

The Buddha Wisdom In Seeing “Small as Big; Big as Small”

How often have we seen people gazing at the night sky and reflecting on the concept of “unlimited possibilities” in various popular media? It has become clichéd in modern times as men like Carl Sagan and Elon Musk popularized the idea of exploring uncharted space, colonizing other planets, and discovering alien life. However, such musings are merely a reflection of mankind’s grandiose complex. In this article, I shall delve into the topic of why “appreciating the small things” and letting them induce a reverie are better than the desire to explore space.

What does it mean for something to be “small”. In some sense, the dichotomy between bigness and smallness exists only relatively speaking. For the purposes of this article, I am defining a “small thing” as that which a human beings can fully observe or interact with close-up. A man may pick up a flower or observe an anthill in its totality, and for all intents and purposes they’re defined as small even if they’re intimately a part of a larger network. *Can we find a big world in small places or things?*

Many eminent artists like Claude Monet and Beatrix Potter have lived near resplendent gardens. It is highly probable that such artists benefited from the childlike wonder of ambling in such verdant and biodiversity rich gardens, which served to inspired their artistic creations. However, what great things can we find within our own backyards? Let’s first enumerate on a few small things with brief comments before proceeding onto the topic of how they can induce an enlightened perspective.

The Real: A Big World in a Small Garden

Bees, birds, squirrels, fungi, and plants are small, yet *they create a big world in a small garden.*

I’ve recently watched a documentary called [My Garden of a Thousand Bees](#). It takes place in the garden of a veteran wildlife director in the UK, Martin Dorhn. His garden is untidy and replete with wildflowers. The garden is full of biodiversity and has over sixty species of bee. During the documentary, Dorhn spends time detailing the life complexity of various species of bees. He even created abodes for procreation by drilling holes into a piece of wood. The amount of complexity of these bees is enchanting [Fig. 1]. Dorhn even found himself growing attached to one leafcutter bee, which he named Nicky.

Birds are also very awe-inspiring creatures to discover in one’s garden. The more one learns of individual species and family differences, the more enticing it can be to record their species diversity. For example, I have recently been trying to find cerulean warblers in my backyard [Fig. 2]. A few years ago, I remember seeing a few, but I don’t find them as often anymore. They are endangered species. Taking time to notice and observe the birds can help deepen our appreciation for their complex lives and struggles. Bird-watching can become quite enriching and immersive. I remember once while smoking, which I have recently quit, a nuthatch perched right next to me. He or she looked straight into my eyes and started chirping as if to communicate some interesting tidbit of information. There has been a lot of recent research and interest in how intelligent crows and other corvids are, but even ‘ordinary’ songbirds can be quite ‘extraordinary’! Exploring the “small things in life” is about discovering the extraordinary in the ordinary. The best Youtube channel on birds is hands down [LesleytheBirdNerd!](#) I highly recommend her soulful channel.

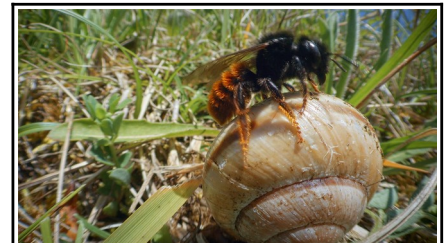


Fig. 1: A red mason bee creates a fortress with a seashell by digging it into dirt and later places grass on top of it. [Click for short video.](#)



Fig. 2: Cerulean Warblers migrate to Georgia, USA during March through mid-May. The more one spends time bird-watching, the more one will become aware of unique migration patterns and how everything is interdependent.

Squirrels can be very cheeky creatures. If one closely watches the squirrels interact with one another in his or her backyard, it can be quite cute and entertaining as they steal and hide acorns from each other [Fig. 3]. Gray squirrels in the USA tend to be more solitary whereas the red squirrels in UK live in colonies. Watching how they play with one another or engage in acrobats can be thrilling. At my old house, I used to feed the same gray squirrel black seeds and walnuts almost every day, and he would sometimes sit in front of my window pleadingly gazing into my house for more. We became friends much like how the lady in [ChooChoo's Story](#) befriended chipmunks. Rodents like squirrels and chipmunks are remarkably smart and important to ecosystems due to burying acorns. We can learn much from them.

