Buddhist philosophy, nature and harmony: implications for product design

by

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to dad, for the support you gave for 32 years...

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for a degree or diploma by the University or any other institution, except by way of background information and duly acknowledged in the Thesis, and to the best of the candidate's knowledge and belief no material previously published or written by another person except where due acknowledgement is made in the text of the Thesis.

Jirawat Vongphantuset
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Abstract

This study examines the idea of Buddhist philosophy in its understanding of nature, both outside (surroundings) and inside (self), and seeks to find ways of assimilating these understandings in the design of utilitarian objects. These could then exist in harmony with nature in both physical and philosophical terms.

As a designer who grew up in an Eastern culture, I am interested in Buddhist philosophy which teaches me to understand the nature of self, and of living in harmony with the surrounding nature. Also, the opportunity to live and to visit many places in Tasmania, has provided the luxury of experiencing different aspects of nature first hand.

I have brought these two personal experiences together in the design of utilitarian interior objects. The objects and the exhibition are inspired by the Buddhist concepts of: Enlightenment, *Samsara*, Mind, *Samadhi* and *Puccha - Vissajjana*.

The study is informed by the works of designers and sculptors such as: Shiro Kuramata, Masatoshi Sakaegi, Bruno Munari, Anthony Caro and Andy Goldsworthy whose works are inspired by nature and which have, also, intrinsic beauty through their simplicity. It also looks into Shaker Design, Thai Craft, and, briefly into Modern and Post Modern movements for possible connections or contradictions.

I feel that as I practice designing these objects, I am in a way making a journey into myself and learning more about my own identity than I understood before.

The outcome of this personal approach to design, informed and extended by my reading and experiment research activity, is a group of unique design works which embody an Eastern perspective towards natural harmony, synthesised with Western functional utility. I believe this makes an original and significant contribution to the field of design.

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Contents

Buddhism, and my curiosity

Years ago, when I was a school-boy, I went with a charity group to a rural village in the northeastern part of Thailand. The purpose was to hand over clothing for people in that village - I was responsible for handing over sandals. By late afternoon, we had almost finished our task and not many sandals were left in the box, when a Buddhist nun walked past. I noticed that she was walking bare-footed, so I offered her a pair of sandals. "No, thank you," she replied, "I have my own pair of shoes, you see, and it doesn't wear out. The more I walk, the thicker it becomes." Then she smiled and slowly walked away.

I have never forgotten that incident, but I hadn't thought about it much either - not until the second incident occurred several years later in Japan.

I was a product design trainee in a company there. Mostly, my job was to help them build models of refrigerators. On my last day of work, my Japanese boss took me to a farewell dinner in an expensive restaurant. I knew it must be expensive - large private room, waitresses dressed in *kimono*. We didn't converse much; he could hardly speak English and I could hardly speak Japanese. What struck me most was the food. Even though all of the plates were beautifully decorated, there was almost no tangible food served in them - just a couple of flower leaves, fish skin and a small amount of dyed onion; and the food seemed to have had no taste at all. The cups were about the size of the lid of a mouth-wash bottle. I caught a train back home, still starving. Luckily Macdonald's was still open that night and I could satisfy my appetite with a 'quarter pounder with cheese'. That happened nine years ago, but I still remember that dinner quite vividly. I'm still in touch with my former Japanese boss but have never

discussed the dinner that night. It intrigues me leaving the story just like that.

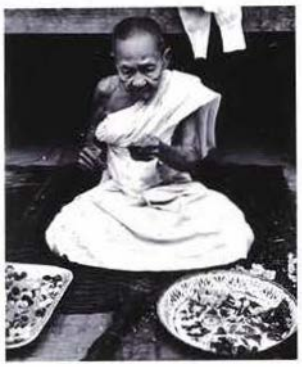

Figure 1: An aged Buddhist nun making a garland

Fig. 2: Japanese food

Both the nun and my former boss are practitioners of Buddhism. Perhaps they tried to tell me something through the two different situations, or possibly they might not have meant anything at all. But it is interesting that I have a strong Buddhist feeling in relation to these two incidents, and I believe that the stories triggered my interest in Buddhism and Eastern philosophies.

I have known that Buddhism is a study about self-understanding. I myself have been in many schools and have been studying for a long time, but I feel that the more I learn from the outside - the less I know about my inside; many questions arise in my mind and the more alienated I feel.

> [In the post modern era] since the only truly insurmountable obstacle comes from within the self, it is more essential than ever to know and define ourselves by exploring the limits that contain our identity. We must reveal ourselves to ourselves through experiences that make us aware of our limitations ... for it is by knowing our limits that we define ourselves. ... The (post)modern citizen, previously dominated by obligations to his fellow citizens, now worries about his own cosmic debts.[1]

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1 Arcand, B., *The jaguar and the anteater trans*, Toronto, Mcclelland & Stewart Inc., 1993, p. 154

Even though I grew up in a Buddhist culture (Thailand), my experience of Buddhism has mainly been with the religious aspects that stem from its main concepts. Often I find those religious practices and rituals do not make much sense to me, for example: chanting in languages that I do not understand (Pali and Sanskrit), lighting candles or incense.

Having spent a year in Japan, I recognize several aspects of Buddhism and Shintoism that influence Japanese everyday living. When comparing their culture to that of the Thai Buddhists, I have become more aware of details of my own culture, which I had always taken for granted.

I had not given serious consideration to Buddhism as an intellectual philosophy with practical implications, until about two years ago. Sometimes, when walking bare-foot or thinking of food, I am reminded of the two incidents cited earlier. Gradually, I began to study Eastern philosophies and, at the same time, to adopt certain practical thoughts about the way I think, and the way I live.

As I adopted Buddhist thought and brought it into my life, through my profession as a designer, I also perceived that, up until now, the field of design has been dominated by Western philosophies and ways of thinking. It makes me interested in conducting a design investigation which is drawn from Eastern philosophies and ideas. To be more specific, I am curious to know **if** I can, or **how** I can, apply any Buddhist thought to the design of objects for daily use. For these objects, unlike paintings or sculptures, are not only viewed, but also physically interact within our everyday life as Balaram has pointed out:

> Products can not only be seen but can also be touched, heard, felt, tasted - and, above all, used.

> Multi-sensory experiences provide the basis for whole gestalts, and cross-sensory meanings provide richer experiences than could be conveyed by either talk or sight alone.[2]

It would be interesting if somehow everyday items such as home accessories, beside their primary functions, could imply some aspects of Buddhist thought and provide open-ended experiences to the people who use them.

I remember my first day in Tasmania. I was brought to a temporary accommodation facility on Mt Nelson. The place was quiet and peaceful, and the first thought that came into my mind was "I can hear myself breathing." Not a common experience in the city where I came from, Bangkok, where I could hear only the sounds that surrounded me, but not the sounds within. Since then, I have had the opportunity to visit many places in Tasmania where I have had the luxury of experiencing different aspects of nature first-hand. For me, this place somehow provides a bridge between the inside and the outside. The two experiences of Buddhist practice and living in Tasmania have become the prime inspiration for my research study.

Fig. 3: Mt Nelson, Hobart

Fig. 4: Central Bangkok

Many designers and architects are now questioning the so called 'international style' and have brought back their

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2 Balaram, S., 'Product Symbolism of Gandhi and Its Connection with Indian Mythology' in *The Idea of Design* [edited by V. Margolin and R. Buchanan], Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p.139

own cultural motifs to their work. With my background, I do not plan to draw on my cultural style, rather I am interested in examining Buddhist concepts and, with my own interpretation, developing a personal design approach. I strongly believe that this proposition is legitimate in this 'post-modern era' in which art and design can be inspired from all aspects of our diverse cultures.

This study is informed by the works of designers and sculptors such as: Shiro Kuramata, Masatoshi Sakaegi, Bruno Munari, Anthony Caro and Andy Goldsworthy whose works are inspired by nature and which have also intrinsic beauty through their simplicity. It also looks into Shaker Design, Thai Craft, Modern and Post Modern movements, along with the revelation gathered from my Master degree thesis submission, for possible connections or contradictions.

This research study examines five selected Buddhist concepts - Enlightenment, *Samsara*, Mind, *Samadhi*, and *Puccha-Vissajjana*, then elucidates my approach to the design of various utilitarian objects, and the concept behind the exhibition. The outcome of this personal approach to design, informed and extended by my reading and experimental research activity, is a group of unique works which embody an Eastern perspective towards natural harmony, synthesized with Western functional utility, which I believe will make an original and significant contribution to the field of design.

Design Survey

I start my survey by first looking into a culture, which has connections between its philosophy, its way of living and the artefacts it produces; **the Shakers**. The Shakers are a well-known Christian communal society which was formed by a group of dissidents from the Anglican Church in Manchester, England and led by Mother Ann Lee (1736 - 1784). In 1774, Mother Ann, along with a handful of followers, left Manchester, England for America. The group then started a small community in 1776 in Watervliet, New York.

The Shaker communities later flourished throughout the area of New England, the Midwest, and the South of America during the 18th and 19th century (at their peak in 1840s, the communities had almost 6,000 members). Besides a unique way of lifestyle - commitment to celibacy, devotion of oneself entirely to Christianity and the community, and to the field of design - the Shakers also contributed their knowledge to the field through architecture, furniture and other products. They also invented many labour saving devices and agricultural innovations. The Shakers had a sustainable lifestyle; the communities also depended upon trading their produced artefacts such as brooms, boxes, furniture to nearby communities for their survival.

By the end of 19th century, the communities were in decline, their numbers fell radically, partly because of their rule of celibacy,[3] and conflicts in financial and property matters. The Shaker communities are now reduced to about ten.

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3 Since the rule of celibacy did not allow marriage, therefore the Shakers did not have offspring of their own, the new members had to be recruited from nearby communities. Later, quite a few Shaker members left the communities to start their own families.

I visited the Shaker village of Hancock, Massachusetts in 1991. By that time, the community had mainly been set up as a tourist attraction and a museum. There was a Shaker tour guide who gave us a brief history of the communities, and a demonstration of how members preached in earlier times. I had an impression of witnessing a small civilisation that contains every aspect of living in itself.

Fig. 5: Shaker village, Hancock, Massachusetts

My admiration was for their practical and sustainable lifestyle, and I was also amazed by the unusual living arrangement such as the double doors and the double staircases (fig. 6 & 7) designed specially to 'spiritually' separate Shaker brothers and sisters.

Fig. 6: Double doors

Fig. 7: Double staircases

There was a sense of 'paradoxical duality' in Shaker ways of living - after work, the Shaker brothers and sisters would come to participate in many activities together such as dining, singing, or dancing at the gathering halls, but at the end of the evening, they would, physically and symbolically, retire to their bedrooms through separate doors, or by separate staircases (in a way they seemed to be together, and in a way they were segregated). This

sense of duality, paradoxically, reminds me of the harmonious idea of the Chinese *Yin-Yang* in Taoism (fig. 8).

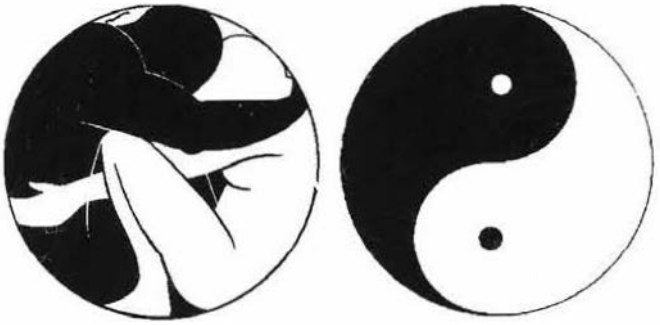

Fig. 8: Yin-Yang Monad

The Shakers are famous for their produced goods - their furniture and utilitarian objects are simple in design, practical to use, and durable, very largely as a result of craftsmanship and the use of high quality materials. Shaker design, because of its simplicity and implied spirituality, reflects their ways of efficient living. Its name has now become a name for a style. When I was at the village, I recall wishing there might be a traditional Thai community which had such a holistic view, where spiritual and day-to-day existence were regarded as one.

One main explanation for the success of Shaker products is that, since the Shakers have a solid trust in God, therefore, in whatever they do, they are honest to their duties and to their communities. As Michael Horsham commented:

> The Shaker makers believed that they were working within the sight of God and that God was all-seeing. Therefore the same care was taken with the inside of a drawer as with the outside. The backs of chairs had the same standard of finishing as the fronts. All work was performed to the glory of God, and, in the Shaker object, it shows.[4]

4 Horsham, M., *The Art of The Shakers*, London, Apple Press, 1989, p. 8

My interest in the Shakers is mainly with the relationship of their philosophy that blends harmoniously to their living and their produced artefacts. I cannot pinpoint a particular design that is directly related to my research project, but I would like to point out some design objects in which I am interested.

Shaker Box:

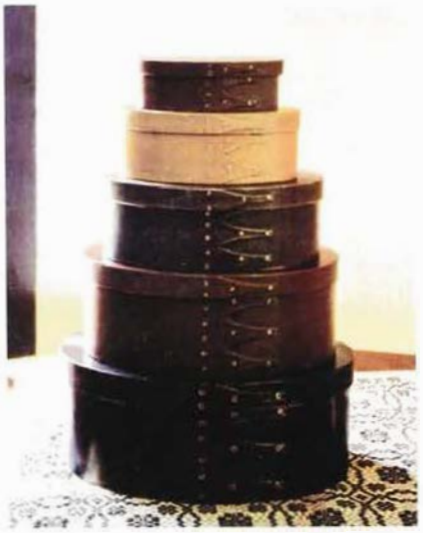

Fig. 9: Shaker Box

The Shaker Box (commonly called a nice box) has been made in several Shaker communities since 1798. It is one of the Shaker's most famous icons because of the way it is designed and the way in which materials are utilised - these multi-purpose boxes are made from local wood such as maple, pine or walnut. The side is made from a single sheet of wood bent around a form, which has swallowtails at one end; copper or iron pins are used to tack the boxes into shape. The swallowtail construction not only allows boxes to slightly reduce and expand according to changes of humidity and temperature, but also provides a sound decoration on the objects. The
boxes are then finished with milk-based paint in several neutral colours. Original boxes were made in an oval shape, while later examples can be seen in a round shape. The oval shape and tension in the box-side gives strength to its structure. The box best demonstrates the Shakers'

aesthetics: simple, practical and durable. I recall seeing a Shaker Style Box made and sold in a country as far away as Indonesia.

Peg Rail:

Fig. 10: Peg Rail

I do not recall seeing any applied ornament or paintings on Shaker walls, instead they used the 'peg rail' as an ornament to serve that purpose. The peg rail is another typical characteristic of a Shaker interior, and is made out of wood such as chechen. A peg rail is installed about 2 meters from the floor across the full length of all the walls. Pegs are fixed to the rail at about 30 - 40 cm intervals. The peg rail is used to hang almost every item in the room from - clothes, hats, candle holders, and brooms, up to large scale objects such as clocks or chairs (the only exception being the bed). This system of hanging proves to be practical for daily house cleaning, and different objects can also be viewed as wall decorations. Often, chairs are hung in their up side down position to prevent dust from gathering on the seat. When I saw chairs hung in that opposite orientation, it was similar to viewing an unusual art installation. I later found that the Shakers call their 'up side down hanging position' 'correct position'. The term reminds me of us, and of how we know, or claim to know whether anything in this world is correct or false, right or wrong. This idea of duality is comparable to a Buddhist viewpoint that describes the perceptions of correct or false, right or wrong as merely subjectifications of the mind.

Candle Sconce:

Fig. 11: Pegged sconce. The pao amarillo Candle Sconce hangs from a traditional Shaker peg rail.

Many Shaker objects were practically designed in connection with the peg rail system, one good example is the candle sconce. The simple Shaker sconce is just a small wooden tray with a rising stem. The tray is for carrying the candlestick, the stem has many holes to allow the sconce to be hung from a traditional peg rail. A simple, practical way of using the candle sconce is implicit in that, the candle can be set higher to light up the room, or lower to light up the smaller area while reading or writing.

