masks, dances, and ceremonial items, they enveloped everyday life with a deep connection to spirit. Some Pacific Northwest clan houses were entered through the mouth of Raven, viscerally reaffirming the vitality of the creation stories.

Many shamanic cultures have recognized the value of using rituals and ceremonies to commune directly with the animal powers that sustain them—the Lakota with the buffalo, the Sami with the reindeer, and the Ayamara with the llama and alpaca. Direct connections with the forms of life that sustain us are possible even in urban environments. We can honor and relate to the life of all beings through the creation of shrines and totems, and the performance of rituals.

Honoring Our Ancestral Spirits

It is easy to think of gardens as celebrations of life. It is harder, perhaps, to think of them as celebrations of death and rebirth. Some gardeners go to great lengths to provide an illusion of unceasing life, continually transplanting flowers to keep only currently blooming ones visible. Flowers are cut and removed the moment they pass the peak of bloom. Dying or dead trees are relentlessly pruned or replaced. If we are to be healed—and to know our wholeness—we must come to honor death as an integral part of the cycles of life that manifest in our communities and our surroundings.

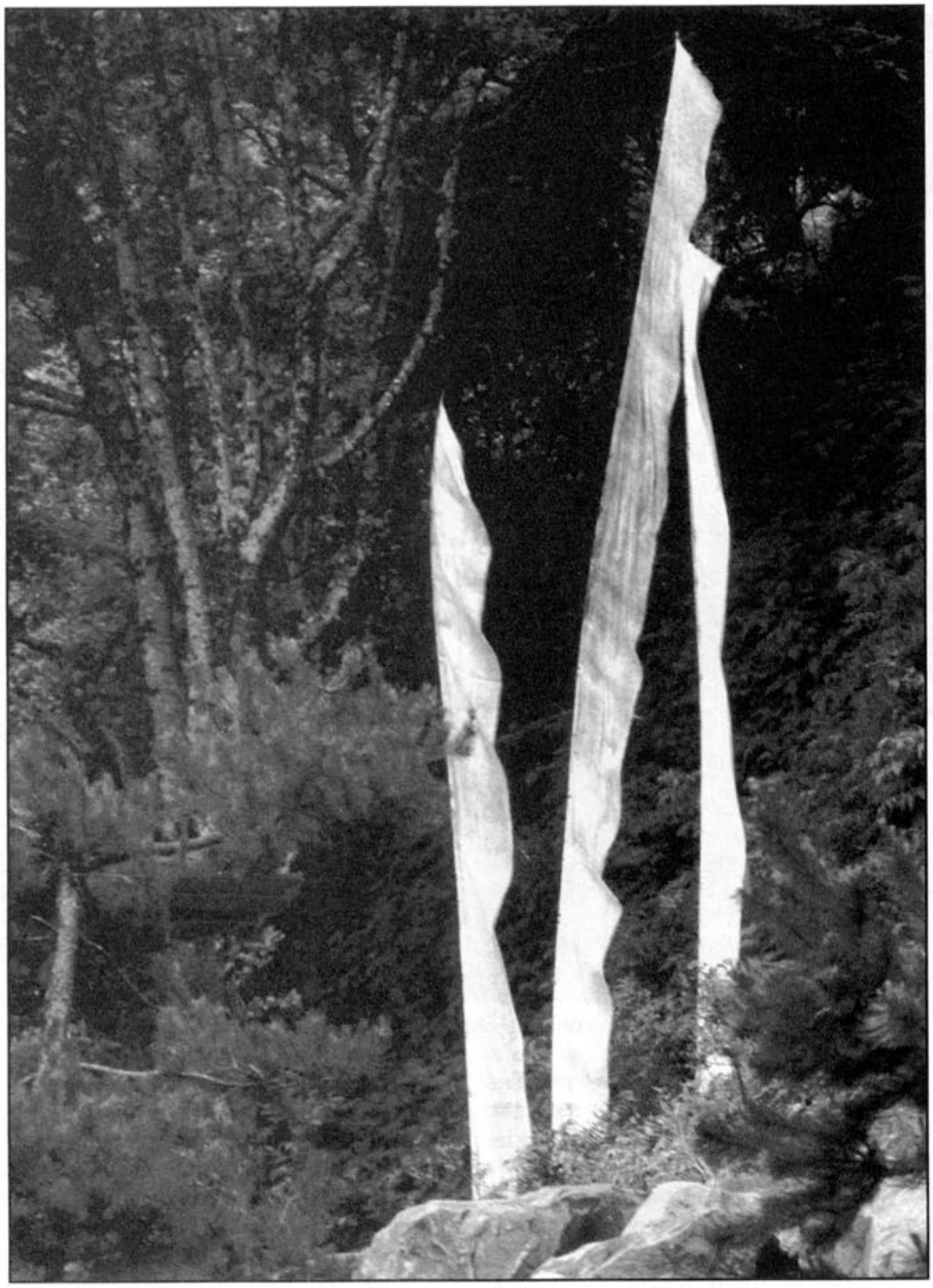
Once we learn to honor death, images of new life arising out of old can become joyful, accepted parts of our gardens, as well as our natural surroundings. We can begin to design gardens and landscapes that honor the full cycles of life, death, and rebirth. As we celebrate endings as well as beginnings in our lives, our relationships with places will be deepened forever.