Fungi are immensely fascinating organisms! Without fungi forming a symbiotic relationship with algae (i.e., lichens) three-hundred million years ago, terrestrial life would not have appeared and evolved. There are over four million estimated fungi species, and we are only able to see their fruiting bodies with the naked eye [Fig. 4]. It is predicted we only know about 1% of the Earth's fungal species. They are immensely important decomposers in a garden and forest's ecosystem, which you can see on fallen wood; without them, wood would not decompose at all in order to facilitate the delicate cycle of life and death. Moreover, there are fungal mycorrhizal networks underlying many forests (especially old-growth ones), which can aid the roots in communicating complex information. What we see of a mushroom or fungi is called the fruiting body, but technically speaking, we're always breathing in and out fungal spores. Granted, it can be fascinating to record the various types of fungal fruiting bodies, which can range from being luminescent to intricately patterned like a brain. The best documentary on fungi is [The Kingdom: How Fungi Made Our World](#) (2018). An enchanting Youtube channel on fungi is Stephen Axford's [Planet Fungi](#). He used to be an engineer, but he became enamored by the world of fungi and started to traveling to catalog all of the diverse species. His short video "[How fungi changed my world](#)" is riveting.

And finally, no backyard is complete without plants. Much can be said of plants from shrubbery to flowers, but one thing is for certain, it is preferable for the garden to be a bit unkempt with native flora [Fig. 5]. Rather than maintaining a nicely trim lawn or, God forbid, a synthetic lawn [Fig. 6], it is best to have native floral diversity to attract fauna for observation and enchantment. The British have a tradition of unkempt gardens, but sadly, Americans prefer sterile and "well-cut" lawns. In that case, an American has no choice but to seek nature preserves or trails for reverie. As Nigel Bakker said, "Let the grass grow tall, the flowers turn to seed, and shrubs and trees expand skywards!" I encourage creating an unkempt garden for the full benefit of this article.



Fig 3: A California ground squirrel's third attempt of stealing acorns from a woodpecker's cache from the [Going Nuts](#) (2019). There is a moment's pause before the woodpecker becomes angry. [Click for a similar clip.](#)



Fig 4: A [short clip](#) from the documentary *Kingdom of the Forest* about fungi set to beautiful music. Showcases fruiting bodies.



Fig. 5: Unkempt gardens can become wildlife refuges. One particular study from UK revealed this. [Link to article.](#)



Fig. 6: Quite soulless in comparison to Fig. 5.

This shouldn't be considered an exhaustive list of all the great things in a small garden. There's much more we can explore such as ants, amphibians, reptiles, mustelids (e.g., this [documentary](#) has a charming small weasel town), and so on. Rather, this list of the Real is meant to set the stage for the proceeding sections. We may cultivate the garden of our lands, but what of the imagination? Can our small minds come to encompass or dream of the whole cosmos from merely observing the intricacies of an little untidy gardens? In fact, if one were to contemplate and spend time in their gardens, it can open the door to enlightenment, for contemplation, wisdom, and creativity are all one.

The Indeterminate Border: The Gnome's House

What happens when the richness of the garden, or secluded part of a forest, is unified with the imagination of man in a way that reveres life? One can then open *portals* that help to apprehend the indeterminacy of the big and small, which is fundamentally recursive in character. One of my earliest memories was seeing a little gnome's house nestled in the alcove of a great oak tree [Fig. 7], yet I beheld the door open to a magical and wondrous world where I temporarily saw gnomes, fairies, and anthropomorphic creatures dance. The line between the real and unreal blurred. Can we truly sever our imagination from the real world of natural phenomena? No, they are coextensive. There is a tradition of making miniature homes in gardens, most likely originating from either UK or Germany. Many may deem garden decorations as superfluous relative to the beauty of the biodiversity [Fig. 8], but this is a wrong manner of approaching things. Rather, decorations can have the added effect in bringing us back to our minds, in understanding how it is the mind that makes all of this rich, varied, and overflowing tapestry of experience possible in the first place. When one rests in the garden, perhaps with a nice cup of tea, it should not be assumed it is just a moment of peace or respite. It is also a moment to contemplate and cultivate our own minds, to bring forth its own imaginative depth and infinite possibilities. As the Gospel of Thomas says, "If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you." It is not space with its endless stars that contain infinity or even the untidy garden itself, but rather, it is the Mind, which is shared by all sentient beings.

As Bodhidharma said: "Beyond mind you'll never see a Buddha. The Buddha is a product of the mind. Why look for a Buddha beyond this mind?" Why did I spend time detailing wildlife in a relatively impartial manner? Because both the real and unreal are equally important in the mind. To reject either is ill-advised. If one is too attached to the real, then they lose sight of the subtle poetic and life-affirming aspect of mind; if one is too attached to the unreal, then they lose sight of the pragmatic and survival-oriented aspect of mind. Balance is key. To be capable of writing both poetry inspired by nature and honest naturalist observation is the true mark of genius.

The gnome's house is meant to exemplify the indeterminate border between the Real and Unreal. What makes the gnome's house indeterminate is that it is both there and not there, it is both a gnome's house and not a gnome's house. This mind is both small and big.

Now, I will move onto the subject of the Unreal. It simply involves sharing some of my favorite artwork involving small things, which can in fact be big!