Thai Design:

During this project, I have also looked into Thai product design hoping to investigate the connection of design and the state religion of Buddhism. Even though there are now numbers of factories that, since the Second World War, have produced industrial products for the local and for the export market in Thailand, but in terms of design, I find no distinctive character in any of the products that can be described as 'Modern Thai Design'. Thai industrial product design nowadays is still mainly dictated by the Western world. As Rajeshwari Ghose has suggested:

> The West then was a source of inspiration for Asian thinkers, even as they were plotting the overthrow of Western rule, and western thought trickled down to the masses after going through several sieves and filters. [5]

Up until the last ten years or so, most factories in Thailand have been merely manufacturing bases for foreign design because of their cheap labour. The awareness of design in Thailand is now just at the fledgling stage: most factory owners are well aware of its importance and many factories now have some kind of design department. But the design somehow is still basically an imitation of designs from the Western world. When I look into modern Thai industrial products, I can hardly find any trace of a relationship between the design, the culture, and its Buddhist philosophy: however trace can be found in traditional Thai craft.

The region of Myanma (Burma), Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia has been known as Indo-China because the various cultures were initially formed by those of the Indian and the Chinese through their

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5 Ghose, R., 'Design, Development, Culture, and Cultural Legacies in Asia' in *The Idea of Design* [edited by V. Margolin & R. Buchanan], Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 197

philosophies, technologies, trade and migration. Within the area of art and craft in Thailand, the tradition has long been established – *Ban Chiang Pottery* in the northeastern region can be dated back as far as 4,000 BC (fig. 12). Buddhism, with a substantial mixture of Hinduism and Brahminism, is considered the state religion, and some designs of recent craft products can be traced to the design of Buddhist architecture such as the *Stupa* (fig. 13).

Fig. 12: Pottery with red-on-buff designs found at Ban Chiang in northeastern Thailand.

Fig. 13: A row of bell-shaped stupas, Ayuthya, 15th century.

The Stupa is typical of Southeast Asian architecture as seen commonly in ancient Buddhist communities. The original design was from India. Stupas are built for keeping ashes believed to be of the Buddha or respected Buddhist monks. Buddhist followers believe Stupas are sacred and many worship them. The form has an influence upon Thai interior decorations such as the head of a pillar (fig. 14), and also in Thai craft (fig. 15).

Fig. 14: Interior of King Rama I's former residence containing a large scripture cabinet with gold-and-black lacquer decorations.

Fig. 15: A betel box set in nielloware from southern Thailand.

Another Buddhist icon that has influenced Thai art and design is the lotus. The Buddha often used the lotus as an analogy for his teachings - for example he compared different kinds of lotus to different kinds of people. A lotus which stays under water means the one who is still ignorant; a lotus which grows above water level means the enlightened one. The lotus is considered a holy flower for the Thais and it has been used extensively in our culture - for example, the way we greet one another by placing two hands together symbolises the un-opened lotus (fig. 16). The message behind this act of greeting is "I am bound to the truth (*Dharma*) within you" which always makes me smile whenever I see Thai politicians greet each other in this way. The lotus is used extensively as a basic motif pattern on both Thai exterior and interior architecture (fig. 14), and as exquisite decorations on traditional craft items as well (fig. 15).

Fig. 16: Woman offering lotus flowers at a temple

It is worth noting that, during the late 19th century, when Thai craftsmen did not possess the skills and technologies to produce items such as fine crystal wares and *Bencharong* (a pentachromatic ware), several 'traditional Thai designs' had been submitted to factories in Europe and in China. Such items were then imported back for use in palaces and in courtier homes (fig. 17 & 18). Since then, we have more access to more technologies and more 'design education', but these have made us less confident of our own design language.

Fig. 17: A Thai lacquer tray, inlaid with mother-of-pearl patterns, holds a collection of crystal bowls made in Europe to Thai designs during the reign of King Rama V.

Fig. 18: Example of Bencharong, a pentachromatic ware made in China for export to Thailand with Thai patterns.

Another example of connections between Buddhism and design can be seen in the area of textiles. Thai textiles have a long symbolic connection with Buddhism - the Buddha prescribed the plain cloth to new monks as a symbol of entering the monkhood. The monk's robe then became one of 'the five principle items'[6] for monastic life.

The more sumptuous design and superb craftsmanship of Thai textiles which originated in Buddhist beliefs can be

6 The five principle items are: robe - made from rags, needle - to sew and repair the robes, begging-bowl - for carrying food given by lay-people, water-strainer - to filter water for drinking, and razor-blade – to shave the monks' heads.

seen for example in women's *Phaa nung* (hip wrapper), (fig. 19). Several design patterns are also inspired by the lotus, while others depict stories from ancient Buddhist literature.

Fig. 19: Phaa nung (hip wrapper)

Design of traditional Thai craft has seen only few changes over the past 50 years. Very few Thai designers are interested in designing or experimenting with craft products, all the work of developing and producing is left to the local craftspeople. This is quite similar to what is happening in most parts of Asia:

> The new students of design were not drawn from the ancient craft sector but from the modern educational system, and traditional crafts as sources of inspiration often had to be relearned. [7]

The other reason, I believe, is the influence of *Theravada* Buddhism (the Ways of the Elders) on Thai people - we are known to relentlessly hold to the old methods and the old rules that were passed down from generation to generation. Thais do not feel comfortable with change, in general, craftspeople do not concern themselves much with exploring new options or new designs. Some modern designs emerge only because of market research intended to promote exports.

> Most developing countries of Asia have begun to perceive design in the contemporary First World model as an agent

7 Ghose, R., [1996], p. 193

> of capturing markets in an increasingly competitive world. Hence, product differentiation is the buzz world.[8]

The influence of Buddhism and other eastern philosophies upon traditional Thai design is mainly on decorations. Even though I very much admire and value Thai art, architecture and design, I can't avoid thinking of this highly decorative style of Thai art as quite 'worldly'. When I go to Thai Buddhist temples (fig. 20), often I am carried away by beautifully decorated architecture and I lose the sense of the meaning of 'being in a Buddhist monastery'. Nowadays, many Buddhist followers in Thailand, as though intoxicated, concentrate upon ritual practice or upon asking spirits for wealth and luck.
I suspect that not many people have a genuine understanding of the Buddhist principles and are able to bring them into real practice. Since Buddhism focuses mainly upon mind and understanding, I am interested in exploring other alternative approaches in using Buddhism as implications for product design, for example, through its utility instead of through its decorations.

Fig. 20: Spires and rooftops of the Grand Palace and Temple of the Emerald Buddha in Bangkok.

Another aspect of Thai craft that I am interested in is the traditional lacquer-work (fig. 21) and *Li Pao* work (fig. 22).

8 Ghose, R., [1996], p. 189

Fig. 21: Traditional lacquerware

Traditional lacquer-work has been produced for more than 500 years in the area of *Sukhothai* (the capital city of Thailand during the 13th - 14th century, located in the northern region of the country). Utilitarian items such as cabinets, cases, trays or bowls are made from hard-wood or bamboo. The texture is then glazed with *Nam Hug* (black crude rubber liquid taken from a plant called 'Melanorrhoea usitata' found in local areas), which makes the work humidity-proof, and capable of withstanding heat and chemicals. The objects are extremely durable. The items are then decorated with paint, vermillion, pearl and gold-leaf (fig. 14 & 15).

Li Pao-work was produced in the ancient city of *Nakhon Sri Thammaraj* in southern Thailand. It has now become one of the most famous regional crafts. Li Pao fibre is taken from a kind of fern named 'Lygodium flexuosum' found in tropical forests of southern Thailand. The fine fibre is hand woven to form items such as baskets, bags or bowls. Later, gold and silver decorations are also used to highlight the work (fig. 22). Li Pao-work has been admired because of its sophisticated weaving patterns, and the makers' perseverance in producing them - some sophisticated patterns and designs of a small bag can take more than a year to finish. While watching the villagers at work, I was reminded of watching people with a rosary during their meditation (fig. 23).

Fig. 22: Li-Pao work

Fig. 23: Villagers at work

I found these two craft traditions authentic in their origins and design. I should like to have explored these local materials and ancient techniques in my design experiments but this is not possible until I return to work permanently in Thailand.

Modern and Post-Modern Design:

The austerity of Buddhist living also led me to investigate the minimal design concept of the Modern Movement. The Modern Movement (Modernism) emerged around the end of the 19th century in response to the growth in industrialization and scientific experimentation in Europe and in America. The concept can be applied to several aspects in society including art, design, music, literature and cultural character. In the field of design, the goal of the Modern Movement was mainly to achieve an 'absolute design solution' for the masses, as Guy Julier indicates:

> The dominant concern of the Modern Movement was to break down barriers between aesthetics, technology and society so that an appropriate design of the highest visual and practical quality could be produced for the mass of the population.[9]

Around the 1930's, Modern Movement aesthetics has also been known as International Style. The German design school known as the Bauhaus (1919 - 1933) dominated the Modern Movement in Europe and later was important in the United States of America where many of the staff worked, after the school was closed down in Germany. The design philosophy of the Bauhaus, can be described in terms such as: the essence of things, truth to materials, refined minimalism, and lack of decoration.

I appreciate several Modern designs and their concepts, and my design philosophy is still substantially governed by many of those notions. In addition, Modern Design philosophy seems to conform with Buddhist ideas in several aspects. For instance, its concern with examining the essence of things and with functionalism, is parallelled by the simplicity of the Buddhist monastic lifestyle.

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9 Julier, G., *20th Century Design and Designers*, New York, Thames and Hudson, 1993, p. 132

However, there are a few ideological aspects with which I do not feel comfortable. Numerous designs from that period put emphasis on highlighting prefabricated materials (ex. tubular steel) and mass production technologies. These industrial-material/process-orientations gave a blunt expression to the design and seem to be 'inhumane' (fig. 24).

Fig. 24: A major influence in the Modern Movement was the Bauhaus, as is clearly shown by these works produced there in the mid 1920s.

Modern designers and Architects of those days acted as dictators in telling people what to live in, what to use, and how to use it. The movement overlooked the diversity and the depth of all cultures; 'anti-historicism' (one characteristic of the Modern style) prevented people from connecting with their own cultural heritages; and those cultures other than the Western were regarded as minor and inferior. Most of all, I do not believe there is such a thing as 'international style', and no designers will ever achieve that absolute state. The term was only a claim from a group of architects and designers at a certain period of time.

By the 1960s, Modern style design had come increasingly under criticism by commentators and the public; words such as: innocuous, monotonous, soulless and alienated- were often heard.

> The public remained unconvinced by the modernist adage 'less is more', even when blended with British craftsmanship and humanizing materials. Instead they once more inclined towards what Anthony Bertram described in 1946 as 'The Enemies of Design': 'Indifference itself, the

> Hitler of the gang, Cheapness First, Unnecessary Novelty, Borrowed Glory, Mass Production, Artcraftiness and Fashion Snobbery'.[10]

The postwar society proved to be too diverse and complex for Modernist prophecies and solutions, and the goal of achieving a somewhat 'utopian lifestyle' was not accomplished. No matter how 'modern' we would like to be, each of us, I believe, is still subconciously connected to our cultural belief and our nostalgic identity.

As a swing from Modernism, the Post Modern Movement (Post-Modernism) gained momentum in the late 1960s. The term, like Modernism, can be applied to several aspects of society. As a counterstyle to Modernism, ornaments, patterns, symbols, historical and cultural elements have been revived in design and architecture. Perhaps the most irrelevant and radical has been the statement of Robert Venturi, who said:

> I like elements that are hybrid rather than pure, compromising rather than clean, distorted rather than straightforward...[11]

These design manifestations have also been inspired by urban culture and 'product semantics' (the relationship between the function and meaning of objects). Several avant-garde styles such as Memphis, Hi-Touch, Crafts Revival have flourished. Many Post-Modern designers enjoy designing objects for production in small quantities for niche markets rather than designing for the masses.

'Memphis' may be considered as the central expression of the Post-Modern style. Introduced in 1981 at the Milan

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10 Woodham, J., *Design and Modernism*, London, Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 118

11 Conran, T., *Conran Directory of Design* [edited by S. Bayley], London, Conran Octopus, 1985, p. 238

Furniture Fair, it was led by an Italian designer Ettore Sottsass and a group of designers who advocated the use of anti-rational, highly decorated surfaces on cheap industrial materials with eccentric forms. Although the vibrant style of smaller Post-Modern objects is appealing and works well in spicing up interior spaces, but numerous inhabitable buildings with meretricious decorations are, same as Modern style products, 'inhumane' (fig. 25). Memphis objects led to some recognition in the design field, however I find no more value than that in their work.

Fig. 25: Broadsheet for Memphis Exhibition, The Boilerhouse Project. 1982.

What I found intriguing about Post-Modernism is the notion of exploring and reviving cultural heritage and identity, and the importance of symbols and representations. These ideas come closer to my own

interests and remind me of *Mahatma Gandhi* (1869 - 1947). When Gandhi was calling for an end to British rule in India by using his 'non-violent approach' (*Ahimsa*),[12] to a certain degree, he adapted the use, and the design, of products to send his message across to both the Indians and the British. As Balaram asserts in his writing:

> [Gandhi used a spinning wheel to weave his own clothes] Working a spinning wheel suggested the importance of communal industry and independence from imports from Britain and brought Gandhi closer to ordinary people.[13]

> In insisting on wearing or using these articles all the time [clothes, Indian traditional cap, sandals, living in a mud-house] he recognized the importance of the 'totalness' of a multidimensional message; communication does not happen through isolated strategies. As a public figure, being constantly watched, everything he did contributed semantically to his holistic message. He himself declared, 'My life is my message'[14] (fig. 26 & 27).

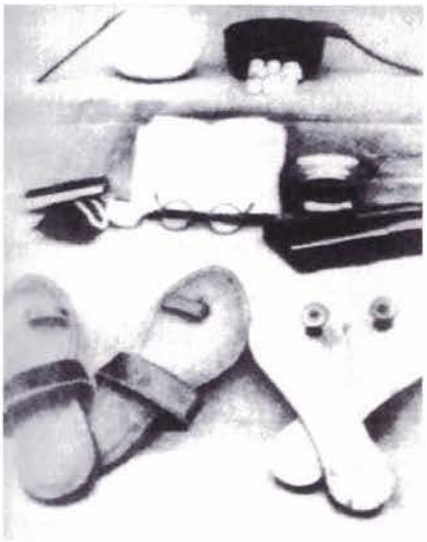

Fig. 26: Gandhi in his typical attire with one of his followers behind him wearing a Gandhi Cap.

Fig. 27: The products used by Gandhi.

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12 The doctrine of *Ahimsa* (nonviolence) is part of *Jainism*, founded by *Vardhamana Mahavisa* around the sixth century BC. The aim of Jainism is similar to Buddhism - to break away from the endless cycle of life and death in order to achieve enlightenment.

13 Balaram, S., [1996], p. 130

14 Balaram, S., [1996], p. 135

Without Gandhi using those items, the objects themselves would not have been able to send any message or have any meaning for anyone, even though Indian people use those items in their daily lives. However, this story gave me an intriguing springboard for my research journey.

Previous Research Study:

The last aspect that I would like to add to this introductory survey is that of my previous research study. In 1992, I submitted my master degree thesis:[15] the thesis was an investigation of 'time' - its history, connections to mankind - physically and psychologically - the ways it is perceived through different cultures, the impact of time measuring systems on modern societies, and the symbols and development of time measuring devices.

With different aspects of time, along with my personal design approach, the outcome of the research study was a concept design of 'time piece' (fig. 28).

Fig. 28: Timepiece (metal, 50 x 70 x 10 mm)

15 Master of Industrial Design, Rhode Island School of Design, U.S.A.

The design uses the sun and its path as icons of time. The timepiece is, similar to a pocket watch, a hand held object composed of two main parts - the central component and the arch. To operate, the timepiece is put in one palm, the central part is held by the thumb, the arch can then be tilted up by the other fingers. There is a small electric-light bulb in the narrow channel along side the arch which is automatically switched on when the arch is tilted up. Inside the channel, the light physically moves to imitate the path of the sun observed from earth. Users know the time by approximating the position of the light along its path, similar to the way that people of the past observed the position of the sun from the earth, for instance: when the light is on the top area of the arch - it is noon, when it moves toward the end of the arch - it is evening (fig. 29).

