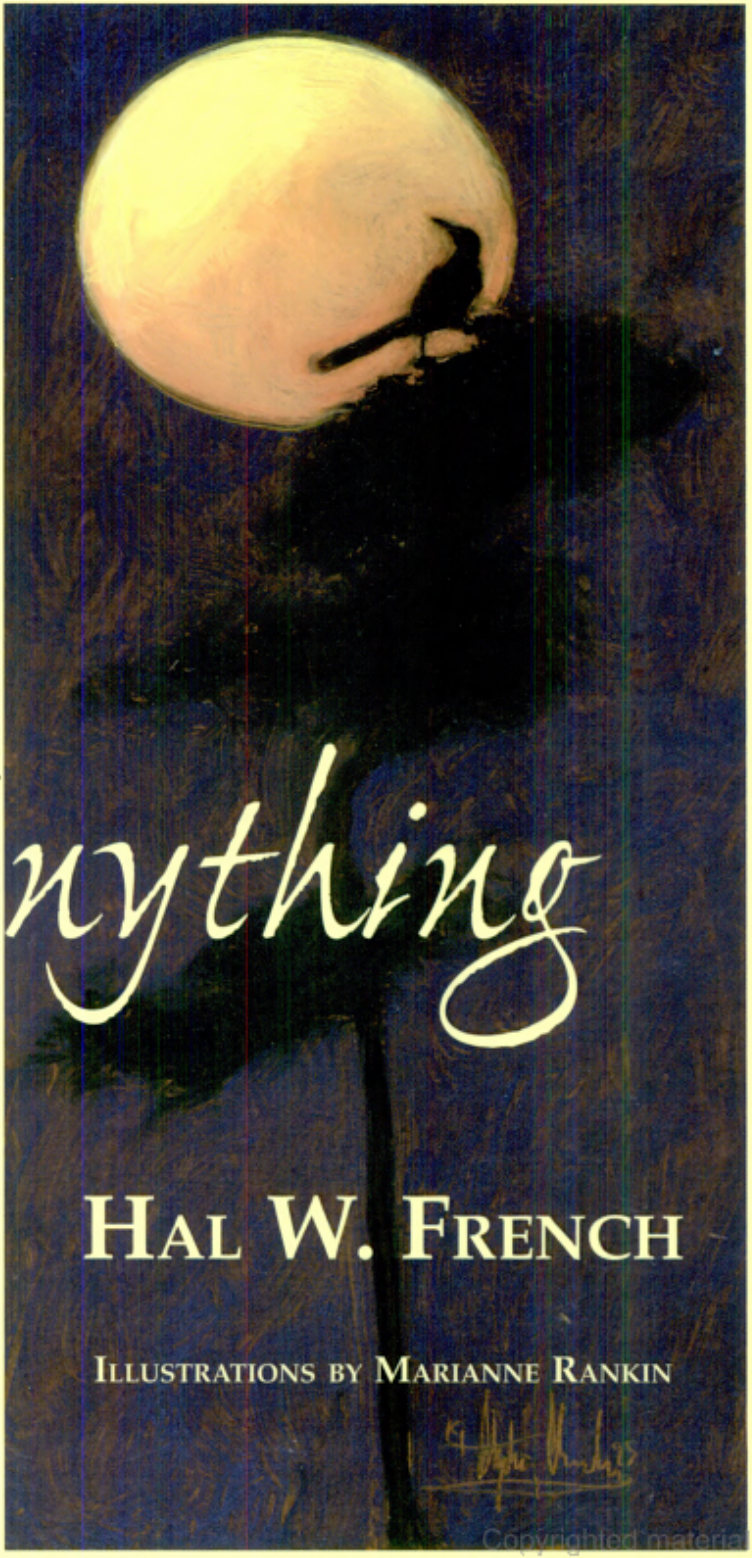
Zen and the Art of Anything



THIS BOOK SIMPLY FLOWS, FLOWS SIMPLY, AND GENTLY CLEANSES AWAY THE DAILY EDDIES OF HUSTLE AND BUSTLE.

KUANG-MING WU, AUTHOR OF THE BUTTERFLY AS COMPANION

HAL W. FRENCH

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARIANNE RANKIN

Zen

and the art of

Anything

Zen and the art of Anything

Hal W. French

Illustrations by Marianne Rankin

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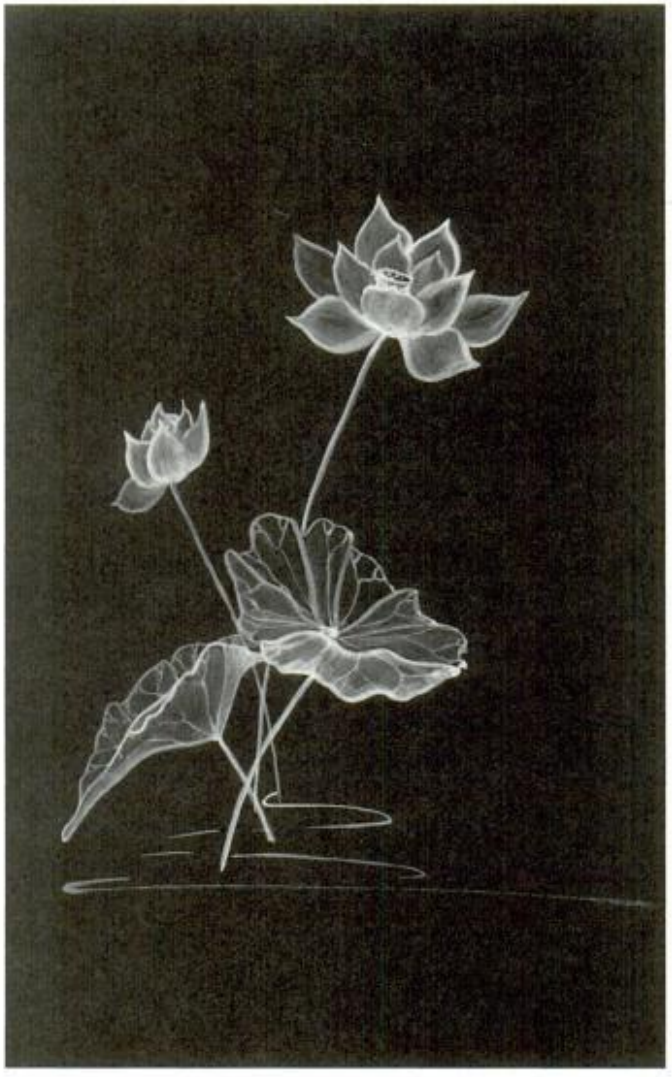
Dedication