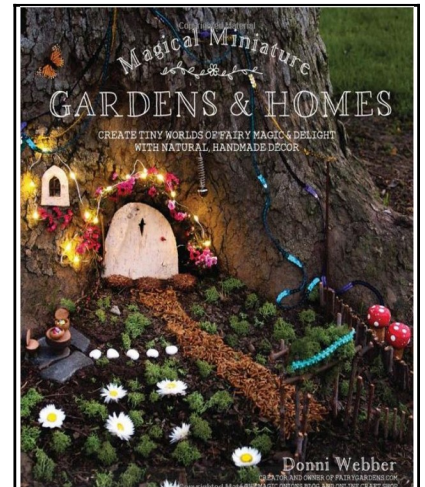


Fig. 7: This is an interesting book I've discovered on this subject matter.



Fig. 8: Having decorations can remind us that our rich experience of the garden comes in the form as "projections of the mind", that all is Mind. It reminds us that the line dividing objectivity and subjectivity is more obscured than originally believed!

The Unreal: The Art of Small Things

My favorite artist that conveys the art and scale of small things is Fritz Baumgarten [Fig. 9-10]. In fact, one can argue that the artwork of all truly great artists reaches the numinous realm of the indeterminate border. What I like about Baumgarten's artwork is how he conveys his gnomes, children, birds, insects, and so on as having a joyous harmonious relationship. Each critter has his or her place in a big world, even hidden in one's untidy little garden or the nooks and crannies of the tree. While I dislike Wikipedia, I love its evocative description of Baumgarten's style: "His whole work has a definite feeling of possible, of real, of lived through scenes, almost down to earth, while at the same time being totally free-floating in imagination, almost psychedelic."

My favorite video game involving the realm of small things is Pikmin 3: Deluxe [Fig. 11-12]. In Pikmin 3, there are three intrepid explorers who land on a fertile planet reminiscent of Earth. As explorers, you are tasked with collecting fruit for your home planet, which had a food shortage due to collective sloth. You have tiny whimsical creatures, called Pikmin, help you in fighting enemies and collecting fruit, and the locales are truly beautiful. You start seeing how your group of small Pikmin and their interactions constitutes a big world. [The main story's ending scene](#) alongside the music is also very relaxing and great! The extra content in the Deluxe version also has an [extra ending](#).

The creator of the Pikmin series was the famed Shigeru Miyamoto who was also responsible for the popular Mario and Zelda franchises. What inspired Pikmin was his time spent in the garden observing the small world ants scurrying through the grass as they carried leaves towards their nests. Miyamoto beforehand had a gambling addiction, being surrounded by the flashing bright lights. By finally dropping his addiction and adopting a mindful attitude, Miyamoto was able to open his heart and thereby find a big world in a small one. This [interview](#) of Miyamoto's here is great, which I recommend skimming. I would argue the Pikmin series is Miyamoto's best, for it truly instills an infinite childlike wonder.



Fig. 9: A painting by Baumgarten. Each critter is precious like a star!

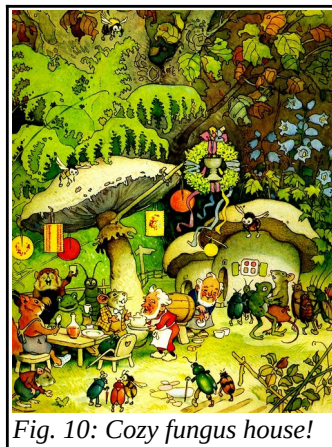


Fig. 10: Cozy fungus house!



Fig. 11: A sample of concept art from Pikmin 3.



Fig. 12: If you want more art in higher resolution, feel free to ask!

The British have a tradition of literature based on anthropomorphic small critters. Some popular artists of this tradition are Jill Barklem, Beatrix Potter, and Brian Jacques. One particular favorite of mine is Kenneth Grahame's classic *Wind in the Willows* [Fig. 13]. It involves anthropomorphic animals modeled after Edwardian high-culture and focuses on their adventures boating, traveling, socializing, and much more. However, even though the animals are anthropomorphic, they still retain much of their animal characteristics in a way that feels genuine. Furthermore, there is a lot of charm and humor in the interactions among Mole, Water Rat, Badger, and Toad, which are the four main characters. Moreover, I would argue there is an undercurrent of mysticism in many segments of this story. For example, one of my favorite chapters was "The Piper at the Gates of Dawn", and it felt reminiscent of certain transcendental poems of William Blake. One aspect that lends to this story's greatness is the richness of its prose. The way Kenneth Grahame talks about ambling in nature, much of the time beside a river or within the Wild Wood, is engrossing. His use of figurative language in describing both the natural world and interiors of the animal's abodes make them come alive. For example, Grahame masterfully uses similes in describing the gurgling and bubbling of rivers and the furniture within abodes in a manner that further draws the reader into its magical world. It feels much like a blissful dream, largely centered on the countryside, inspired by England's River Thames, in a manner that evokes a lofty joy. Be sure you read it unabridged!