Fig. 29: Timepiece, displayed with different position of light

During the final presentation, there was an argument – 'the design concept contradicts the scientific fact that the earth moves around the sun, rather than the sun moves around the earth!' The debate sounded silly at the beginning - whether the sun moves around the earth or the other way around. Rapidly it caught fire, the debate went on and on without any conclusion between the two groups of the audience, most of the time over my head, mainly about scientific meaning and perceived meaning. It was somewhat like a debate between the 'scientific' Modernists and the 'poetic' Postmodernists. The following quotation can be seen as an argument against my work:

> The time of sun dials has long passed. Sunrise and sunset do not play a role in our civic life as they did formerly. Artificial illumination prolongs the day. And this little machine takes care of the regular distribution of our daily work dividing day and night into time spans of equal length by its course, whereas still with the Romans, depending on the seasons, either night or day had the longer hours. Thus we have corrected the course of the sun, originally the mistress of time and hour, according to our needs.[16]

In many aspects of our lives, we have become enslaved to our 'designed time'; the sun and torches have been replaced by electricity and light-bulbs. But deep down in our psyche, I still believe that, we prefer to live by what we perceive rather than what has been scientifically proved to be the case - the terms such as: 'sun rise' and 'sun set' are still in common use in our daily lives.

Since that study, I still would like to make a further design experiment, using nature (as I perceive it or, with a philosophical approach) as an implication for product design. The debate also made me aware that, I do not entirely think in the same way as the Modernists do, and this realization made me begin to look more closely at cultural context and cultural belief in conjunction with the simplicity of Modernist design.

The above review has served as a platform for this research study. To sum up, the development of the following personal design strategy will be cultivated from these concerns:

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16 Krampen, M., 'Semiotics in Architecture and Industrial/Product Design' in *The Idea of Design* [edited by V. Margolin & R. Buchanan], Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 91

1. Buddhist Philosophy: this will be the main proposition - assimilating Buddhist understanding in the design of utilitarian objects. The study will also be informed by Shaker religious functional design.

2. Modernist design concepts: functionalism, refined minimalism or the essence of things are ideas that conform to those of Buddhist thought, but yet remain sterile in much Modernist design.

3. Post-Modernist ideas: the revival of cultural identity in design, the significance of signs, symbols and meanings, the idea of small scale production - these ideas will be examined and compared with the use of symbols and analogies in Buddhist teachings; and with thoughts gathered from the product symbolism of Gandhi.

4. Traditional Thai art and design: I do not intend to revive Buddhist inspired traditional ornaments in my design approach as Post-Modernist designers might do. Instead, I will study selected Buddhist concepts, then assimilate my understanding into the design of utilitarian objects. Perhaps, in the future, it may be considered as an example of 'Modern Thai design'.

5. A further investigation from my Master degree thesis, relates to design inspired by Tasmania's natural treasures - places, landscapes, and patterns in nature.

6. Works from contemporary designers and artists, which I consider to be connected with my research journey, will always play a part.

Four Noble Truths

When discussing Buddhism, many people are familiar with Buddhist terms such as: Enlightenment, *Nirvana, Samsara, Karma* and *Zen.* Some even use those terms in general conversation. According to Buddhist doctrine, since those thoughts can only be known through personal experiences, they cannot be clearly described by words. However, the aim of this chapter is to give a general idea of what Buddhism is about.

Buddhism was first introduced in India by the Buddha some 2,500 years ago. *Siddhattha Gautama* (the Buddha's former name) was born a crown prince in an Arayan kingdom called *Kapilavatthu* near the mountains of the Himalayas in India, around 560 BC. When he was born, a Brahmin ascetic prophesied that as he grew up, if he stayed in the palace he would become a great king but, if he entered a religious life, he would be enlightened and become the founder of a new religion. His father, King *Suddhodana* wanted Siddhattha to succeed to his throne, therefore the crown prince was brought up with only pleasurable surroundings in order to keep him inside the palace, secluded from him was anything displeasing. One day he escaped outside and saw, for the first time, the other stages of man: birth, sickness, old age and death; these triggered him to search for the meaning of life. At the age of 29, tired of a worldly life, he decided to leave the palace permanently and began to search for his true nature and to live his life as an ascetic. He wandered around from place to place, practiced in both Hindu and Brahmin schools. Unsatisfied with any of the teachings, he found his own middle path. Eventually, at the age of 35, he became enlightened as the Buddha. He taught people for 45 years before he died at the age of 80 (ca 470 BC).

Fig. 30: A giant bronze Buddha head of the Sukothai period (12th-13th c.) in the Thai National Museum.

What the Buddha found in his enlightenment is unknown; people know only of what he taught, and he taught only what people need to know, other than that, he appeared to be silent, (The Buddha refused to discuss life after death, heaven or hell. He preferred people to concentrate on the search for reality of the here and now). Buddhism is a teaching about nature, the nature of impermanence. Many perceive that Buddhist teaching is pessimistic in its outlook on the world, because it is all about one Pali word, '*dukkha*'.

An approximate translation of the word *dukkha* would be 'suffering'. According to Buddhism, life is *dukkha*, to come into being in this world is to suffer. Aging, illness, frustration, disappointment, hunger, feeling too hot or too cold are suffering. Or a common expression such as "I need a beer!" also implies a state of suffering. *Dukkha* covers 'unsatisfactory' conditions, both physical and mental.

> [Dukkha represents] deeper ideas such as 'imperfection,' 'impermanence,' 'emptiness,' 'insubstantiality.' It is difficult therefore to find one word to embrace the whole conception of the term *dukkha* ... so it is better to leave it

> untranslated, than to give an inadequate and wrong idea of it by conveniently translating it as 'suffering' or 'pain'.[17]

Even when people are happy, for whatever reason, Buddhism describes it as a root of suffering, similar to grabbing a snake by its tail. The snake may not bite immediately, but will twist its head to bite the grabber eventually. We tend to cling to happiness even though we all know that it will not last forever. Things change all the time. Loved ones often change their feelings toward us or, if not, they will eventually pass away; it is just a matter of time. When happiness inevitably comes to an end, people suffer from a sense of loss; their delusory pleasures have been taken from them; and this, too, is *dukkha*.

The Buddhist concept is in a way an extension of the Western saying: "Eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die." It teaches people to be more aware of the limitations and impermanency of nature and to be prepared for the natural course of life.

If we compare the idea of *dukkha* to incidents that happen in life, and if we are convinced that life is suffering, then we might begin to search for its cause.

The cause of suffering is ignorance, *avidya* in Sanskrit, or not knowing - not knowing that 'there is no unique individual self'. This notion is very radical, compared to the Western valuing of individuality, or to the French philosopher René Descartes' well known statement "I think, therefore I am."

According to Buddhism, there is nothing concrete or real or solid that we can call 'self'. All things change both physically and mentally, we all are aging. The way we

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17 Rahula, W., *What the Buddha Taught*, New York, Grove Press, 1974, p. 17.

think, and the way we feel are different through time. This raises the question: "which me is the real me?" If we try to hold on to, or to interrupt, this natural process of changing, we will suffer.

To attempt to stop this suffering is to perceive things with an empty mind. 'Emptiness' (*sunyata*) in Buddhism does not mean physically empty. Things are still around, but the mind is pure and empty. If one had an empty mind, he or she could still see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think of anything, but would be aware not to follow, or to hold on to, or to be triggered to react to those perceptions, until feelings such as love or hatred develop. Dogen, a Buddhist Zen master stated:

> If you are not willing to hear, the loudest voices could not reach your ears; if you are willing to hear, even the silent voices could reach your ears.[18]

Along with Buddhist ethics, the practice of meditation is a way to train minds to be empty and pure, it allows people to think more clearly and to understand the true nature of things. All things are **impermanent** and cause **suffering** if we become too attached to them; therefore they are **unsubstantial**. If one see all things in these ways, he or she may well be able to move beyond the illusion of self.

The moment that the mind is still, with no greed, no anger and no delusion, one might experience a glimpse of what Buddhism calls 'enlightenment'. It does not happen after death, it is an experience of here and now.

There is a story about an old monk and a young disciple. The old monk made the disciple sit still and meditate every day. At the end of each day the monk would whip

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18 Takahashi, M., *The essence of Dogen*, London, Kegan Paul International, 1983, p. 17.

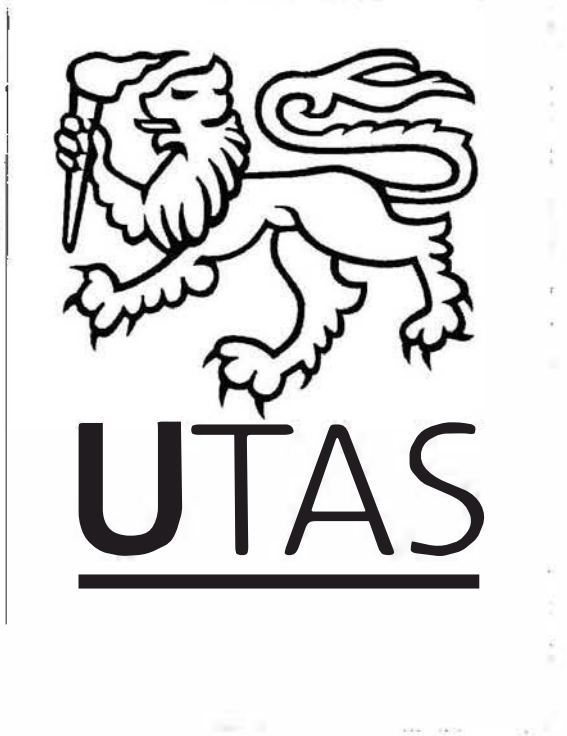
the disciple on his head and ask "Are you enlightened?" and the answer was always "No sir, not yet." The poor boy meditated and thought very hard day by day about what enlightenment was. This went on for years, until the boy became a teenager. Then one day when the monk was about to whip him again, at that moment the disciple raised his arm, grabbed the whip by his hand and shouted "I am enlightened, don't hit me, it hurts!"

The Buddha's teaching of suffering or discontent, the cause of the arising of suffering, the liberation from suffering, and the path to the liberation (enlightenment), are known as the **Four Noble Truths** which are the principle concepts of all the Buddhist teachings.

At its beginning Buddhism was only passed on within the superior caste and amongst well-educated Indian people. Not until the third century was it embraced and promoted by an Indian king *Ashoka*, and since then it has been made accessible to ordinary people. For 2,500 years, Buddhism has spread over Asia and part of Southern Russia. It blended with many local religions such as Hinduism, Braminism, Shinto, Confucianism and Taoism. It grew into several sects. The practices varied from place to place, but the main concepts have remained pretty much the same. The two main sects are Theravada (Hinayana)[19] and Mahayana. Theravada, which can be translated as 'the Ways of the Elders', is very conservative, holding to what was taught over 2,500 years ago, while Mahayana (the Great Wheel), emerged around the first century, is more liberal and adapts its teachings and practises to places, times, and circumstances.

19 I tend to avoid using the term 'Hinayana', it is the name that Mahayana Buddhists use to refer to the conventional doctrine as 'narrow' or 'low', and call themself 'Maha' which means 'greater' or 'superior'. It is, more or less, back to the belief of a self.

The following 5 chapters will examine selected Buddhist concepts in more details, and elucidate my approach toward design.



Enlightenment

> A man travelling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.
>
> Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted![20]

Enlightenment is best described as the ultimate realisation of one's true nature. Although achievable in all people, very few have ever experienced it. This is because people still hold on to the belief in a 'self' and build upon that belief, all desires and mental defilement.

Buddhist teaching describes how enlightenment can only be attained by **self-discovery**, mainly by practising meditation. Once enlightened, one's mind becomes clear and still, completely detached from all ignorance stemming from the belief in a self. There is also the intuitive realisation of 'the true nature of things'. It is often compared to putting up a fire in a dark cave; once the fire is lit, every corner of the cave can be clearly seen, no matter how long that cave has been in the darkness. The realisation is **simple** but difficult to attain. It is not an accumulative process that would happen within any specific conditions; it takes place instantly or in a timeless moment.

The ultimate goal, the utmost goodness (*Summum Bonum*), of many eastern philosophies, including Hinduism and Buddhism, is to attain this enlightenment

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20 Reps, P. & Senzaki, N., *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, Boston, Shambala, 1994, p. 39

but, each teaching has its own different approach which varies from each of the others.

Siddhattha, the first man who is known to have been enlightened, became the Buddha after this discovery. The teachings later have been known as Buddhism. The word 'Buddha' is the title given to him and means the Enlightened One or **the Awakened One**, one who 'blows out' his own ignorance. Among the Buddhist followers, it has been postulated that, through time, there have already been several Buddhas and there will be more to come.

Enlightenment is a notion that I have never experienced or even come anywhere near. In fact, I am still much in doubt whether that ideal state is possible to achieve. However, when discussing enlightenment, it often reminds me of when I try to resolve certain problems seriously but cannot come up with any solution. Then one moment, while I am about to nod off and thinking of something totally different, all of a sudden, the solution arises, and it is clear from the beginning to the end as to how I should approach it. An enlightenment would be something in this manner which explodes out of the mind, that reality is always with us but is too close for us to be aware of it; we overlook it.

If one had to be totally detached from the awareness of a self in order to be enlightened, people would be less likely to achieve enlightenment these days. It is the way of modern 'Western' thought which focuses upon the notion in opposition to the Buddhist concept of 'non-self' – 'individuality'. We build belief in ourself from the time we are born and given names; and then we begin to say 'I'. Later we add concepts such as

human-rights, womens-rights, animal-rights, etc. which also re-emphasise and stretch that belief further.
With the ideas of **discovery, simplicity, awakening**, and the further ideas gathered from the design of my 'timepiece', I began experimenting with the first project. The design of lighting was used as a vehicle for this experiment as light seems to be the first sign for us to commence our daily routines (we usually wake up every morning when the sun rises).

In Chinese culture, several designs were developed from the human body and its parts. For example, the iconographic letter of the word 'sky' or 'god' was developed from the human image (fig. 31), or the design of chopsticks, "developed about five thousand years ago as extensions of the fingers;" [21] since people in those days did not want to dip their fingers in hot pots in order to reach for food.

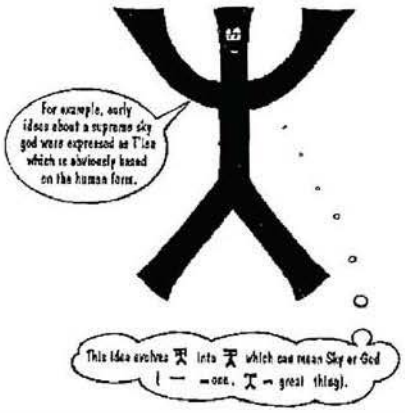

Fig. 31: A Chinese iconographic letter which means 'god' or 'sky'.

In this first project, I also sought inspiration from the human figure in the design of table lamps (fig. 32 & 33).

21 Petroski, H., *The Evolution of Useful Things*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, p. 19

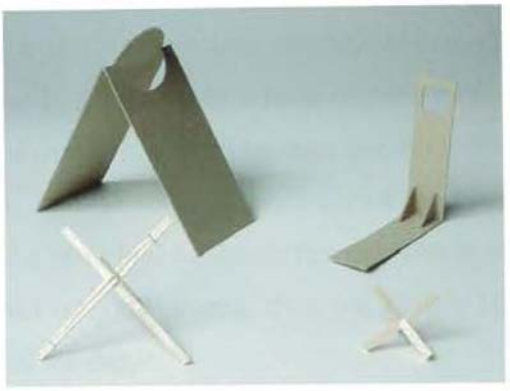

Fig. 32: Early concept models of table lamps made out of cardboard and balsa-wood to imitate the human-figure. The small balsa model on the lower right was selected for further development.