To Gene Doyle,
who knew so much of Zen before he studied it formally,
and who taught us so much beyond his tragic death in 1996.

A Note to the Reader

The reader may appreciate a word about this book's format.
I've often felt that reading can be a chore,
since our eyes and minds don't readily adapt to the rigidities
of justified margins, which break up phrases and ideas,
forcing us to drop our eyes arbitrarily, awkwardly, to the next line.
The attempt here is to make those line jumps more natural, in structure and reason.

I hope this style may make your reading more pleasant,
and render Zen more accessible.



A Zen Foreword for a Zen book

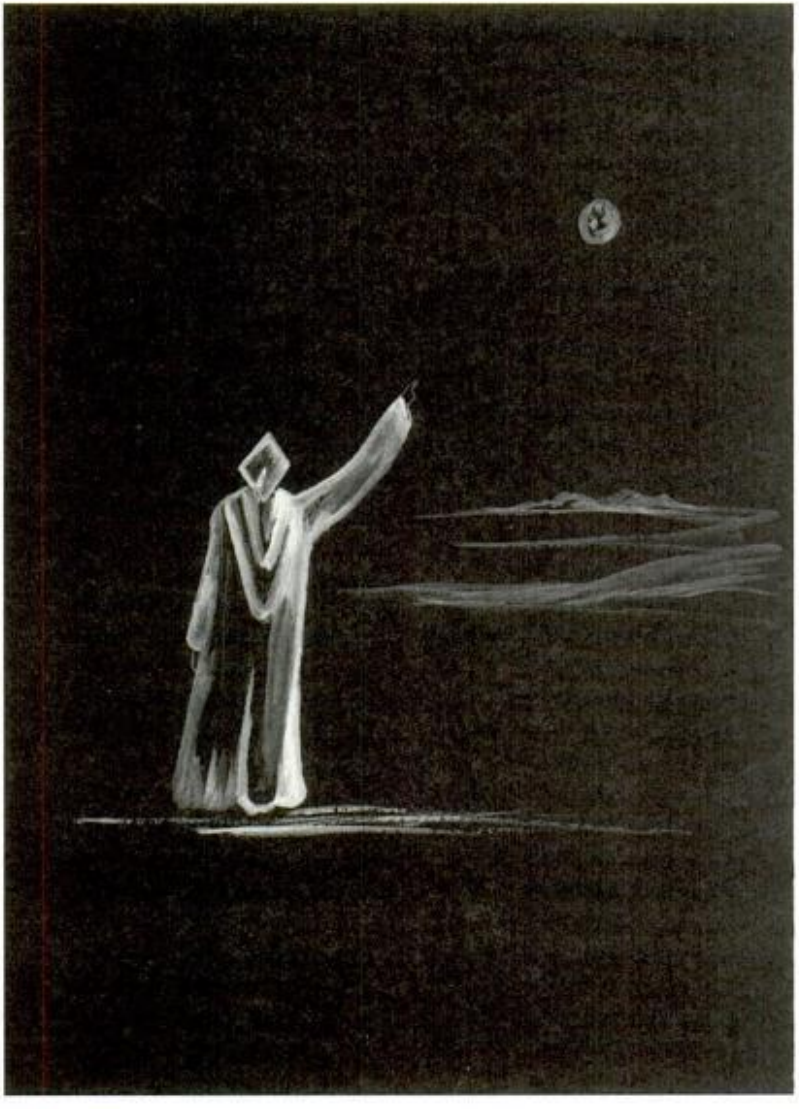
Is my baby a boy, a girl, or neuter? No, none of these. Is it celibate, then? Not quite, for it giggles curiously at sex. Baby is sex's climax, sex-interested, and belongs to no particular sex. It simply is. My baby is my parent. Coming home to my baby, I come home to Me.

Such homecoming is "nothing special," Professor French assures us. When I give up my sophisticated adult thinking, I quit stupefying myself and others, and I come home to life's Prime, its Beginning. It feels so good, spellbound in frisky babies' "show and tell," learning their laughing lifeless art. They "can do anything," as they say, for they never fight the river; they just frolic in it, flow with it. I now join in my baby's nimble "art of anything," to quote Professor French's phrase.

Being artless is not an art, nor does it deny art. It simply charms anything anywhere. Professor French artlessly presents this mighty "non-art of anything," the Beginner's Mind, my Baby's feisty Heart and deft Hand. This book simply flows, flows simply, and gently cleanses me of daily eddies of hustle and bustle. The book delights as my baby, just being there. Professor French calls such non-art "zen," perhaps a non-Zen, not awesome Zen.