One of the most powerful chapels with a funerary garden is the Resurrection Chapel in Turku, Finland, designed by Erik Bryggman in 1940. The pews in the chapel are restricted to one side and set at an angle, facing a glass expanse through which is seen a garden of moss-covered rock and aged trees. On the side of the chapel nearest the garden, there is an altar and an open area for displaying the coffin or urn during a memorial, forming a balance point between the congregation and nature. The design calls one's attention not only to the symbols and rituals within the chapel but also to the signs and rhythms of nature outside, visible through the glass. The duality of the setting is transcended at the close of the ceremony, when the deceased is carried by the living through a ceremonial door in the glass wall, out into the forest, in a reunion with the cycles of nature and life itself.

Learning the principles of chi-based design can bring a whole new understanding of the function of funerary temples and shrines in different cultures. As previously noted, funerary temples at Angkor Wat were designed to act as places in which to contact the energetic bodies of deceased leaders, and to access their wisdom and aid for the benefit of their descendants and their subjects. By creating funerary gardens as gateway structures, we can connect with the wisdom of our ancestors. They can be sacred places where we can reflect, grieve, say our farewells, and honor the contributions of both the living and the dead. We can engage in rituals that celebrate the ongoing connection between the material and spirit worlds. Restoring our connections to the spirit world can result in profound energy shifts.

Healing the Chi of Community

There is another kind of chi—community chi—which is vital to our lives yet is often ignored even by those who have learned to focus on the energetics of our personal living and working places. Com-



Prayer flags at Neahkanie, Oregon, call attention to the spirit of place.

munity chi is the product of shared values and beliefs reflected back to us from our surroundings. Community chi is the joy or fear we feel walking down a street at night. It is the dread or excitement we feel as we enter a school, hospital, or library. It is the emptiness or fullness we feel as we leave a church, shrine, or temple. It is the sense of wholeness or hollowness that we experience as we interact with our surroundings.

We have ignored the essential role of chi energy in the health of communities even more than in the health of individuals. We are well acquainted with the scars that rape and abuse leave on an individual's self-esteem. We are only beginning to acknowledge, however, that similar imprints are left on the physical and psychic bodies of our communities—both ecological and human—that have suffered pillage, rape, murder, or abandonment.

An abandoned New England mill town, a logged-out California lumber community, and a mined-out Appalachian village each bear testimony to how the energy bodies of our communities can be damaged by abuse. The soils, forests, and waters have been ravaged, and can no longer support the needs of the community. The human population is left without a source of livelihood, with high mortgage payments on now-valueless homes, with injury and sickness. There is a sense of abandonment, grief, bewilderment, defeat, and hopelessness.

In a comparable way, our urban environments reflect our desires and our addictions. The hardness of our urban landscapes of stone and steel, and the confusion of flashing neon signs and wailing sirens reveal the emotional scars of our culture—the track marks of material addictions. We have built walls around our hearts to lessen the pain of what our culture has created, but the resultant isolation aggravates our feelings of emptiness and meaninglessness.

When we cut ourselves off emotionally from the pain that we inflict on the rest of Creation, we also cut ourselves off from the life energy that sustains us. When communities are disconnected from natural sources of energy, they begin to show the same kind of rupture, clogging, and displacement that individuals do. They can attract and contain the same types of negative spirits that possess individuals. As with individuals, obstructions to the flow of chi energy within communities can manifest in diseases of the spirit. In vicious, relentless cycles, those diseases often breed more substance abuse, addiction, violence, rape, isolation, depression, and despair—all of which have become epidemic in our culture.