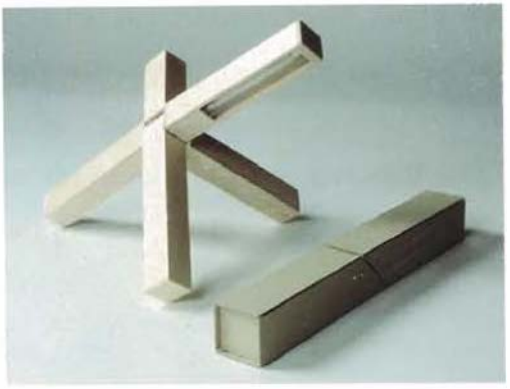

Fig. 33: Full-scale development, the lighting components were brought from a small flashlight.

The way lamps operate was also inspired by the posture exercises of 'Yoga'. Yoga is well-known as a kind of exercise suitable for relieving stress. The original Yoga school was founded by *Patanjali* around 200 BC. in India; it is considered as a branch of Hinduism which also seeks the state of enlightenment. It believes that the mind and the body are not two separate entities, they are closely inter-related, therefore should be developed together to a higher awareness. The art of 'simple living and high thinking'[22] seeks an enlightenment through eight-ascending steps (*ashtanga*): self-discipline, proper behaviour, **steady posture**, proper breathing, withdrawal of the senses, concentration of the mind, meditation and enlightenment (*samadhi*).[23]

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22 Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre. *Yoga. Mind & Body*. Victoria, Australia, Thomas C. Lothian. 1996, p. 10

23 Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre. [1996], p. 7

'Steady Posture' (*Asanas*) is practiced through different body movements which require both physical and mental involvement. Through the body's movement, Asanas relieves pressure of the body's joints, stretches the muscles, balances the nervous system and massages all internal organs, thereby, slowly improving the physical health.

The two final forms of the table lamps were designed to symbolise the human figure; their movements are inspired from the two Asanas called: *Surya Namaskar* / The Sun Salutation (fig. 34 & 35) and 'Inclined Plane' (fig. 36 & 37). The first posture is practiced as a warm-up exercise, the second posture gives a thorough lateral stretch to all parts of the body.

Fig. 34: Sun Salutation

Fig. 35: Yogi lamp # 1 (myrtle & perspex)

Fig. 36: Incline Plane

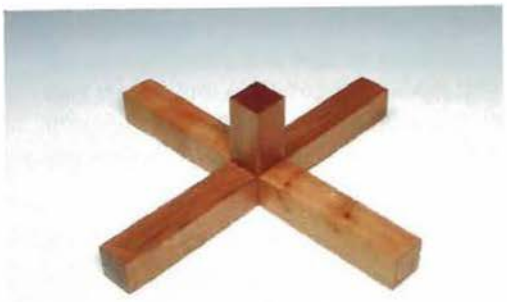

Fig. 37: Yogi lamp # 2 (myrtle & perspex)

With the idea of **discovery**, the two lamps were designed to be ambiguous in their functions. Instead of being

'switched on and off', their simple geometric forms would be physically manipulated by 'twisting' and 'lifting' (fig. 35 & 37); the objects then **awake** and, simultaneously, light-up and reveal their functions as table lamps. This idea of discovery had been translated into the sense of surprise influenced by the Kaplan statement:

> Mystery...is somewhat unexpected in the context of psychology. Perhaps for this reason there has been an inclination to translate it into a more familiar concept, such as 'surprise.' A critical difference between mystery and surprise, however, is that in a surprise the new information is present and it is sudden. In the case of mystery, the new information is not present; it is only suggested or implied. Rather than being sudden, there is a strong element of continuity. The bend in the road, the brightly lighted field seen through a screen of foliage - these settings imply that the new information will be continuous with, and related to, that which has gone before. Given this continuity one can usually think of several alternative hypotheses as to what one might discover.[24]

With the exhibited items, the central mechanisms of both lamps were developed so that the 'clicking' can be felt when lamp # 1 is twisted on, and in lamp # 2, the idea is to allow the lamp to operate with only one hand by lifting the handle up.

The first design experiment was mainly inspired by the movement of the human figure and through my inward concentration. I found the idea of 'simple discovery' and 'direct interaction of the forms' worked well in this context. I carried the idea further and began working on another lighting project, but this time focusing outward, the discovery inspired by **place** (partly as a further investigation from my Master degree research study).

When I first came to Tasmania in 1996, I seemed to be more acutely aware of what I came across in my new

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24 Cited in 'The future isn't what it used to be' by V. Papanek in *The Idea of Design* [edited by V. Margolin and R. Buchanan], Cambridge, MIT Press, 1996, p. 59

environment; reminding me of my mentor's words, "The longer you stay, the less you see." My first trip out of Hobart was to go bush-walking in the area of the *Huon Valley*.

We walked down a valley for about an hour. At its bottom, looking up, I saw a big water-fall whose name I do not recall. Its visual impact was inspiring - two big cliff by the sides, a water fall in the middle and sun light from above, (fig. 38).

Inspired by this scene, a floor lamp (fig. 39), made from local materials of 'horizontal stick' and 'huon veneer', instead of playing with light, used shadows that are projected onto the wall to imitate that water-fall scene. The lamp still uses a conventional switch hidden at its back to turn the light on and off. Even though I was not quite pleased with the outcome - its look is conventional - I carried on the idea of 'design inspired by a natural scene' into the next object.

Fig. 38: Water fall scene

Fig. 39: Floor lamp (horizontal stick & huon veneer)

Later in the year, I visited a place called 'Henty Dunes' on the west coast of Tasmania. I was overwhelmed by the sharp contrasts of forests, vast sand dunes and seas. While strolling along the dune, looking out to the sea, there was

a moment when I did not feel like I was moving, but instead was witnessing the land and the sea moving against each other, then glittering light shone from the sea. It was a unique glimpse which happened as if I was experiencing the landscape with a new perception.

Fig. 40: Dunes in Africa's Sahara Desert (to illustrate the idea of dunes)

The scene of Henty Dunes that day reminded me of Rut Bryk's 'Marshy lake', and Masatoshi Sakaegi's 'Unit tile Waving Motion' (fig. 41 & 42). Both works are modular ceramic wall tiles, they express the feeling of landscapes observed from a distance. Shadows projected from the relief, also add to the works' depth and mystery.

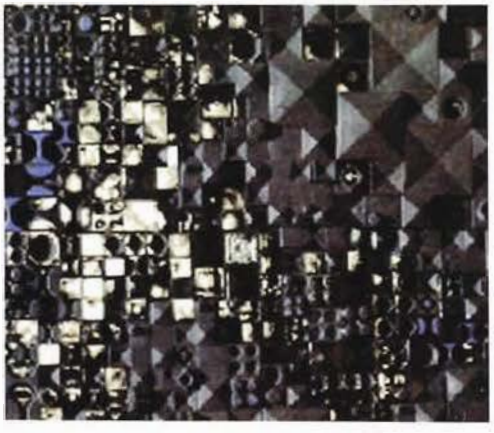

Fig. 41: Marshy lake

Fig. 42: Unit tile Waving Motion

I wanted to capture that timeless moment and translate it into design work, the following project was designed as wall sculpture so that viewers would have an impression of looking at a scene. The 'dune piece' (fig. 45) is an abstraction from that experience. The large surface represents the landscape and the pattern of sand dunes.

The top part can be slid to the side. The sculpture then reveals its function as a wall lamp (fig. 46).

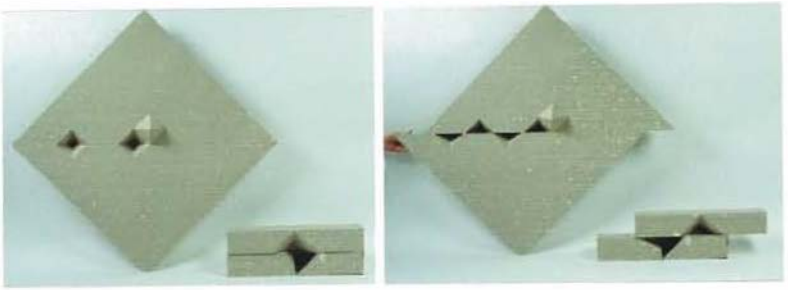

Fig. 43 & 44: Design development (cardboard)

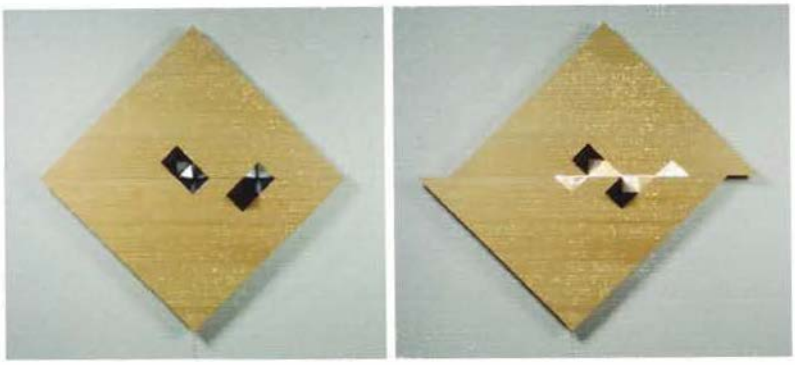

Fig. 45: Dune piece (huon-veneer, MDF & aluminium)

Fig. 46: Dune piece, the top panel can be slid to the side to light up the piece.

With the same principle, the 'Luna piece' (fig. 50 & 51) was designed so that its round shape counteracts with the square shape of the first piece. I noticed afterwards that the two works can also be read as masculine-feminine characters (fig. 52). Some viewers read the design as a representation of the Yin-Yang symbol, because of its shape and the separating curvature line, which I do not mind (although I had no intention to represent it, the line separating the circle evolved from a number of sketches) (fig. 47, 48 & 49)

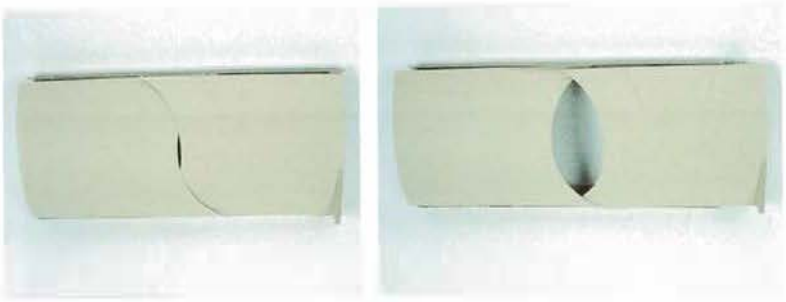

Fig. 47 & 48: Initial design of the Luna piece (cardboard): the two panels can be slid apart, the parting line at the front then form a circle representing the moon, then the light would shine through.

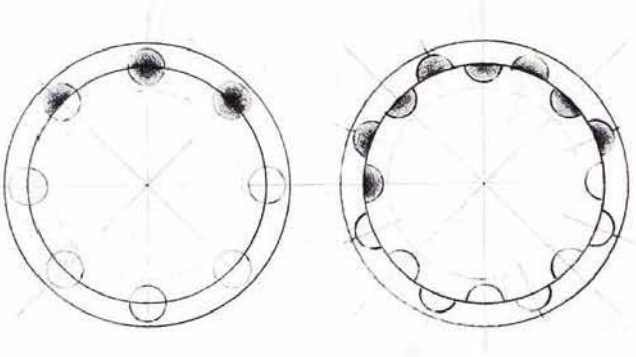

Fig. 49: Further development: the design evolved to a round shape, the outer ring can be rotated, the piece then lights up.

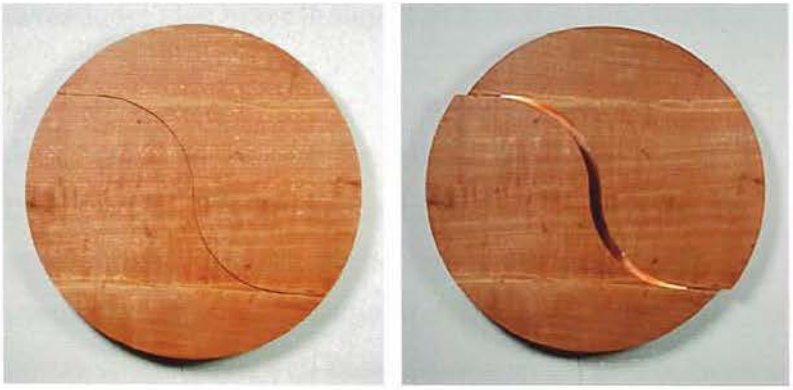

Fig. 50: Luna piece (myrtle-veneer, MDF & copper) The final design has the combination of the curvature line and the round shape from early developments.

Fig. 51: Luna piece: the top part can be slid to the side. the piece then lights up.

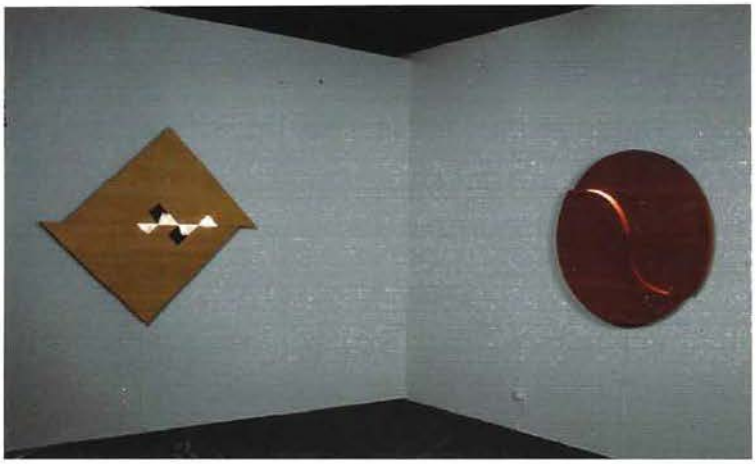

Fig. 52: Two wall pieces displayed together.

idea of direct interaction with the work through the ambiguous forms is fascinating. It gives users a sense of contentment through **self-discovery**. With this idea, I plan to experiment further in the following projects and will investigate also other thoughts in Buddhist philosophy.

Even though the prototypes in all cases are able to demonstrate how the designs should work, I would wish the products to be better engineered and professionally produced. The sliding mechanism in the wall pieces should be able to slide smoothly. With the Yogi lamps, the power sources can well come from a rechargeable battery so the electrical cord is not needed.

Samsara

> [If] a man were to eat a ripe mango, and plant the seed; and from that a large mango-tree were to spring and bear fruit; and then the man were to eat a ripe mango from that tree also and plant the seed; and from that seed also a large mango-tree were to spring and bear fruit; thus of these trees there is no end discernible. In exactly the same way, to be born here and die here, to die here and be born elsewhere, to be born there and die there, to die there and be born elsewhere, this, is the round of existance.[25]

Samsara means an **endless cycle of change**; birth, aging, illness, death and rebirth.[26] Samsara is not a term coined by the Buddha, the concept existed even before his time. The aim of most Eastern philosophies is to be enlightened and break away from this wheel of change.

Fig. 53: Tibetan Painting, depicting the concept of Samsara

I was studying the Buddhist idea of Samsara - the cycle of impermanent life, and was trying to find objects that might provide a metaphor for this thought, when I came across two inspiring statements. The first one was from the Mohammed:

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25 Warren, H., *Buddhism in Translations*, Cambridge, Harvard University, 1900, p. 232

26 The idea of rebirth in Buddhism is slightly different from the idea of reincarnation; reincarnation describes a soul as a permanent entity which passes on from one body to another, while rebirth in Buddhism describes a new life as a separate entity, but conditioned by the actions (*karma*) of the old one.