I was released into Me as I read through the book at a sitting, for I could not put it down. This is a book of my Baby, Me, who "can do anything." You will not be able to get over this book, either. How could any one get over oneself, one's Me, irresistible as one's own baby? The book shows my Baby, sparkling with surprising insights—feisty as my adorable baby, fresh as my baby's adoring eyes. This book is simply irresistible.

Kuang-ming Wu
Author of *The Butterfly as Companion*



I

My Story and This Book

My Story

The year was 1990, and I was presenting a paper on Zen at a Buddhism conference in southern Taiwan. In the course of the paper, I made a passing reference to Bodhidharma, the traditional bringer of Zen to China from India.

After the presentation, a resident Buddhist monk approached me, and, with a whimsical smile, pointed to me, and said,

"You are Bodhidharma!"

I was rather pleasantly mystified by that, but could elicit no further elaboration. The monk simply left, and I was left to ponder the classic Zen ***koan,*** or riddle:

"Why has Bodhidharma come from the West?"

And why, then, had I come from the West to talk to a largely Buddhist audience, about Zen?

In what way was I, late in time, following Bodhidharma's model?

And why, as a Westerner, several years later, should I attempt a book about Zen?

I am in many ways an unlikely candidate for such a project.
First, I'm an academic, and academics don't write much about Zen.
They may study about it, and teach a small segment or even a rare course about it,
but they don't write about it.
Practitioners do.
Professors write about lots of things religious,
but not much on Zen.
The ones who write about Zen are persons, East and West,
who have spent years in Zen centers and monasteries,
who have received extensive training with Zen masters,
and have been initiated.
I understand that, and am intimidated.

Second, it isn't just the profession, it's personal.
I'm a still more unlikely candidate by way of origins.
So I'm still more intimidated.
But this isn't an expert's book on esoteric Zen.
That might intimidate you, too.
Zen here is *"nothing special,"*
for "nothing special" people like you and me.

I have to pick up the story a little more than a century ago,
to detail my own journey toward wanting to write about Zen.

On September 1893, over 100,000 people lined up

to cross the border into a section of Oklahoma known as the Cherokee Strip.
Other segments of the Indian Territory were opened a few years earlier and later,
but this was the largest and the most dramatic such entry.
My grandfather was among those who raced to establish a claim.
It was in many ways the closing of a frontier.
Five days earlier, in Chicago, the World's Parliament of Religions had opened.
It was, in many ways, the opening of an incredible new frontier.

My early life was shaped much more by the first event.

Perhaps my grandfather's horse was slow.
At any rate, the land he claimed was poor,
and he came back in a few years to settle in Kansas with his family,
having buried two small boys in the soil of Oklahoma.
As the Indian Territories were opened for settling,
the frontier closed.
Yet, by the time I appeared, elements of it remained.

We lived, in my boyhood, in a small town near Dodge City, "Land of the Fast Draw."
The lore of the cowboy was a living thing,
not just memorialized in the graves at nearby Boot Hill.

The most visible markers in Mullinville, my town,
were windmills and grain elevators.
My father operated one of the elevators, and my mother had taught home economics,

which gave me an early appreciation for wonderful basic cooking,
a subject for further discussion in chapter five.
The vital church in Mullinville, just across the street from our home,
had a strong measure of frontier Christianity,
evangelical in style and content.
It was, and its impress remains, whatever else has been appended,
very important to me.

I did my first public speaking as an early teenager
in a contest sponsored by the WCTU, the Women's Christian Temperance Union.
It was a respectable, sedate group.
Its founder, crusading, saloon-smashing Carrie A. Nation,
less than forty years before, had been based in Medicine Lodge,
only a little further away than Dodge City, in the other direction.
That was my boyhood, growing up in a farming community
in dustbowl, depression days,
with some residual legacies of the frontier still around.

While some of those frontiers remained open for me,
some other far different ones were beckoning in young adulthood,
grafting themselves onto my own root stock.
But it was not until 1966, sixty-three years after the Parliament of Religions,
that I really awakened,
while studying one summer at the University of Chicago,
to the awareness of that event and all that it meant.

Research on the Parliament and one of its leading figures, Swami Vivekananda,
opened to me the world of Eastern wisdom, and that door has kept opening wider.
It led me to Zen.

The religion of South Asia became my primary research area,
but East Asian religion was on my teaching platter, too,
and travel to East Asia deepened the interest.
Most notably, a personal friend and mentor,
Professor Nolan P. Jacobson, quickened that interest.
His books, his lively presentations made me want to know more about Japan and Zen.
With his death in 1987,
and the subsequent invitation to write a chapter in a memorial volume to him,
I knew what I'd contribute.
My chapter, the essay "Zen and the Art of Anything,"
written that same year, was the initiation of a serious study of Zen for me.
Other papers followed, and more travel in East Asia,
with visits to Zen centers,
and by 1994 I felt ready to offer a course for Honors and M.A. students,
again with the same title.
Several days in the Green Gulch Zen Farm were very helpful,
and the book ***Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,*** by Shunryu Suzuki,
founder of the San Francisco Zen Center that spawned nearby Green Gulch,
was my favorite Zen source.
My students, each time I've taught the course in the University and elsewhere,
have actualized his title: they've been incredible co-teachers and learners—

more than in any course I've ever taught.
We were all beginners, and that democratic Zen spirit
fostered more of a workshop than a classroom environment,
with everybody contributing.