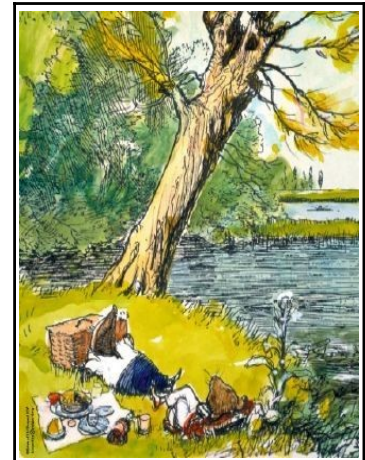


Fig. 13: EH Shepard's iconic, colored illustrations of *Wind in the Willows*.

Besides artwork in the strict definition, board games can also help cultivate appreciation of the small things of life. I have recently been playing a lot of *Wingspan*, which has become popular in recent years [Fig. 14]. It is a tabletop card game which involves an engine builder. It involves collecting birds in one's aviary, getting food, laying eggs, and drawing cards. The base game has 170 bird species of North America in forest, grassland, and wetland habitats, but there are two expansion packs for birds of Europe, New Zealand, Australia too [Fig. 15]. The Oceanian expansion pack, which focuses on birds on New Zealand and Australia, has 95 additional species whereas the European one has 81 additional species [Fig. 15].



Fig. 14: You can also buy a digital version on Steam.

Much like my section on the Real, this section on the Unreal is not meant to be exhaustive.

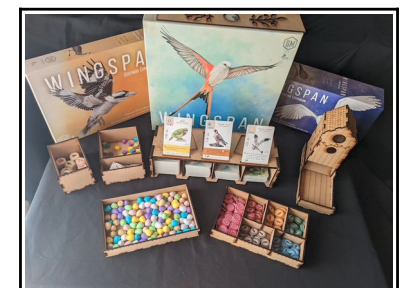


Fig. 15: The Steam has yet to add the expansions.

A Coral Reef can be an Untidy Garden

Note, some people may not live close to an untidy garden. Instead, they might live near the beach and ocean. In this sense, a coral reef is the best analog of an untidy garden [Fig 16], a microcosm that reflects the infinity of the macrocosm. Coral reef are estimated to contain one-third of the species diversity of the ocean. The Real would involve many species of fish such, polyps, crabs, and so on; the indeterminate border would be a sand castle; the Unreal would catalog impressive artwork of the ocean and marine life.



Fig. 16: The best documentary on coral reefs is episode 3 of BBC's [Blue Planet II](#).

This article is about seeing the tripartite structure of the Real, Indeterminate Border, and Unreal. The Real is best viewed with nonjudgmental awareness; the Indeterminate Border is best experienced in reverie; the Unreal is best manifested through one's own creativity and artistic expression. Note, it is best to create one's own unreal artwork from time-to-time rather than adopt a consumerist mentality.

Aporia and Final Thoughts

We near the end of this essay, but I must confess, there was a much more ambitious and concealed goal in writing it. Throughout this essay, *I have deliberately deconstructed the argument I aimed to construct*. It is best understood through this quote from the fifth verse of the Diamond Sutra (Red Pine translation), which was claimed to awaken the sixth Ch'an patriarch Hui Neng:

“Since the possession of attributes is an illusion, Subhuti, and no possession of attributes is no illusion, by means of attributes that are no attributes the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.”

What this is claiming is not something that can fully be intellectually explained. It requires solitude and contemplation within natural scenery to tacitly apprehend. It requires great wisdom to penetrate its subtle meaning. However, as a provisional explanation, it's claiming that both the Unreal and Real realms exist in a kind of recursive, topsy-turvy relationship; that they possess a kind of mutual dependence or interpenetration. Likewise, we can modify this verse in the context of the article:

“Since the Unreal is an illusion, Subhuti, and the Real is no illusion, by means of the Unreal that is Real the Tathagata can, indeed, be seen.”

We can also see this principle at work in the Heart Sutra. We can apply “form is emptiness; emptiness is form” to the dichotomy of big and small as “big is small; small is big.” In other words, if we perceive various microcosms as inseparable and not severed from the macrocosm, we shall finally “see things as they are” and awaken to our true natures.

The obsession with bigness and the Real excluded from the Unreal, from the likes of Carl Sagan and Elon Musk, foster delusion. I urge them to seek wisdom in the Buddha way. All it takes is finding infinity in one's own untidy little garden rather than vainly pointing to the stars above.

There is an untidy little garden in each of our hearts.
That untidy little garden of the heart is so big...
It nourishes us always,
All we need is to open our minds to it
Vaster than all the grains of sand in the Ganges...
Pure, perfect, incorruptible.
Namo Amitabha Buddha