> If a man finds himself with bread in both hands, he should exchange one loaf for some flowers; since the loaf feeds the body indeed, but the flower feeds the soul.[27]

The second one was from a poem in a Taoist text about matter and emptiness, it can be approximately translated as:

> No matter how beautifully the vessel may be decorated, without the emptiness inside, that vessel would be useless.[28]

Originating from the idea of Samsara, the new design project is to use **flowers and vases** as an analogy of the concept. The design would attract the users' attention and lead them to observe the progressive change the flower undergoes as an analogy of one's life. Along with the main concept, I have also set out 4 further ideas for the design investigation: 1. the idea of co-existance, 2. the essence of things, 3. the idea of representation, and 4. the idea of caring and interaction.

1. The idea of co-existance,

> Organism and environment form an inseparable whole. No organism exists without its environment, and there would be no environment without the organism; the best symbol for the organism-environment reciprocity is the well-known Chinese figure of Yin and Yang. Whenever we see in our environment what we must see in order to act successfully, we see parts of ourselves "in the picture": our nose, our hands, our feet are always present if we look at a building or other artifact. This has definite consequences for the scale of our environmental experience: we cannot escape from our visual environment.[29]

With Krampen's assertion, I should like to test if things can be designed with a consideration of both positive and negative aspects. That reminds me of a story about the bell

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27 Sparnon, N., *Japanese Flower Arrangement*, Tokyo, Charles E. Tuttle, 1960, p. 17

28 Suwannapetch, B., *Tao khong Lao Tzu*, Bangkok, S & K Books, 1995, p. 32

29 Krampen, M., [1996], p. 90

in a temple: "How old is the bell?" a tourist asked a monk. "The bell itself was cast during the thirteenth century, but the air inside is much older." the monk replied. This sense of duality and harmony also has an influence upon Zen art - in Buddhist Zen paintings,

> ...the empty spaces in the paintings are just as important as the painted figures.[30]

In this project, I plan to experiment with an idea of complementing rather than containing (the co-existance of flowers and vases). I should like the vases, instead of containing the flowers, to complement them.

2. The essence of things, the Buddhist concept of living is parallel to the concept of Minimalism - having only the essential elements, for instance, the Buddhist monk is allowed to possess only minimum necessities to live in monastic communities: a robe, a begging bowl, a needle, a rosary (in some communities, a water strainer) and a razor. I am in favour of the minimalist concept and would like to assimilate this idea to the design of vases, however I need to clarify for myself that, 'my intension is not to minimize elements in design, but to be careful how I am putting them in.'

I was trained to consider and to analyse many factors through the process of design: function, aesthetics, ergonomics, materials, process, cost, maintenance, etc. I tried it differently with this study, approaching the design with an unconditioned mind. I cannot claim that my mind was empty or has ever been empty at any time in my life; but, during the initial stage of designing, I did try to clear it - no pre-conceptions as to how vases should be. Some Surrealist artists use addictive substances in order to move away from awareness.

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30 Westgeest, H., *Zen in the fifties*, Zwolle, Waanders, 1996, p. 16

> The Mahayana schools describe reality in terms of two truths, **relative and absolute**. Relative truth is of two kinds. **Perverted relative truth** refers to conventional perceptions in which the world is overlaid with pre-conception and phenomena are seen as solid. This is like mistaking a rope for a snake. **Pure relative truth** refers to a direct and simple experience of things as they are, without pre-conception, by one whose perception is free from mistaken views on reality. This is said to be like seeing a rope as a rope. **Absolute truth** is emptiness, self-existence free from the extremes of existing or non-existing, undefiled by confusion, joyful and unbiased towards pleasure or pain.[31]

At that period, the few thoughts in my mind were, 'a flower.....space'. Then, after several moments, there was a glimpse of using lines to define space around that flower.

Initially, strings and knots were used as a minimum structure to hold flowers on solid bases (fig. 54 & 55). Then, I moved to metal wire, since it can form a rigid structure and, simultaneously, define space. Since the space is defined by wire, stems, leaves and water are revealed, in comparison with the conventional vases that tend to conceal these elements. This would realize the concept of co-existance and the essence of things.

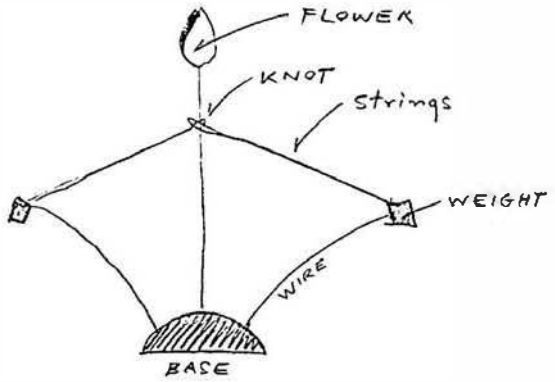

Fig. 54: The initial design concept

31 Hope, J. & Van Loon, B., *Buddha for beginners*, Cambridge, Icon Books, 1994, p. 72

Fig. 55. Three dimensional design development

During the design process, I kept bending wires into different shapes and I refined bases into different forms (fig. 56 & 57). I finally came up with two complete designs, the 'Stupa vase' and the 'Oriental vase' (fig. 58 & 59). The design of the Stupa vase was influenced by the Buddhist architecture of the stupa (fig. 60) and the form of the lotus flower, a small spout is integrated into the form. The design of the Oriental vase was partly a reflection from Far-Eastern style architecture (fig. 61).

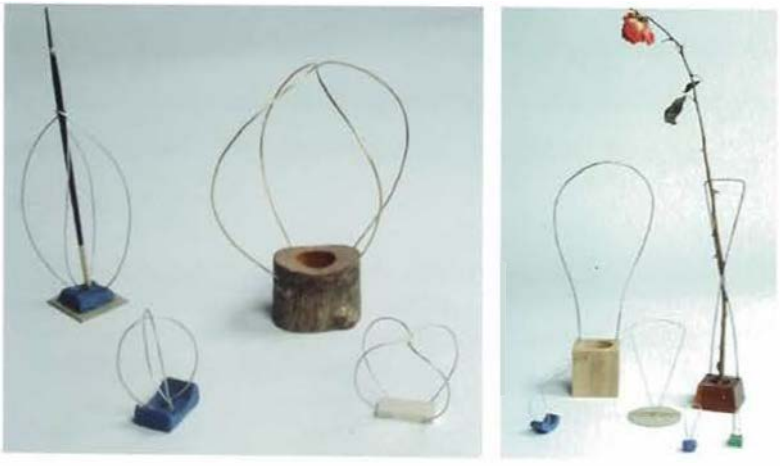

Fig. 56 & 57. The experiments with bases and wires

Fig. 58: Stupa vase

Fig. 59: Oriental vase

Fig. 60: Stupa

Fig. 61: Torii gate; marks the entrance to the Miya-jima island, Japan

When the two vases were completed, the design seemed to be simple as though no work had been done which seems to comply with Buddhist Zen art. As Helen Westgeest asserted:

> In the Zen belief, the concepts of emptiness and nothingness do not refer to an absence of something, but are 'complete' in themselves. It means that empty is also full, and nothing is something.[32]

The outcome of this project still carries the element of simple discovery through the ambiguity of the forms. The prototypes were made in wood. With the idea of a small scale production, I later tried batch producing them

32 Westgeest, H., [1996], p. 17

in ceramics by using the slip-casting process (fig. 64 & 65). Coincidently in the Stupa vase, the use of ceramic (rather than wood) as the media provides an 'intimate' and 'pleasing' sound when the lid touches the base (the same kind of sound that happens when we close the lid of a ceramic tea pot, or when a small metal spoon touches the rim of a tea cup) (fig. 62). This sound also led to the design of a small vessel to accompany the Oriental vase (fig. 63).

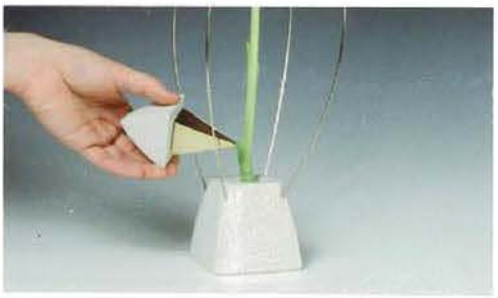

Fig. 62: The top part of the Stupa vase can be taken off to use as a small beaker for watering flowers.

Fig. 63: Small vessels for the Oriental vases

Fig. 64: Slip casting moulds

Fig. 65: Ceramic vases in the kiln

3. The idea of representation: when people bring plants and flowers into their homes, they somehow want to feel connected to nature outside. With the idea of 'design inspired by nature' that was implicit in the lighting project, the Landscape vase and the Emptiness vase (fig. 68 & 69), were designed to represent a landscape which comprised land, river, trees and sky (the outside nature). Since each element is introduced as an abstraction of Nature (outside), the Landscape vase is intended to host only one flower, the wire structure of the Emptiness vase can be enlarged to host more than one flower.

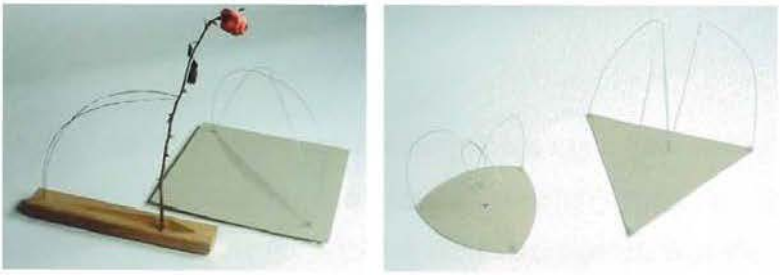

Fig. 66 & 67: Development of the Landscape vase and the Emptiness vase (cardboard, wires & wood)

Fig. 68: Landscape vase (cast-acrylic & stainless wires)

Fig. 69: Emptiness vase (cast-acrylic & stainless wires)

In the Landscape vase and the Emptiness vase, I chose to use synthetic material called *Aztech* (generally used on kitchen tops) as the material for their bases (there was no intention to imitate the appeal of marble). The material can be easily manipulated like wood, and it can be mass produced by an injection moulding process as well. The choice of colours was minimized to primary black or white; the neutral colours compliment well the vibrant flowers.

4. The idea of caring and interaction. At the beginning of the year 1997, a Japanese toy called *Tamagotchi* (fig. 70) was introduced to the global market. It is shaped like an egg with a liquid crystal display on its front. It is a 'virtual pet' that requires the owner to 'feed' it through buttons on its body. The toy has been very successful among children and teenagers in many countries. One reason behind its success would be the sense of caring and interaction that is missing in our modern society. It provides for people who somehow cannot afford to have pets due to time restrictions, and our modern lifestyle.

Another work that reminds me of these ideas in an odd way, although the interaction is different is one by Shiro Kuramata – *Miss Blanche* (fig. 71). I read the design as if Kuramata tried to freeze or capture his love towards nature by putting flowers in cast acrylic, but when looking at its shadow on the floor, which appeared to be blurred and insubstantial, (like the image we see through fish bowls). I felt as if the shadow argues or plays against the form of the object: no one can really capture or freeze anything.

Fig. 70: Tamagotchi

Fig. 71: 'Miss Blanch'chair

I assimilated the ideas of caring and interaction, and also the design of *Miss Blanch* chair to the design of my vases: the reservoirs of the vases have been reduced to the minimum, requiring people to water the flower every couple of days in order to care for it (fig. 72). Since the life of cut flowers is about a week, in watering the flower, people would have an opportunity to observe the progressive change it undergoes. This interaction might give an analogy for **impermanent life** which changes all the time.

Fig. 72: The Oriental vase with its watering vessel

At the beginning of this year, when my father was very ill from cancer, we decided that when the time came, we would let him go naturally without any attempt at resuscitation. Few hours before he passed away, I recall asking the doctor if he would make it till dawn, replied the doctor, "no one knows when a leaf would fall from the tree, we are neither shaking the tree nor trying to prevent this leaf from falling." My father stopped breathing in the morning.

I finished designing the four vases in April 1997, a year later, I saw an umbrella stand, *Asisai* designed by Kazuyo Komoda with a similar idea using steel rods on an aluminium base (fig. 73).

Fig. 73: 'Asisai' umbrella-stand

Mind

> Hogen, a Chinese Zen teacher, lived alone in a small temple in the country. One day four travelling monks appeared and asked if they might make a fire in his yard to warm themselves.
>
> While they were building the fire, Hogen heard them arguing about subjectivity and objectivity. He joined them and said: "There is a big stone. Do you consider it to be inside or outside your mind?"
>
> One of the monks replied: "From the Buddhist viewpoint everything is an objectification of mind, so I would say that the stone is inside my mind."
>
> "Your head must feel very heavy," observed Hogen, "if you are carrying around a stone like that in your mind."[33]

Whenever I watch news about the signing of important agreements by heads of state, I always observe the stationery and desktop accessories that are used in those events. Stationery and desktop objects somehow signify the status and power of their owners. The act of signing treaties, the stamping of symbols onto the paper suggests commitment and announcement.

> The cult objects of the desktop, from Filofax to Rolodex, are ways in which we enhance our image of professionalism, proclaim our status and show that we take work seriously.[34]

In more common scenes, when looking into the context of 'work' nowadays, the term 'work' for many people is associated with desk space and several desktop objects are involved - pencil and pen, document-tray, stapler, telephone, card-holder, computer, etc.

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33 Reps, P. & Senzaki, N., [1994], p. 119

34 Conran, T., *Terrence Conran on Design*, New York, Overlook Press, 1996, p. 202

Initially, I tried manipulating small natural objects such as stones, branches and pieces of wood to see if I could discover any connection to the new design project: a stationery set (fig. 74).

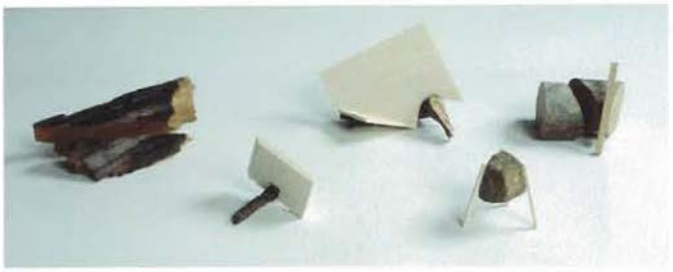

Fig. 74: Experiments on natural objects

While experimenting with natural found objects, I also thought about designing a pen. Since the time the pen was invented, it has been an object that we use to state our intentions in the form of writing, I began to imagine using pens as representations of their owners' **minds**, and started experimenting with this idea.

The first design is a pen and its holder. The pen's simple form signifies a pure and empty mind. Instead of placing it vertically (the expression of dominance), the pen's horizontal orientation on the holder suggests, according to Buddhist philosophy, the 'insignificant self' (fig. 75, 76 & 77). When the pen is picked up and used to write words and sentences, it is like a mind which begins to develop different states of emotion, intension, and feeling which, the same as words, can be powerful.

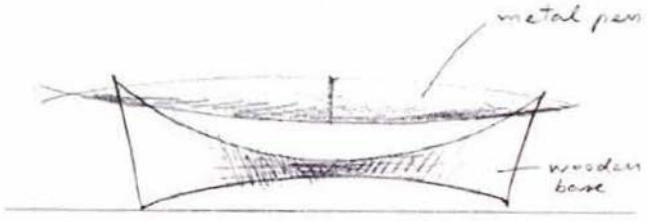

Fig. 75: Concept drawing

Fig. 76: The pens (brass & aluminium)

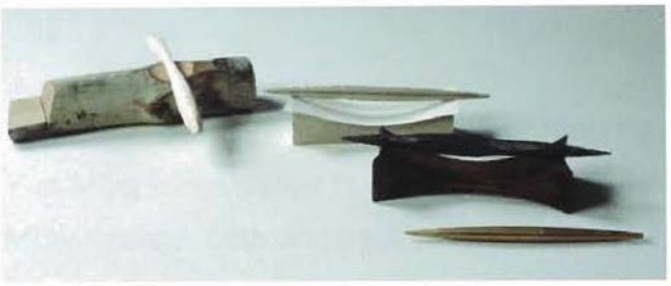

Fig. 77: Development of the pen and its holder, the form of the holder is inspired by the carving on a wooden stick.