Suzuki refers in his book to the example of his master,
who had joined the Soto Zen order when he was thirty, which is rather late.
And Suzuki shares how his master's teacher would often,
both scoldingly and endearingly, refer to him as "You lately-joined fellow."
What then of me?
To modify the cliché, "When he was my age,
he had been alive for thirty years!"
I have come much later to the feast,
and that might be another inhibiting feature.
But Suzuki gave me the challenge of recognizing and speaking
precisely from my beginner's mind-set.
Is there any validity to a beginner's observations?
Can an outsider's freshness of perspective contribute to the discourse,
along with the seasoned wisdom of the insider, long immersed in the tradition?
And if the outsider has been more of an insider in other practices,
can he also bring a useful comparative vantage point to the table?

Suzuki's emphasis on practice and process spoke to me, also;
other sources seemed too goal-oriented, too focused on getting there,
to the all-embracing state called ***kensho,*** or ***satori:***

ENLIGHTENMENT!

Some told stories of enlightenment experiences in Japanese Zen monasteries,
but made it clear that no content could be communicated,
for that would take away from the search of other aspirants.
That part left me cold.
I remembered from childhood the teasing jingle,
"I know something I won't tell,"
and I remember resenting it when my father, a member of the Masonic Lodge,
reluctantly said that he couldn't tell me, his son,
about what went on in the Masonic sessions.
I think that I developed an early distrust of the esoteric,
the too tightly held conclusions of any spiritual or fraternal elite.
What appealed to me about Zen, instead,
and in sharp contrast, was precisely

ITS ACCESSIBILITY.

Yes, the reading of Zen sources, time spent in Zendos,
disciplined meditative practice were important for me.
But factors like these are necessary in gaining insight into any religious tradition.
You can't become an insider through study alone,
you need to get understanding of the experience of an insider,
and to appropriate what elements you can.
What amazed me, despite the esoteric trappings that had so often intimidated me,

was my experience that I could learn something of Zen.
That was itself an "enlightening" realization!
An "outsider" could get into Zen, even one who came from rustic origins
only slightly removed from the frontier of the American West!
Amazing!
And if I could, then that says something about Zen, not just about me.
Zen is far more accessible than some would lead us to believe.
And I don't have to claim, in writing about it,
that I live now in the state of total enlightenment.

There is a delightful story told by Huston Smith in his preface to Suzuki's book
Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind.
Smith notes, "In Shunryu Suzuki's book the words ***satori*** and ***kensho,***
its near equivalent, never appear." And then Smith shares a story:
"When, four months before his death, I had the opportunity to ask him
why ***satori*** didn't figure in his book, his wife leaned toward me and
whispered impishly, 'It's because he hasn't had it'; whereupon the
roshi batted his fan at her in mock consternation and with finger to
his lips hissed, 'Shhhh! Don't tell him!' When our laughter had
subsided, he said simply, 'It's not that ***satori*** is unimportant, but
it's not the part of Zen that needs to be stressed.'

That is so charmingly wise. I would prefer to talk about enlightening moments,
rather than a state of enlightenment, and when such moments come,
to feel that these should be shared.

The man whom we call The Buddha would, I think, have disclaimed the title.
It's *"nothing special."*
It means simply "One who woke up,"
and he made it clear that the rest of us could wake up, too.
Chapter three of this book includes what seemed literally like a wake-up insight
for me, coming as it did in the middle of the night.
I had for days been pondering the themes of ***kronos*** and ***kairos,***
clock time and timing, while writing that chapter,
when suddenly I woke at two A.M. on October, 1997,
the moment that the time changed to Eastern Daylight from Eastern Standard time.
It seemed, in that luminous moment,
that I now understood something that had always seemed impossibly obscure.
I felt, just then, that I knew about the relativity of time,
and that I had known it all along.
Later I learned that my wife, at that same hour, Greenwich Meridian Time,
had left her hotel in London to fly back home.
Three zones, intersecting:

"What time is it?"
"It depends."

And I am aware that every time you use that phrase, you know about relativity, too.
No esoteric secrets here. *"Nothing special."*
And if that feels like at least SMALL-CASE enlightenment,
so be it.

Perhaps any student of Zen, like Bodhidharma himself, has an obligation
to share something of what he has experienced.
And if a few SMALL-CASE enlightenment moments should occur for you,
in transit with me, in these pages, then you can share those, too.

"You are Bodhidharma."

This Book

Why, indeed, should I write, or you read, yet another book on this theme?
The premise has spawned an extensive genre:
*Zen and (*or *Zen in) the Art of…*
Let me count the ways:
Perhaps the two most familiar are Eugen Herrigel's classic *Zen in the Art of Archery,*
or Robert Persig's cult favorite from the early seventies,
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance.
But simply to enumerate a few others, the list may include:
Zen and the Art of Calligraphy, Zen and the Art of Writing,
A Beginner's Guide to Zen and the Art of Windsurfing,
Zen and the Art of the Macintosh, Zen and the Art of the Internet,
Zen and the Art of Medicaid, Zen in the Martial Arts,
Zen in the Art of Flower Arrangement, Zen in the Art of J. D. Salinger.
If we were to add other titles, just *Zen and…*, dropping the *Art,*
or still others, associating Zen with other pursuits,
the list would grow exponentially.

Why have these books multiplied? What is the premise behind them?
One answer may simply be trivialization, using a catchy title to sell a non-book,
by appending the word *Zen* and appropriating its popular mystique for marketing purposes.
The resultant product may have little to do with Zen,
and contain little of substance about the subject itself.
Or it may seem exploitative,
separating a specialized activity from the original tradition,
which sought to cultivate a holistic approach to life.
In a similar way, other Eastern disciplines have been popularized,
tailored to partial interests,
as in *Yoga for Skiers,* or *How Now, Tao Jones?*
But even these pop market titles may indicate two truths about the traditions themselves:
first, they are portable.
There is an element of universality about them.
They are not culture-bound to the world of the East.
And second, they can, with authenticity, be applied to various life pursuits.