The restoration of places to wholeness comes in part through time, but it can be enhanced by consciously tapping the infinite power of the Earth to heal. We can greatly enhance a community's health and well-being by performing intentional healings on the chi of that place or community. When we call upon Earth energies—asking for the balancing of negative energies, and the focusing and relocation of positive ones—they respond to our requests by aligning with our activities.

Healing can come through an act of faith, perhaps by an individual or small group at first, and then by the larger community. It can come through individuals forgiving those who caused the damage. It can come from performing rituals that offer acknowledgment, release, and healing to unwanted spirits that have taken up residence in a community. It can come through embracing living, working, and cultural patterns that are life affirming.

Getting Community Chi Moving

Individuals or groups—preferably the entire community—can raise the healing energy of a place and feed it into the energy body of the community. Direct raising of chi energy seems to be very efficacious in enhancing community health, yet it is a practice that our society almost totally neglects.

Moving with our hearts open within the

energy fields of a place brings our energy into resonance with that of the place, and augments both. This practice—which can take the form of ecstatic ritual dancing, labyrinth walking, sacred processions, or circumambulation of sacred places—directs our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual attention into an act of honoring the energy of place.

The practice of movement in sacred processions is associated with sacred places worldwide. Islamic pilgrims circle the Kaaba in Mecca. Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims alike circumambulate Mount Kailas and Mt. Meru. Christians in the Gothic cathedrals of Europe make their rounds of the shrines in the churches. Visitors to the Buddhist monument of Borobudur in Java circle the monument on each level as they wind their way to the top. In all cases, the chi of both the place and the pilgrim is enhanced in the process.

Healing our communities requires nurturing our souls and opening our hearts—restoring both our self-esteem and our love of others. Ritual celebrations of seasonal changes that impact our lives are an excellent way to restore community chi. When their energetic roles are more deeply understood, existing rituals such as graduations, weddings, and funerals can be transformed to contribute to community energetics.

The act of publicly acknowledging what we deeply value is vital to sustaining our health and that of our culture. Whenever we conduct personal rituals and celebrations honoring places that we hold sacred, we honor the sacredness in ourselves, others, and all that makes our world. Whenever we hold something sacred in community—and make that sacredness visible in public places—our whole community is able to experience the sacred dimension of life.

At the same time, we need to perform physical acts of healing—planting trees, restoring streams and wetlands, creating fish and wildlife habitat, removing sources of toxins, and creating meaningful work for the members of the community. Even small acts of caring and taking responsibility—from removing junked autos to planting flowers, from sweeping sidewalks to picking up trash—can begin the process of healing. Anything done with reverence—even offering a song and a smile—can help restore health and enhance well-being.

Working together in community ritual can bring cathartic release, heal us, and build an enduring bond of community. Community energy can be nurtured in many subtle ways—creating a small park with a few shaded benches, or an outdoor coffee shop where news and friendships can be shared. Creating shrines that focus the natural flow of chi in a place can provide a wonderful source of sustenance for a community.

PHOTOS © TOM BENDER

The stupa of Borobudur, Java

In learning to honor all life as we shape our surroundings, we touch the sacredness of both people and place. By using the traditional design wisdom of a region, we honor the work, insights, and hard lessons of the past. In addition to accommodating and honoring other life forms when we build, we need to leave room for them in our communities—for their own sake, not for our enjoyment or recreation. We can learn, like many indigenous cultures, to live intimately with other forms of life and open our souls to their special gifts and wisdom. By providing opportunities for birds to nest, wildflowers to grow, and squirrels to play, we honor the other lives with which we share our world. By planting trees, we honor a will to have a future. By putting sacredness into all of our relationships, and making all places sacred, we align ourselves with the incredible power of Creation. Connection with the spirit world is not something only for deep ritual and esoteric practices. It is a means of nurturing and enriching our lives which can be brought into our everyday surroundings and every aspect of our lives.

Notes

1. Freidel, Schele & Parker 1993:284.

2. Schele and Freidel 1990; Schele and Mathews 1998; Freidel, Schele and Parker 1993.

3. Schele and Mathews 1998.

4. Goloubew 1941.

5. The Chinese practice of siting tombs at places with good chi in order to honor the ancestors is a parallel.

6. Coedes 1963.

7. Lansing 1991.

8. See Bender 2000: 90-92; and Lovins, Hunter, and Hawken.

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