Then I began to think about representing the working area by using a writing-pad, I was influenced initially by the following 4 works:

1. Ryoan-ji Garden in Kyoto (fig. 78 & 79): *Ryoan-ji* means 'quiet dragon'. I visited the place when I was nine. I still remember the feeling of absence and loneliness while standing there (even though there were numbers of tourists along the other side). The ripples of sand slowly drew my attention out towards the rocks and, paradoxically at the same time, pushed my awareness inwards.

Fig. 78: Ryoan-ji garden, Kyoto, a Zen garden of the Muromachi period, which is said to have been designed by So-ami as an ocean scene, and to have been made without trees so as not to obscure the view from the monastery of a distant shrine on Yawata mountain.

Fig. 79: The usually silent Ryoan-ji garden in Kyoto is likely to be packed with inquisitive, staring eyes and to resound with childish voices.

2. A Chinese calligraphy by Chu Yun-Ming (fig. 80): Chu Yun-Ming was a master in Chinese calligraphy during Ming dynasty, 16th century, and this is a poem about flowers. Even though this work was created a long time ago, whenever I look at it, it gives me a feeling of nowness and presence, which comes from his skill in using the brush - the way the brush was raised, lowered, turned and twisted. It makes me feel a sense of connection with him (the brush and the work) as if he were still there. It has been said that: "in calligraphy one's nature cannot be concealed."[35]

Fig. 80: Chu Yun-ming's 'Poem on Flowers'

35 Hay. J., *Masterpieces of Chinese Art*. London. Phaidon Press, 1974, p. 11

3. Sculptures by Anthony Caro: I like the way he arranged the panels to create the space of inside and outside in 'Shaftsbury' (fig. 81), and in the work 'Pin up flat', the cut and bend on a large steel panel adds a highlight to the panel's simplicity (fig. 82).

Fig. 81: Caro's 'Shaftsbury'

Fig. 82: Caro's 'Pin up flat'

4. The last work is 'Wood' by Andy Goldsworthy (fig. 83): at first glance, it seemed as though the branch projects a shadow on the ground. But with a closer look, what appeared to be a shadow is in fact a ditch; the ditch image is so powerful, it is as though the ditch creates the branch. It suggests to me the idea of negative space creating the object.

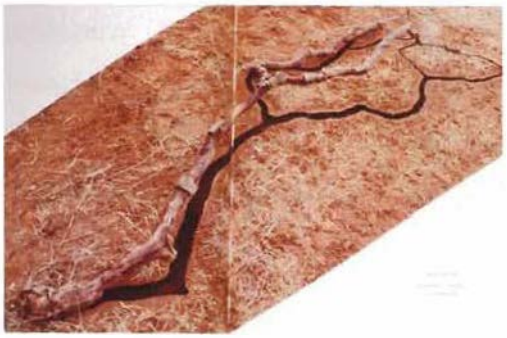

Fig. 83: Goldsworthy's sculpture

Development

Animated by Japanese Zen gardens, the writing pad was designed as a large empty space whereon to work and to perform. I intended to design the pad as a concentrated place for working, similar to Japanese Zen gardens, where people sit and contemplate in order to calm their minds. On the pad, there would also be a functional sculpture on the empty space to hold stationery (fig. 84).

Fig. 84: An empty pad and a sculpture

The sculpture on the pad was initially influenced by Caro's and Goldsworthy's works. I came up with the idea of having the negative space formed from a section of the ground elevated up to create a form, then I started to do my own design experiment by using cardboard and expanded the idea (fig. 86 & 87). At this point, my experiment was also informed by Bruno Munari's 'Portable Sculpture' (fig. 85). Inspired by Japanese Origami, Munari designed portable objects with purely aesthetic functions. The miniature sculptures can be folded and put in envelopes convenient for travelling.

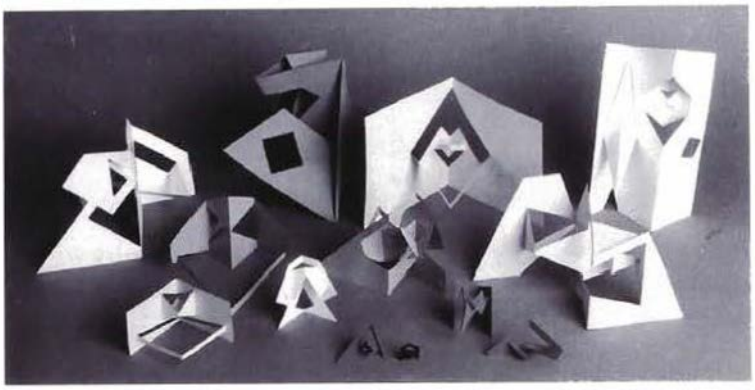

Fig. 85 : Bruno Munari. "Portable sculpture", 1959. These "aesthetically functional objects" combined the antique oriental tradition of "simple" art (i.e. Japanese origami) and the commitment of European avant garde artists to destroy the traditional concept of "art work."

Fig. 86 & 87: Design development on cardboard

The final design of the miniature sculpture on the writing pad was chosen for its simplicity, it also has the dynamic expression of an Oriental brush stroke, the two angled planes provide a space to host the pen (fig. 88).

Fig. 88: Miniature sculpture, final design chosen

The pad has the sense of contrast between a **static** landscape and a **dynamic** form. The colour of the writing pad has been reviewed several times; first I experimented with the ripple pattern of a green leather sheet in order to achieve a sense of the sand ripples of Zen gardens

but later found that the colour and the pattern of the leather obscured the miniature sculpture on the pad (fig. 89). Finally the combination of black and blue seems to work well in this context, and this colour scheme was used in all objects in the project (fig. 90).

Fig. 89: Writing pad. experiments on green and burgundy leather

Fig. 90: Final design on black leather

Inspired by Shaker objects which were always designed in connection with the peg rail system and with the pen perceived to be a representation of mind or soul, I had the further idea of using the writing pad as a host for the pen while working at a desk, and having **a notebook** as a host for the pen while on the move (fig. 92 & 93). A notebook was specifically designed in order to host the pen; its curves suggest a **dynamic** look, in contrast to the static expression of the writing-pad and, another special feature of the notebook, is that no matter which page is opened, the pen will always be accessible, the idea inspired by the design of ancient Buddhist manuscripts (fig. 91).

Fig. 91: Buddhist manuscript in Sanskrit, India, c. 1145

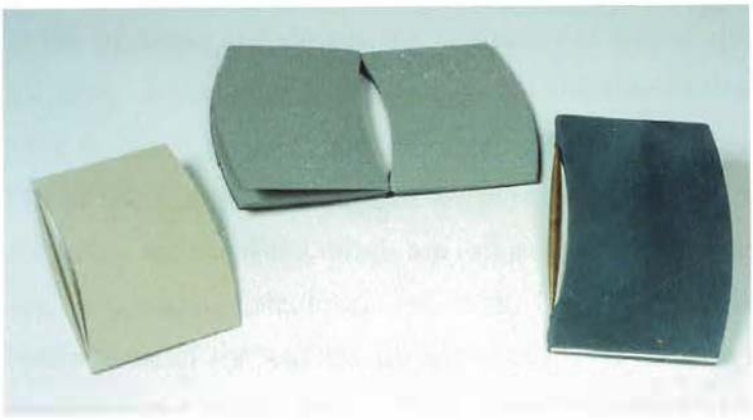

Fig. 92: Design development

The pen, like a mind, is placed to activate either the pad or the notebook; it represents the state of **'presence'**. When the pen is not with the pad, for visitors, an **'absence'** of the pen is an indicator that the owner is away. But for the user of these 3 objects, placing the pen into the notebook, signifies its presence with the notebook (fig. 93, 94 & 95).

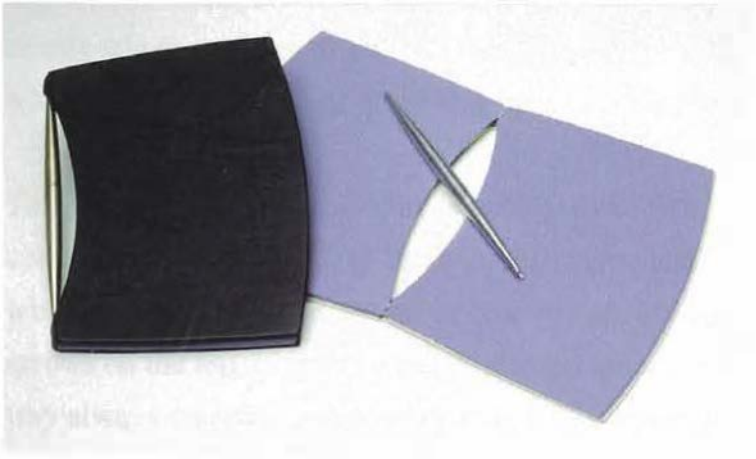

Fig. 93: Notebooks, prototypes

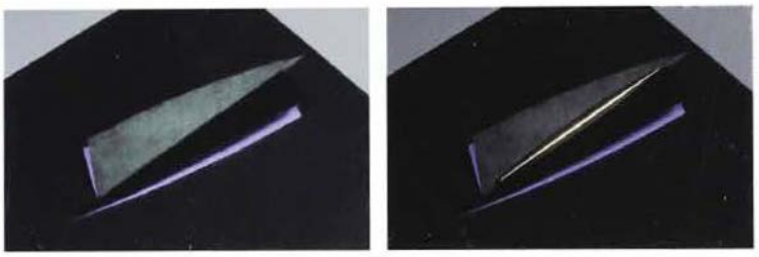

Fig. 94 & 95: Details of the writing pad. the pen (represents a mind) can be placed either with the pad or with the notebook.

In the Buddhist anecdote at the beginning of this chapter, the story implies that all things have no absolute truth and have no character; they are all perceived by our minds. Minds according to Buddhism are pure and empty. Emotions appear when minds are aroused with what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. The anecdote also reminds me of the way the Shakers hang their chair in an up-side-down position and call it 'correct-position'. I wanted to have a design that fondles and plays with this thought; that questions the way we perceive things - whether they are on the left or right, right or wrong, in or out, negative or positive.

The design of a **document-tray** is analogous to this concept (fig. 96). Each tray has a dualistic character which can be perceived as 'in' or 'out' by observing the arrows on the top, or on the side, while two arrows in each tray always contradict each other (fig. 97). Users can decide which one they wish to use as an 'in-tray' and which as an 'out-tray' by observing the trays' arrows.

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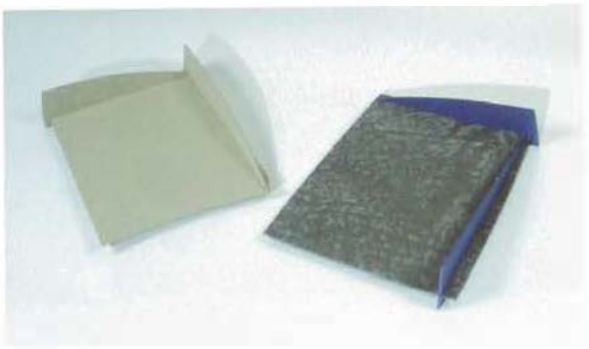

Fig. 96: Design development on cardboard

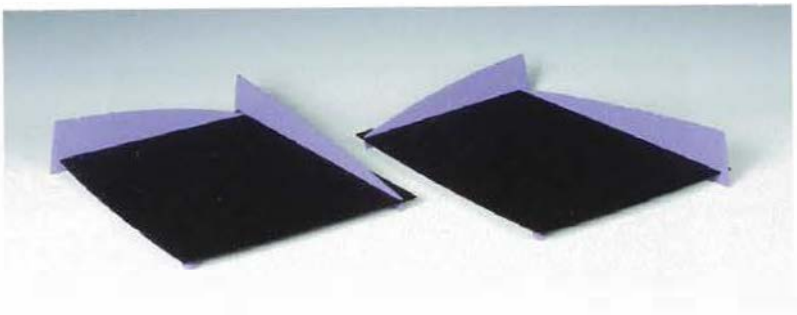

Fig. 97: In & Out Trays, prototypes (leather, metal & MDF)

The last object of this stationery set is a card-holder (fig. 98 & 99). With a single sheet of metal, cut and bent,[36] it was designed in the same manner as the trays; it has no top or bottom, but either side can be used depending upon the user's preferred colour.

The design also reflects upon the representation of a self. People today represent themself by name-cards, by using the card holder, no matter how important the name on the card might be, when the card holder is turned over, while it is still the same object, the name disappears, and this signifies the non-self concept. I later named it as the 'Ego-holder' (fig. 100).

36 In an industrial process, die-cut sheets can be stamped out from large metal sheets.

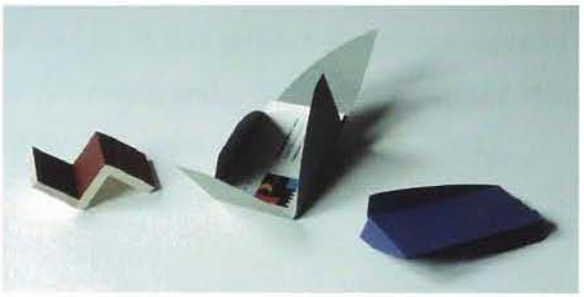

Fig. 98: Design development, the original idea was from the object on the left that can be turned over for two different colours, and the idea of a card wrapper (middle). When combining the two ideas together, they became a card-holder (right).

Fig. 99: Card-holder, made from a sheet of metal, cut and bent to shape.

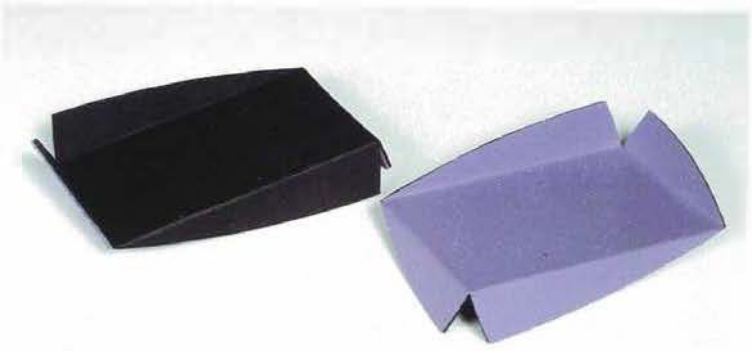

Fig. 100: Ego-holder, prototypes

The final design in this project comprises a pen, a writing-pad, in & out trays, and a card holder. All the items can be produced by industrial processes (fig. 101).

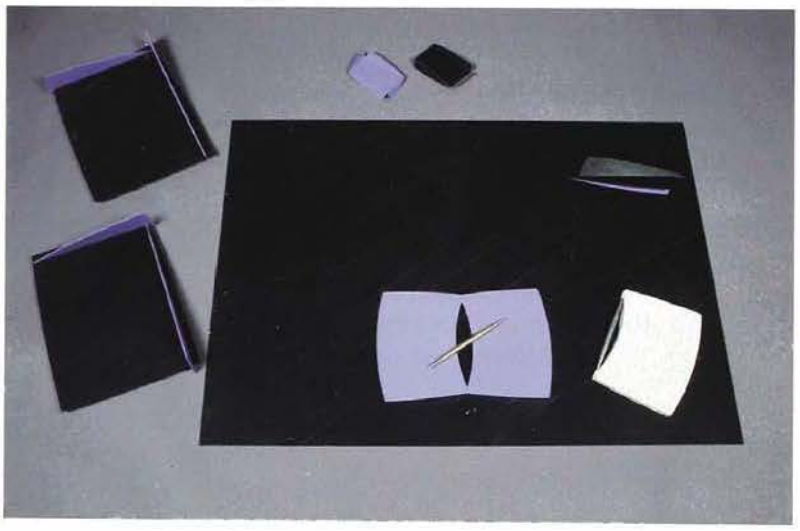

Fig. 101: The stationery set

Samadhi

Taiko, a warrior who lived in Japan before the Tokugawa era, studied Cha-no-yu, tea etiquette, with Sen no Rikyu, a teacher of that aesthetical expression of calmness and contentment.