Zen simply means meditation.

The first premise of this book, then,
which it may hold in common with some of the titles listed above,
is that a wide variety of life pursuits,
when combined with a meditative and mindful discipline,
may be elevated to the level of art forms.
And, while this premise claims the portability and universality that properly belongs to Zen,

the applicability factor is authentically present within Japan itself,
the originating culture that we most readily associate with Zen.
I refer to the classical *"do"* patterns of Japan, indicated by the suffix ending,
as these describe particularly intense life disciplines.
Do, derived from *Tao,* or way, is abundantly evidenced,
as in the way of tea *(chado),* the way of soft combat *(judo).*
the way of calligraphy *(shodo),* the way of the samurai *(bushido),*
the way of flower arranging *(ikebana* or *kado),* the way of fencing *(kendo),*
the way of archery *(kyudo).*
Many other skills might be added to this list,
such as landscape gardening, dramatic arts, ceramics, weaving, and the like.

I once witnessed in a home near Hiroshima
many specimens of the art of rock carving and polishing,
which added beautifully to the decor.
In all of these we see, more than the production of specific attractive objects,
a deep expression of innate creativity.
The objects appear to grow with integrity
out of the highest refinement of the artisan's human spirit.
The artisans may become designated as "National Treasures,"
not merely to be accorded near veneration,
but to inspire and instruct others who have novice status on a particular path.

This may illustrate, in brief, the artistic legacy that characterizes Japan,
but how do we establish the specific contribution of Zen to this climate?

That isn't easy, since several traditions factor in,
most notably Shinto, Taoism, Zen and other schools of Buddhism,
along with the disciplines of Confucianism.
Several of these traditions derive from originals borrowed from China,
sometimes through a Korean filter,
and Buddhist forms are traceable, in some cases, further back still, to India.
Richard Walker, a colleague, long-time student of the Far East,
and former ambassador to Korea,
once suggested a conundrum to me that may be useful here
in understanding both Japan and Zen.
It's simply the word *ad_pt.*
Fill the blank for the first term characterizing Japan with the letter *o,*
rendering the word *adopt.*

The Japanese have been called the world's greatest borrowers.
It is a notion which accords well with the Buddhist teaching of emptiness,
which can simply be defined as openness,
a willingness in this case to absorb from strange systems,
to drink from alien wells.
The Japanese word *torukumu,* "to take over," similarly expresses this ideal:
a capacity for spiritual ingestion.
Emptiness implies an invitation to be filled,
a welcome to what is offered by a myriad of potential hosts.
Shinto itself, the religion native to Japan,
was given much of its shape, and its actual name, through Chinese influence,

with the term *Shinto* derived from *shen-tao,*
the Chinese word for the way of nature (yet another *do* pattern).
But the borrowed elements blend with other elements,
indigenizing themselves into what is termed *Nihon-do,* or, simply, the way of Japan.
Nihon-do means no slavish imitation,
but that any borrowed elements soon lose their strangeness in the peculiarly Japanese mix.
The second variation on the conundrum, then, inserts the letter *a,*
forming the word *adapt.*
Religiously, the different traditions cited, along with folk and popular religion,
all contribute to the Japanese mix.

Clearly it isn't simple, then, to isolate the unique contribution of Zen,
except to say that it seems to have provided, historically,
a strong stimulus to aesthetic sensibility and artistic expression.
We think of the poetic form of *haiku,*
a favorite, concise way of conveying, in a singular, sharp image,
a profound impression from some experience of nature,
or of the *koan,* a riddle which impels the adept to look deeper,
behind the surface nonsense of a given paradox.

The Trappist writer Thomas Merton once observed,
"We find very serious and responsible practitioners of Zen
first denying that it is religion, then denying that it is a sect or school,
and finally denying that it is confined to Buddhism and its structure."
While this conclusion may again make it difficult to establish Zen "influence,"

it may indicate that Zen's own absence of institutional walls
is congruent with the Japanese spirit,
allowing it to blend borrowed elements, indigenizing,
stamping them with a characteristic Japanese spirit.

The third letter to be added to the conundrum has doubtless been anticipated,
with the new word, formed by adding the letter *e,* being *adept.*
That which is borrowed and indigenized then enables persons,
in the Japanese setting, to become more *adept* at the practice
than those from whom it was originally borrowed.

Without analyzing this notion, a simple anecdote,
with which everyone is familiar, may serve to illustrate.
How is it that such a profound change, in half a century, has occurred,
by which the label, "Made in Japan,"
formerly attached to a small, cheap trinket,
now identifies a sophisticated technological product?
One thinks immediately of various brand names,
and associations which they convey:
Sony, Mazda, Nikon, Fuji, Nissan, Mitsubishi, Toyota, and others.
These convey images of intricate electronic equipment,
state-of-the-art cameras and computers, superior automobiles.

Japan's modern miracle is dramatized as we compare it, for instance,
with Brazil, a country of roughly the same population, around 125 million persons.

On paper, Japan has all the disadvantages:
an island with few natural resources
compared to Brazil's thousands of square miles of arable land
and abundant mineral deposits.
And yet a recent statistic shows Japan accounting for ten percent
of the gross world product, while Brazil accounts for less than one percent.
How has this miracle been achieved? Let it stand, as is.
Every reader will recognize the amazing recovery of Japan since World War II.
The "ad*e*pt" quality is profoundly evident.

An additional feature to note:
all of the Japanese art forms that have been cited,
as well as others for which we may need to generate new terms,
such as ***techni-do,***
must be seen as growing out of a general quality of life.
To illustrate from one of the classical ***do*** patterns,
we may note that the place where ***kendo*** was practiced in ancient times
was called "the place of enlightenment."
That place for most is not necessarily where a "fine" art is cultivated,
but the work place (***techni-do*** again), the play place,
the home place, where we may simply pursue the way of being human.
What we are after, then, is the pursuit of what might be called "lower education,"
not higher, the quest for the mastery of the common arts, not the fine ones.

Here it must be recognized that "arts" themselves may be abused,

and that Zen, like any other tool, or "means of grace,"
can be exploited, as Brian Victoria has detailed in his recent book, *Zen at War.*
The Japanese war machine, in World War II,
used some Zen disciplines to cultivate incredibly dehumanizing mind-sets,
which resulted in horribly brutal atrocities in places like Nanjing, China.
The approach of this book, then,
is to suggest that the arts pursued must not be employed
for ego-enhancement or for selfish purposes,
nor may they be separated from the mundane tasks
that integrate us with the human community.
An *enabling* book must also *ennoble.*

The second major premise of this book, then
(and what may distinguish it from the titles mentioned above)
is that a meditative and mindful approach to these common arts,
that we customarily take for granted
may enable us to live total, not just segmental
lives which are more generally and authentically human.

"Fine" arts, or specialized expressions of excellence, may emerge from this base,
but we may experience an expanded and enhanced appreciation
for what it means simply to be alive.
You are invited to understand Zen as something that is not exotic,
but the most mundane, practical approach to life that is conceivable.
It is a vehicle to everyday spirituality.

As R. H. Blyth reminds us, "When sacred really equals profane, we have Zen."
That means that we will focus here on the tasks that each of us performs,
daily (or regularly, or routinely),
but so very seldom does in a mindful, reflective way:
breathing and speaking, waking and sleeping,
moving and staying, eating and drinking,
working and playing, caring and loving,
thriving and surviving.
These are birth-to-death, life-cycle activities in which we all engage:
Can they be elevated to art forms?

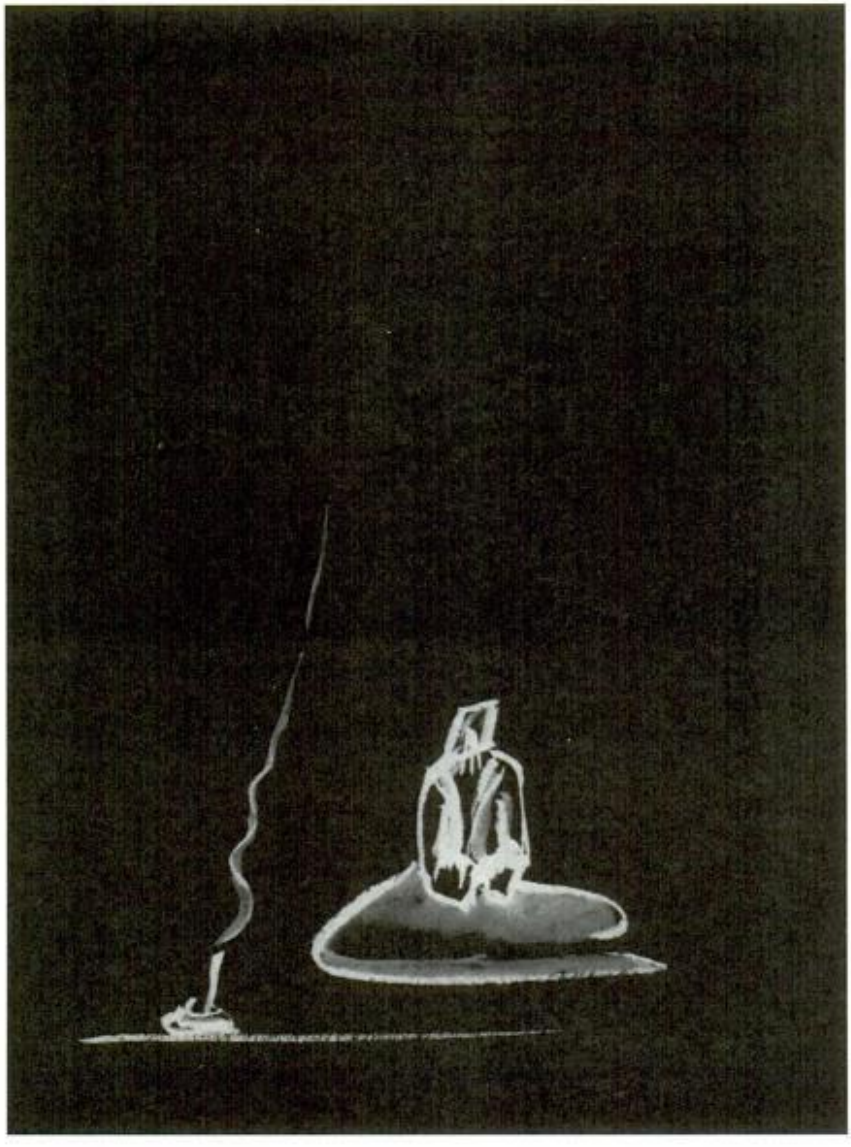
The book's third premise, then, an elaboration of the second,
is built on the reversibility of the conundrum cited above,
namely that the mindful, meditative disciplines of Zen
may be ***adopted*** by persons of any culture,
adapted non-intrusively into their life-styles,
with the result that these persons, in all or any of their life pursuits
may become more ***adept*** in their practice of them,
to the benefit of all.

That's the claim.

I once had a student, David Sims, who was taking an independent study in Sanskrit
with me while he was also enrolled in structured courses
in Greek, Hebrew, Latin, Arabic, and Chinese.