Taiko's attendant warrior Kato interpreted his superior's enthusiasm for tea etiquette as negligence of state affairs, so he decided to kill Sen no Rikyu. He pretended to make a social call upon the tea master and was invited to drink tea.

The master, who was well skilled in his art, saw at a glance the warrior's intention, so he invited Kato to leave his sword outside before entering the room for the ceremony, explaining that Cha-no-yu represents peacefulness itself.

Kato would not listen to this. "I am a warrior," he said. "I always have my sword with me. Cha-no-yu or no Cha-no-yu, I have my sword."

"Very well. Bring your sword in and have some tea," consented Sen no Rikyu.

The kettle was boiling on the charcoal fire. Suddenly Sen no Rikyu tipped it over. Hissing steam arose, filling the room with smoke and ashes. The startled warrior ran outside.

The tea-master apologized. "It was my mistake. Come back in and have some tea. I have your sword here covered with ashes and will clean it and give it to you."

In this predicament the warrior realized he could not very well kill the tea-master, so he gave up the idea.[37]

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37 Reps P. & Senzaki N., [1994], p. 90

When I was little, whenever taken to Buddhist temples, I was always anxious before entering each hall because of its threshold (fig. 102), since it is considered bad luck if stepped on, I had to try my best to hop over it, and it was so high compared to my size in those days. Psychologically, I believe temple thresholds are created in order to make people aware of their thoughts and their actions whenever they enter those holy places.

I recall a similar thought in Japan; one afternoon, I asked my Japanese friend the significance of *Noren* (short curtains hung from the doors before entering Japanese restaurants) (fig. 103). He told me that the primary reason is to conceal the activity inside; another reason is to create an awareness of entering a place - people tend to bow their heads a little bit when they walk past this Noren. It reminds people to be aware and to respect such places. In most ordinary Asian houses, people still take off their shoes before entering. Similarly in Western cultures, taking off hats and coats upon entering houses is also a way to show respect. Halls like vestibules provide a transition between the inside and the outside.

Fig. 102: Entrance to a spirit room in a traditional Thai house with a high threshold

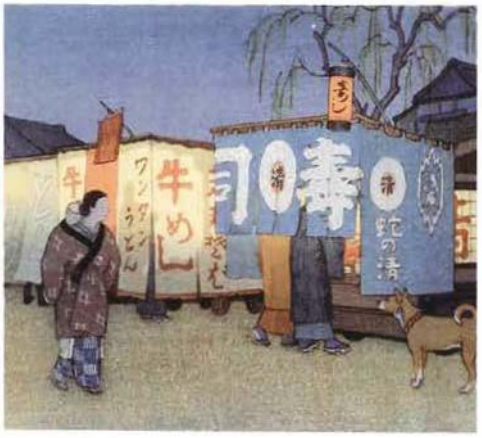

Fig. 103: Noren

Samadhi is a Pali word, means awareness or consciousness. When the mind focuses upon certain acts, Samadhi occurs. I wanted to have a design that might

remind people of this kind of awareness. In Eastern cultures, there are many aspects of life which deal with Samadhi – I've just learnt that lighting candles and incense, which previously seemed to make no sense to me, is an act intended to create Samadhi before praying or meditating. In this project, the investigation will be about the notions of **awareness** and **place**.

Common interior artefacts such as screens are used to divide spaces, to conceal the opposite side, and to create a feeling of privacy. I am always fascinated by the design of Chinese folding screens (fig. 104); they are simple and practical. The way Chinese screens fold back and forth gives a fine example of an integration of the *Yin-Yang* concept in product design.

Fig. 104: Part of a Chinese twelve-fold Coromandel lacquer screen, dated 1681. A continuous scene depicting various activities around a lake, with borders decorated with precious objects and calligraphy.

I decided to the use the screen as an experimental object in this investigation. Its concept is based upon the above concerns. I developed the design by using cardboard as described by the following illustrations:

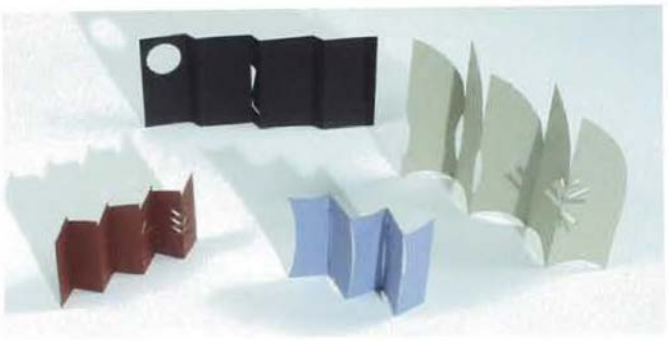

Fig. 105: Originating from the design of Chinese folding screens. I experimented with different types of folding and cut on colour papers.

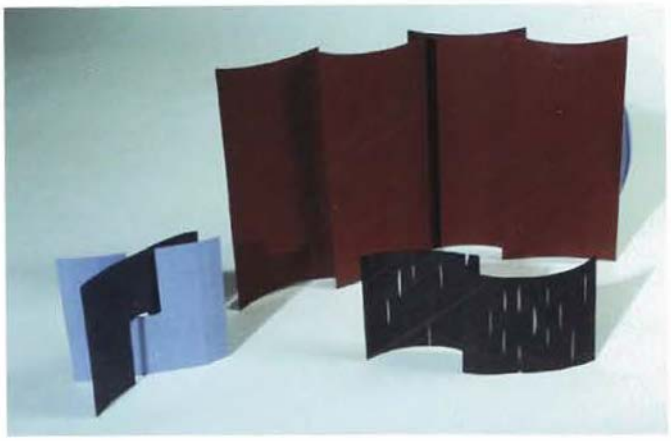

Fig. 106: Several panel design (the red model) was reduced down to only two main idemical elements (the blue and the green models).

The design chosen had its inspiration in an impression of a dancing couple (fig. 107). It is a large-scale, free-standing sculpture when not in use (fig. 108). The two principle elements represent the Yin-Yang dualistic character. The sculpture can be manually expanded (slid) to provide the function of a protective screen. The screen has no inner side or outer side, both sides have the same nature.

Fig. 107: Dancing couple

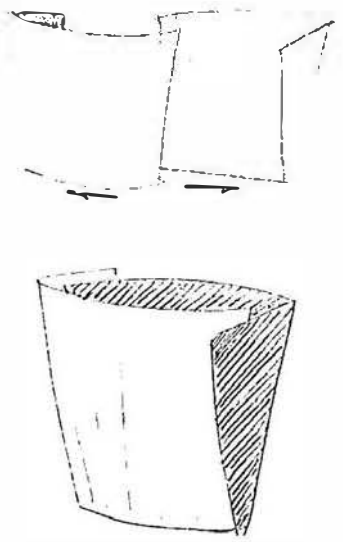

Fig. 108: Sketch of the screen principle elements

At this stage, I am reminded that each morning when I wake up, I am always worried in advance about things to do - will there be enough hot water through the whole shower; while in a shower I think about what to have for lunch; while having lunch I am curious as to whether I shall have a productive afternoon - my thoughts always go on and on like this. Samadhi is important in every act we perform, but often we tend to forget that we live in **this** moment and we forget to feel, to enjoy, and to be aware of the present place and action.

I would like the screen to suggest this awareness upon entering into or crossing a space, instead of bounding or stepping across. As with similar designs in Asian cultures, I wanted to incorporate the function of 'items-keeping' - providing small shelves or hangers; an idea partly influenced by the Shaker peg-rails. Users can deposit items such as coats, hats or scarves onto some kind of hook on the screen, such actions might mark an awareness upon entering a space, and vice-versa; private items such as night-gowns or slippers could be kept in the opposite side. Another way of using the screen is to use one side for male items and the other side for female items. Initially I experimented with different cuts from the screen's panels (fig. 109).

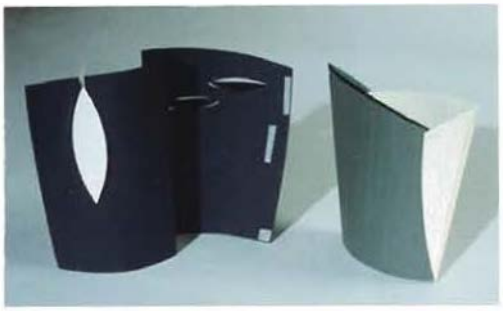

Fig. 109: An early concept was to have a mirror with the screen, and the cuts on the screen would have become coat hangers.

Discovery is a distinct character in my work, I was looking for an element of surprise to be inside the screen when it expanded. The solution was derived from Andrea Branzi's 'Chair Cucus' (fig. 110), and from the work 'Glass, twigs' (fig. 111) by Pascal Mourgue. Both artists created appealing contrasts by using natural objects in association with man-made materials - leaves and acrylic, twigs and glass. I thought of sticks of Horizontal wood that were lying in the corner of my studio, for the past three years. I like the contrast of Horizontal sticks against a brick wall - natural versus man-made, and put the idea into trial (fig. 112).

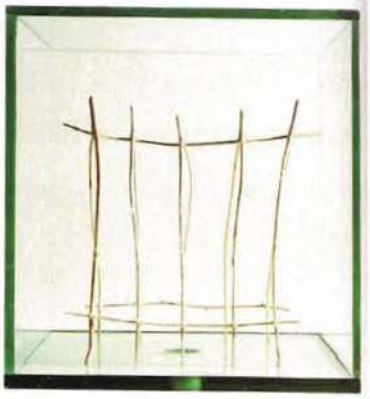

Fig. 110: Andrea Branzi's 'Chair Cucus' Plywood, hazel nut branches

Fig. 111: Pascal Mourgue's 'Glass, twigs'

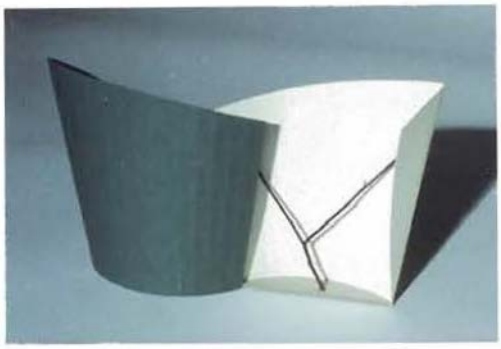

Fig. 112: The concept model with a twig

Fig. 113: Bamboo, thorns and birds, by Chang Yen-fu. Yuan dynasty

It was difficult to choose the right branches for the screen. Eventually, two Horizontal branches had to be slightly manipulated to achieve the right composition. They were put inside the screen with the following purposes. Their minimal composition and the expression of shadow signify the oriental touch of Chinese paintings (fig. 113). The natural forms and textures also create a contrast with the man-made screen.

The choice of material was changed from aluminium to fibre-glass and finally to ply-wood because of the ease of manipulation and its natural texture. The combination of plywood colour and the green paint represents the colours of a tree trunk and leaves. The screen's base is equipped with swivel casters, and can then be moved and rotated freely in any direction, before or after expansion. I found that expanding mechanism could be improved so that the screen would have a more solid feel while being expanded (fig. 114 - 117).

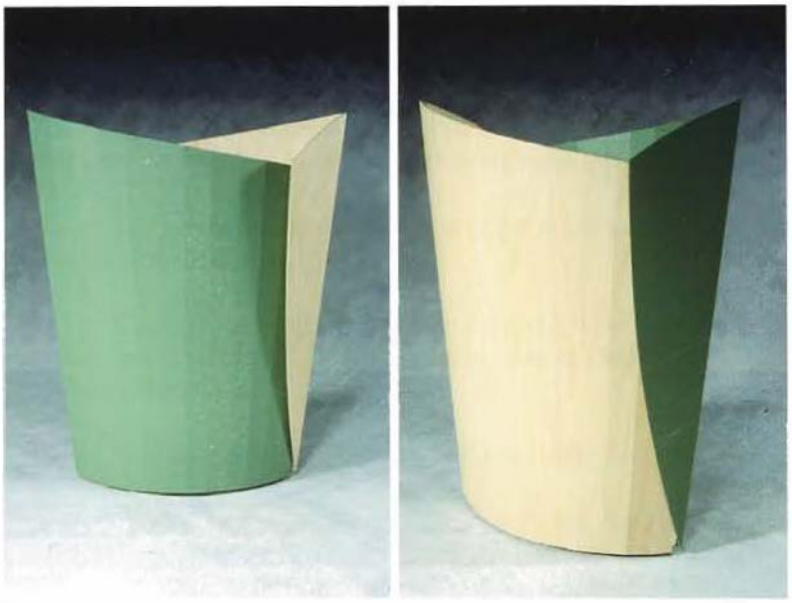

Fig. 114 & 115: The screen, prototype (plywood)

Fig. 116 & 117: The screen, expanded with a scarf hanged from the Horizontal branches

Puccha - Vissajjana

Provided he makes and wins an argument about Buddhism with those who live there, any wandering monk can remain in a Zen temple. If he is defeated, he has to move on.

In a temple in the northern part of Japan two brother monks were dwelling together. The elder one was learned, but the younger one was stupid and had but one eye.

A wandering monk came and asked for lodging, properly challenging them to a debate about the sublime teaching. The elder brother, tired that day from much studying, told the younger one to take his place. "Go and request the dialogue in silence," he cautioned.

So the young monk and the stranger went to the shrine and sat down.

Shortly afterwards the traveler rose and went in to the elder brother and said: "Your young brother is a wonderful fellow, He defeated me."

"Relate the dialogue to me," said the elder one.

"Well," explained the traveler, "first I held up one finger, representing Buddha, the enlightened one. So he held up two fingers, signifying Buddha and his teaching. I held up three fingers, representing Buddha, his teaching, and his followers, living the harmonious life. Then he shook his clenched fist in my face, indicating that all three come from one realization. Thus he won and so I have no right to remain here." With this, the traveler left.

"Where is that fellow?" asked the younger one, running in to his elder brother.

"I understand you won the debate."

"Won nothing. I'm going to beat him up."

"Tell me the subject of the debate," asked the elder one.

"Why, the minute he saw me he held up one finger, insulting me by insinuating that I have only one eye. Since he was a stranger I thought I would be polite to him, so I held up two fingers, congratulating him that he has two eyes. Then the impolite wretch held up three fingers, suggesting that between us we only have three eyes. So I got mad and started to punch him, but he ran out and that ended it!"[38]

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38 Reps, P. & Senzaki, N., [1994], p. 51

When the Buddha died, his teachings were not recorded in any written language for more than 400 years - in those days, Buddhism was considered a divine doctrine and was taught directly from person to person, another intention was to urge the followers to put emphasis on practice, not studying. The communities kept Buddhism alive by reciting all the teachings to one another verbally. Monks who were very intelligent would have been selected to do this task of reciting Buddha's teachings, they did nothing but revise the doctrine all day long. To lay people, giving food to those monks was an act of merit and virtue because monks carry the heritage of Buddhism. The system has been developed into a method called '**Puccha – Vissajjana**'. *Puccha* is a Pali word meaning 'bringing up questions' and *Vissajjana* can be translated as 'breaking down the questions'; some modern texts translate the term simply as question and answer. In such event, two or more members would sit together, one raises a question and the other(s) would recite the answer. With this technique, the Buddhist monastic communities could then sort out their understandings as to what Buddha taught. The method is still in practice today and the process is similar to those of seminars, where two monks might recite the teachings in front of an audience of lay-people. The term Puccha - Vissajjana is also in common use within Thai society.