Impressive!
I thought, of course, that he must be aspiring
to become a consummate classical linguist,
but his vocational ambition was to become a house painter.
He simply wanted to have some facility for the rest of his life,
whatever he did vocationally,
to study the great religious traditions in their original languages.
His was the purest liberal arts ideal I've ever encountered.
In fact, he didn't become a house painter, but a plumber, and a good one.
A personal reference: he's often worked for me!
Maybe he picked up naturally, with reference to classical languages,
the concluding insight of Marian Mountain's book *The Zen Environment,*
when she observed, simply,
"Zen is a plumber's helper."
The most mundane tool for the most practical of tasks:

see if it helps you.



II

Breathing and Speaking

Breathing

Where do we begin?

Why not where life begins, with breathing?

So breathe. Just breathe.
For the next two minutes, or about twenty-five breaths, perhaps,
just breathe, before you read further, and be aware of each breath.

You've borrowed or bought this book,
and you've just begun to match that investment with your own attention
to the most basic of all activities,
the act of breathing.
That's where Zen and about every school of meditation that I know of begins.
Where else?

Think of a baby's first breath, and your own next breath.
You enter life, life enters your body, with each inhalation.
It's like each beat of your heart in being largely involuntary.
But unlike your heartbeat, your breathing can easily enter your awareness.
It's that initial consciousness of your breathing that becomes the first building block
to a heightened awareness of many other facets of your life.
Your alertness expands,
and you begin to marvel at the mundane moments that fill each day.

So, just breathe.
You seldom need to gasp for breath;
there's a ready quantity of air around you, which sustains you.
You are concerned at times about the quality of that air,
but you're not on the Mir spacecraft,
where your oxygen supply is threatened by a system shutdown,
or living in Tokyo, where, as relief from air pollution,
you might pop into an oxygen bar.
Usually, for most of us, the air is there, as a cherished given.
Recent findings in North America suggest that it's actually improving.
But if the air supply immediately around you is polluted, say, from cigarette smoke,
see if you can remove the smoke or move away from it as you continue this exercise.

Some would seek to enhance meditative moments with incense,
giving a sacred, set-apart feeling.
Or you may simply prefer natural air,

ideally, weather permitting, air outside or entering your room from outside.
You need breathing room,
and maybe a habitual breathing room in your house, for meditation.
As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh suggests,
a bell which a person entering that room for meditation employs
may signal others, and invite them, where they are,
to breathe also, and the moments of peace may spread through the house.
The space itself, consciously chosen, can be sanctified.
"Where we breathe, we bow," in the poet Gary Snyder's words.

In Zen, the breathing is part of the practice of ***zazen,*** or seated meditation.
You may want to enhance your intentionality by acquiring a ***zafu,***
or firm, round cushion, for this purpose,
and consulting a manual of instruction on matters of posture if these aren't familiar.
But details of practice may be suggestive and not dogmatic,
so you may evolve into your own style,
with variations on procedures followed in a given school.
We will thus be discussing *zen* (lowercase),
simply meaning meditation, as much as
Zen, which might refer to a particular Japanese model.
It will be helpful to know the Zen tradition, and to spend time in a Zen community,
but the approach here is that, as claimed above,
you may ***adapt*** the tradition to your own circumstances.
This does not mean sanctioning a casual, careless approach,
but a discipline that is your own.

Back to breathing.
As you breathe, you breathe with Beethoven and Buddha, with Mary and with Socrates.
It's the same substance, the same air.
You are sustained by this regular pattern of the filling and emptying,
the rising and falling of your lungs.
If you began, as suggested, with two minutes of attention to your breathing, consider:
assuming that your rate of breathing is about like mine,
twenty-five breaths for two minutes,
that adds up to the incredible total of 18,000 breaths each day!
Are you amazed?
18,000 inhalations, 18,000 exhalations,
the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide
(simply stated; of course it's more complex),
repeated these many, many times every day!
Each of us moves, by some estimations, about 440 cubic feet of air per day.
We are working, just by breathing!

In my customary twenty minutes of morning meditation,
I am focusing on just over one percent of my 18,000 daily breaths.
I modify the sacred phrase only slightly, to ask: "Give us this day our daily breaths,"
and seek to expand my awareness and appreciation of those breaths.
And in my state of South Carolina,
the reflection is canonized and expanded in the state motto:
"Dum spiro spero": "While I breathe, I hope."
I am, literally, "inspired," by each in-breath.

And with it I hope for…what?
Minimally, another breath, and another, and so much more.
But before you elaborate on your own hopes,
just center on your present breathing process.
What is implied in the common phrase, "Don't hold your breath"?
Maybe it means, "Don't put your life on hold till something that you want to happen occurs.
That something may be extremely unlikely,
but in any case, that's a future event,
and now is where you are.
Don't hold your breath waiting for something else."

Fix your mind on the image of a digital watch or clock.
That's the image of your mind in meditation.
The digital instrument has no sense of past or future;
all it has is the moment.
You've doubtless watched it to see how it changes.
Take it as a challenge, in the memorable words of a beloved friend,
the late Dr. Nolan Jacobson,
"to catch the ceaseless flow of quality in the passing moment."
You have no agenda; simply count your breaths,
watch your breathing.
How much quality can you compress into that moment,
and each passing moment of your life by simply being there and nowhere else,
giving yourself completely to the possibilities resident within it?
Try the simple exercise suggested by Thich Nhat Hanh:

"Breathing in, I calm my body.
Breathing out, I smile."
Stay with that for several breaths. Let it penetrate.

"Dum spiro, spero," again. "While I breathe, I hope."
But reduce that hope, which seems like a futurist category,
to the most immediately present tense possible
simply the hope for your watched-for next breath,
that while your attention is focused on the breathing process,
it will last long enough for you to learn from it:
just the next breath.
You hope that your life will be supported,
that your breathing apparatus will not fail,
that the supply of oxygen will not suddenly dry up or be poisoned.
You will expire some day, but not yet,
as you now expire in your next outbreath or "little death" expiration.
Revel in the momentary experience of breathing.
You're alive!!
Once more, as you're reflecting, this miracle may again impress itself upon you.
In the sense of wonder that they create,
our moments of meditation, of focusing on our breathing,
may seem more and more like prayer.

But as you breathe, move out for a little from the immediacy of your time zone,
to identify with others who are breathing with you,

and all who will pick up the cadence of breathing after your own ceases.
The ancients; all who have ever lived,
and have breathed their last.
All who will populate this earth space in the unimaginable days to come.
And feel how the tapestry of breaths is now being shaped
by the contrasting rhythms of all the life forms that are breathing with you.
Feel the contrasting rates of breathing themselves,
determined partly by genus and species, partly by activity.
Your own breathing is now, doubtless, relaxed, regular and tranquil.
But hear, also,
the labored breathing of the sick and dying,
the escalated breathing of workers in strenuous tasks,
or of the athlete in competition,
the quickened breaths of passion,
the almost silenced breathing of those in great fear,
perhaps in hiding, paralyzed by worry that their next breath,
however slight, might betray their presence.

Hear...
the hushed breath of wonder,
the excitement that takes your breath away.
Remember, and remember how you recovered
from having the wind knocked out of you,
feeling the surge of air once again enter your lungs.
And remember,

how in near panic, close to drowning,
you fought for your life,
breaking the surface of the water,
knowing, in vast relief,
what a gift it is to breathe.
Remember now,
in the quiet of this moment.
And cherish the gift.
And consider yourself as proxy, in your cherishing,
for all those life forms which cannot reflect and marvel,
as you can, at the givenness of the stable supply of air which sustains them.

As you are grateful for the diversity of life,
in its myriad manifestations,
you are now the celebrant for all of these.
It is a priestly act,
and your role is that of priest for all receivers of the air that surrounds you.
As a human, do you believe in your priesthood for all these receivers?
You may, then, want to lift your hands now, symbolically,
and swell your lungs, as you lift these creatures up with your breathing,
celebrating all of the realized possibilities,
the fantastic varieties of living things,
over measureless time, beyond your imaginings.
Consider, in Gary Snyder's memorable phrase, all
"Us critters hanging out together something like two billion years."

"At the end of the ice age
we are the bears, we are the ravens."

Breathing is always a sharing, a communication:
"in and out," or "out-in" *(kokyu* in Japanese).
Breathing out we give life to trees;
Breathing in we receive life from them.

Link this moment, then, with the further reaches of time and space;
right now, as you breathe,
"The ringing in your ears
Is the cricket in the stars."
How do we fathom the magnitude of these identities forged now,
in our breathing, with all these creatures?
What are the mechanisms, the dynamisms, by which they ingest air?
Perhaps the question intrudes now,
but it may on another occasion impel my search for greater knowledge,
and also for a deepening reverence for the Mysteries
that will always elude my most dedicated quest.

And these Mysteries include the wind,
that exterior force which matches my own breath dynamism.
What forces energize and pattern the movement of the winds?
Consider, as you have mused over breath patterns, the winds, also:
The howling gale, driving rain before it,

leveling objects in its path,
churning tumultuous ocean waves,
the quiet spring morning,
in which scarcely a leaf rustles in the gentlest of breezes,
the north winds of late autumn,
with their warning of icy blasts to come,
the soft sighing of the trees on a summer evening,
cooling the heat rising from city streets,
And all of these, metaphors for the divine activity in our midst,
the spirit itself:
"The wind blows where it will, and you hear the sound of it,
but you do not know whence it comes or whither it goes."
Mystery again.
But we are given a clue as to origins.
The same Greek word is employed both for wind and spirit.
Play still other word games with me for a moment.
Go back to the Hebrew Bible,
to the account of the creation of human life:
"And God breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul."
Three Hebrew words for breath are used in this partial verse,
each reinforcing the other with the clear conclusion:
Life is breath; breath is life.

So in Japan, the ***hara,*** the mid-section, or center of breathing, is the locus of life.
That locus may be thought of, alternately, as the nerve center, the brain,

where mental activity is *"head*quartered,"
or the blood circulatory center, the heart,
which is our mythic romantic core.
Japan combines them in ***kokoro,*** or "heartmind."
And it's fitting that Zen, which focuses on breathing,
would blossom in Japan, where the ***hara***
(as in ***hara-kiri,*** the act by which, in classical samurai spirit,
the warrior may choose to end his life at its center, the ***hara)***
also embodies the essence of human life.

And back to the Hebrew,
where the most sacred name for the Divine contains only consonants,
the word rendered in the most recent English translations of scripture as ***Yahweh.***
In the Hebrew, vowels were not used, and the word was too sacred to be pronounced.
Assumed vowels were inserted between other consonants, and articulated as ***Adonai.***
But consider the consonants in the sacred word itself,
called the Tetragrammaton:
they are perhaps the softest of consonants,
which may be transliterated as ***yodh, heh, waw, heh.***
Each one can almost be breathed.
Is the insight here, then, that the Divine may best be represented in breath or wind?
It would seem so.
And my relation to the Divine, also, carries this same flavor:
consider—while we're looking at words—
that in three classical languages, Sanskrit, Hebrew, Greek,

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