Another notable aspect was that, when the Buddha died, the community turned into disarray because Buddha did not appoint any successor. But he did state that, one has to find his or her own path to enlightenment. Six months later, 500 elite monks and nuns formed the first council in order to put Buddha's words into order (some believe that the 500 monks had already been enlightened by that time). As early as that time, some monks were not in agreement with the main group as to what they had heard from the Buddha already, and they were allowed to leave

the community peacefully. After the first summons, all monks left along separate routes to spread Buddhism. The second council happened more than a century later. By that time, there were many differences in understanding and the approach towards enlightenment and the community broke into several beliefs and later developed into several groups. Today, there are two main sects, which are *Theravada* and *Mahayana.*

Conservative Theravada is strictly holding to what was written down since the first summons over 2,500 years ago. There is a **path** and steps to follow - the followers have to 'observe the precepts',[39] 'meditate' in order to obtain 'wisdom'. Theravada Buddhism is currently being practiced in South East Asian countries such as Thailand, Myanmar, Laos and Sri Lanka. Mahayana Buddhism, which is being practiced in countries such as China, Korea, and Japan has more liberal views: it interprets Buddha's words of 'finding one's own way to enlightenment' by adapting the teachings and practises to places and times. Mahayana considers itself as 'greater vehicle' because of the belief that there is more than one way to achieve the state of enlightenment - one can seek his or her own way to enlightenment without having to become a monk or a nun. The followers of Mahayana Buddhism name the Theravadin school as the 'lesser vehicle' because it follows only one path.

The differences in belief and in practice between Theravada and Mahayana are not serious enough to develop into any degree of conflict. Above all, the two sects both believe in not clinging onto anything in order to gain enlightenment: one can use any vehicle to cross

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39 Buddhist Precepts start from 5 articles for ordinary lay-people: refraining from killing beings, refraining from stealing and cheating, refraining from improper sexual behavior, refraining from telling lies, and refraining from taking intoxicating drinks. The precepts go up to 227 articles for monks.

the river - a boat, a raft, or a sheet of wood, but in order to step onto land on the other side, one has to leave all kinds of vehicles behind.

Puccha - Vissajjana Exhibition:

The exhibition takes on the idea of a **path** and the idea of **Puccha - Vissajjana**. A loose path is set up, viewers are guided through: the first object (a block of wood) appears without revealing its function as if to ask a question which would allow the viewers to contemplate what the object might be. As they walk further, viewers would see the same object again, this time exhibited with its function revealed as if to give an answer. Different objects are introduced alternately and their utilities are revealed along the path. The exhibition allows the viewers to speculate in a visual context, and they experience a sense of Puccha-Vissajjana through this didactic trail. This kind of setting is also more practical for the viewing experience since it would be inconvenient to have viewers physically trying out all the prototypes in the exhibition (fig. 118).

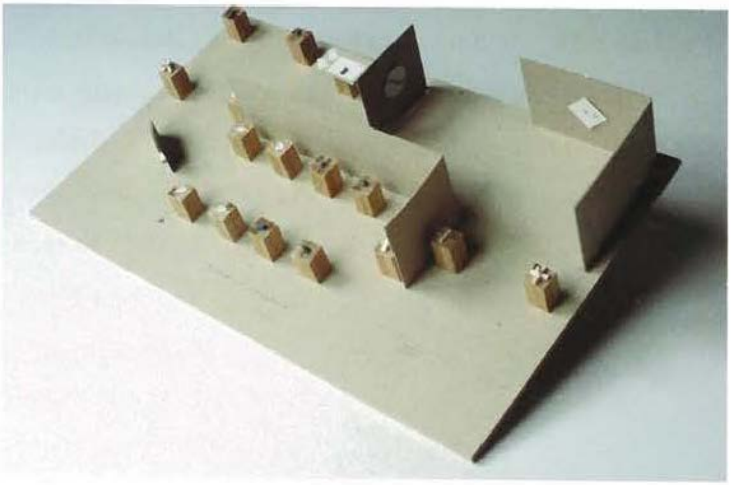

Fig. 118: Concept model of the exhibition, set as a didactic trail

With the idea of a trail, the *Plimsoll Gallery* is suitable for this concept with its removable wall panels and full control of the lighting system - I can loosely control the direction in which viewers would view the works by arranging the gallery's panels. The setting of light is dimmed, and spotted only onto the works to create the feel of contemplation.

Since the nature of the works is ambiguous and minimal, simple white plinths are used as they blend with the colour of the wall and the exhibited items will be highlighted. The height of plinths (120 cm) allows viewers to see the works, such as the Landscape vase and the Stupa vase, as if they were hovering above the plinths' top of meditating power, the same feeling is evoked with the wall pieces that displayed as if they are floating apart from the wall (fig. 119 & 120).

The stationery set is shown with the same concept of floating, an MDF platform, imitating a table top, is suspended from the ceiling, suspending strings also act as a boundary for viewers, creating a feeling of items in a clear glass case (fig. 121). The first object displayed is 'a block of wood' (Yogi lamp #1), which will also be the last object displayed in the exhibition (with its function revealed). They will be placed just opposite on each side of one wall, implying also the concept of samsara - the wheel of change (fig. 119 & 124).

Fig. 119: The entrance; several objects displayed without revealing their functions, as if to ask questions.

Fig. 120: First left turn; the Dune piece reveals its function as a wall lamp, the two vases and the Luna piece are introduced.

Fig. 121: The second chamber; floating table-top with the stationery set.

Fig. 122: After the display of the stationery set, the Luna piece is lit up, one of the Yogi lamp reveals its function, the other lamp is slightly twisted to give a hint of what it might be.

Fig. 123: Second left turn; the screen, the two models displayed to illustrate how the screen works, a scarf on the other side suggests its utility.

Fig. 124: The final hall; all the vases displayed with flowers, at the end, a block of wood first seen at the entrance reveals its function as a lamp. After the viewers walk past the curtain they would come out to see the same block of wood again, the concept inspired from the cycle of Samsara.

Summary & Future Directions:

When I try to categorize my work as to whether it is Modern or Post-Modern design, I find that neither term can be applied, since there are aspects from both movements. Although several designs evolved in a manner similar to those of the Modern movement period - functional,[40] simple, minimal, and lack of ornaments,[41] yet my design strategy is different - it is not entirely dictated by functional considerations or manufacturing processes, rather by philosophical inspiration. The work also takes into consideration both symbolic and cultural values and identity, which are part of the Post-Modern concept.

To conclude this study, I am confident that by using the design of objects as a vehicle for my investigation, I have validated my objective of *'assimilating Buddhist thoughts to the design of utilitarian object'*. Beside a group of unique artefacts that mark my progress, there are several design aspects that I have recognized. These, too, I would like to contribute to the field of design. I will summarize them as follow.

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40 With the Modern design concept, my understanding all along used to be; if something is 'functional', it must also be 'practical' to operate. After this study, I have found out that; although my designs can be considered 'functional', they are far from 'practical' to use.

41 I am not against ornament, but ornament in my work tends to blend in with functions.

1. Design Process:

Within the context of product design inspired by Buddhist Philosophy, with my personal design strategy, instead of using traditional Buddhist symbols such as the Buddha's image or lotus as decorations on the objects as we see in traditional Asian arts and crafts, I have investigated various Buddhist terms, then assimilated those understandings as concepts for the design of objects. Each design contributes an analogy to Buddhist thought through its utility and aesthetics - lights with the idea of Enlightenment, vases with the idea of *Samsara*, stationery with the idea of mind, the screen with the idea of *Samadhi*, and the theme of the exhibition was inspired by the concept of *Puccha-Vissajjana* together with the idea of 'path' in Theravada Buddhism.

2. Duality:

In many eastern philosophies, duality is another intriguing characteristic. In Taoism, it is said that nature creates all things with two opposite qualities. This nature of being two-fold can be commonly seen, for example, the well-known Chinese Yin-Yang Monad (fig. 8). 'Yin' represents masculinity, which is strong and aggressive, 'Yang' represents femininity, soft and gentle. The two energies co-exist with harmony. If one has a balance of these two energies, he or she should have a healthy life.

In Buddhism, the sense of duality is explained differently as the coexistence of 'emptiness' (*Sunyata*) and 'ignorance' (*Avidya*) in a mind. Their proportions change through different states of emotion. With greed, anger, and delusion, a mind will be swamped by ignorance. With emptiness in the mind, ignorance will be driven out completely. When emptiness becomes a state of mind permanently, one will be enlightened.

I use duality as a means to communicate senses of the complementary and contradictory in objects which well vary upon each occasion. Duality in the work can be seen in three aspects:

2.1 Identical Parts:

With the two wall-pieces, the screen, and the Yogi lamp #1, each design is composed of two identical parts. Duality in this sense implies balance, harmony and completeness in objects.

2.2 Simplicity and Ambiguity:

Simplicity expresses the intrinsic beauty in objects, and can be compared to the simple lifestyle in Buddhism; **ambiguity** represents delusion, a cause of ignorance. A contradiction between simplicity and ambiguity was included in this aspect. Designs such as the Yogi lamps appear to be simple in their forms, but at the same time ambiguous concerning their function as lights. The two wall-pieces look like simple wall decorations but conceal their functions as wall-lamps. The screen when closed together can be viewed as a simple sculpture until it slides out; then it can be used as a dividing screen and also used to hang clothes or other items.

2.3 Utility:

Duality in this sense plays with our minds. The In and Out trays allow the users to decide which tray to use for which purpose. In the case of the card-holder with neither top nor bottom designated, the user chooses by the colour. There is another sense of utility implicit in the negative spaces for example in the wall pieces, where sliding the form reveals the function of a light. Also, in the writing pad, the negative areas fold up and become a form to carry a pen.

3. Awareness / Consciousness (*Samadhi*):

Buddhist teachings always focus upon an awareness of here and now - an experience from meditation, an experience from an action, or an experience of emptiness. In Buddhism, heaven and hell do not exist after death, they do exist during life as states of mind at certain moments. I express this awareness of here and now through the experiences of using objects, which can be described in three manners.

3.1 Direct Interaction with Objects:

A virtual tour of a famous museum on a computer screen is not comparable with the experience of a real visit. Instead of switching on and off products from remote-controls, I was trying to create what I consider to be an 'honest action', informed by the study of 'product semantics' in the Post Modern movement. All the lights operate with a direct manipulation of their forms without switching, eliminating barriers between users and products, the experience is more present and more direct.

3.2 Discovery:

I consider this the most distinctive application of my work. Many of the designs appear as simple forms and belie their functions. Using direct interaction with the objects, users then discover their utility. This awareness leads to a feeling of contentment. The process runs parallel with Buddhist philosophy, ignorance-action-enlightenment.

3.3 Rituals:

In the introductory chapter, I mentioned that I felt practices and rituals in eastern religions such as lighting candles or incense did not make much sense to me. To my surprise, I have found that ritual-like-performances have become a noticeable part of my work (watering

flowers, alternating the pen between the writing-pad and the notebook, depositing coats/hats upon entering a space). Those acts, to a certain degree, are similar to rituals in many Eastern cultures (fig. 125) and I have been spontaneously drawn into using them as a unique character of my work. Since the Modern-Movement, product designers tend to make things to be more convenient to use. In order to do so, designers have simultaneously minimized the effort or steps required to perform certain tasks while using products. When it is too easy to do something, we tend to be unaware of our own actions. By reintroducing ritual in the use of products that many of us have overlooked, it might remind us to be aware of our actions, our states of being, and to tune into what we are about to do.

Fig. 125: A woman prays before the neighbourhood god at the FukTak Temple, bowing three times with lit joss-sticks while silently making her supplications. Food offerings to the local gods were commonplace at such shrines, where Buddhist, Taoist and animist traditions coexisted without irony.

4. Emptiness (*Sunyata*):

Emptiness in the core of Buddhist teachings. In short, emptiness means that all things, including a self, are without anything affirmative or definite, therefore, nothing can be held on to. If one can rest his or her awareness by not holding that, for example, this belongs

to me, or this body is mine, that person's awareness would transcend into another state, the state of emptiness, and would be released from suffering.

In the design of the vases, the way the wires were used to form a space reflects an absence of an inside or an outside and, when using the vases, the progressive change of flowers reflects an analogy to emptiness in a sense that, no one can hold on to the beauty of flowers, all things are impermanent no matter how well they are cared for.

5. Next Steps:

After my three-year study of eastern philosophy and my design investigations, it is time for me to make a brief stop and wrap up this project for submission. My next step is trying to earn some 'income' from the 'outcome' of this study (my awareness of duality!). With further experiments on different materials and processes, small items such as Yogi-lamps, vases and stationery have a great potential to be batch produced, which I intend to do. I wish then to try and market those design items when I permanently return to my home country.

About the future of my design investigation, I am interested in another group of objects, the hidden objects of the house - ladders, irons and boards, brooms and dust pans, trash-bins and vacuum cleaners. Most of us have those items somewhere hidden behind the scene in our homes. With my design approach, I would try to bring them out as display items like the dining-set, or couches, or lights. I imagine ladders and ironing-boards as part of wall sculptures, brooms and dusters seen as flowers in a vessel, or a vacuum-cleaner standing in the middle of a living room as a sculpture. Such items in interior spaces, instead of being **hidden away**, can **be displayed** in harmony with other furniture; as seen in the work of a

French designer Philippe Starck, who is keen to design what used to be the objects' unseen aspect, and turn them into puzzling art objects (fig. 126 & 127).

Fig. 126: Philippe Starc's 'Dole Melipone' 1981, 'Titos Apostos' 1985 and 'Tippy Jackson' 1982

Fig. 127: Their reverse side

Fig. 128: Many traditional brooms; together can be viewed as art

Another direction is to make a further exploration in the area of traditional Thai crafts in terms of local materials and ancient techniques, then try assimilating my contemporary design strategy to those traditions. Perhaps, develop my own concept of 'Thai Craft Revival'.

For myself, I will still follow the path to enlightenment by practising meditation. My initial attempt was to examine whether I could experience any event as 'super-natural'. The instructions are simple but difficult to perform - sit quietly, observe the breathing whether 'inhaling' or 'exhaling' and, the most difficult one is, refrain the mind

from rambling, if thoughts happen, let them pass. I meditated, anticipated something happening, but nothing happened. Finally, after several occasions of sitting, I have realized that nothing is going to happen and I should not anticipate anything. After a while, peace gradually came.

At this stage, what I find rather 'special' in meditation is its, 'non-special moment'. It is a moment which I can rest my mind in peace without attempting or achieving anything, this I can appreciate. To spend a period of time in a monastery would be an intriguing experience for me to try next. Buddhist study and practice have proved to be useful for my everyday living, they helped me deal, with better understanding, with several incidents over the past three years - the up and down of this study, and the loss of loved ones. The latest proof is happening here and now - for the past 45 minutes, I can, for the first time, patiently write up this final chapter, on a steering wheel, in the middle of a Bangkok traffic-jam!

List of Illustrations

Figure:	Source:
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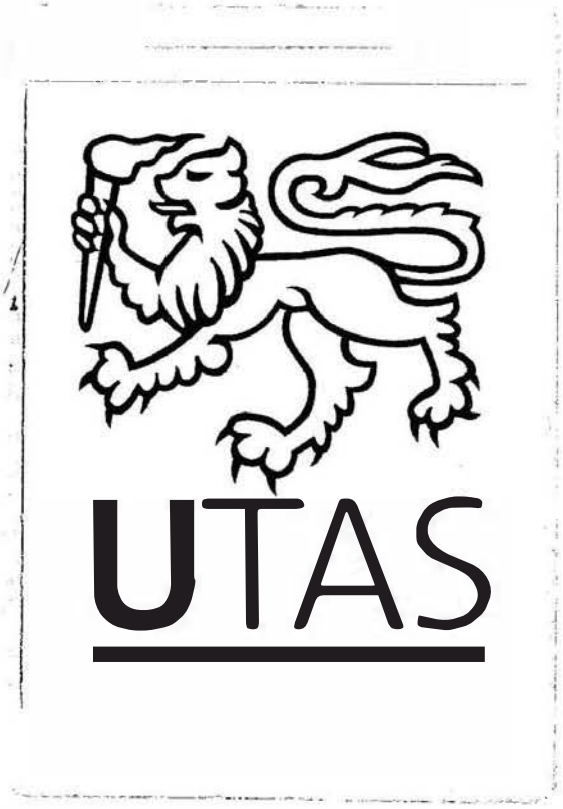

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