

# WHERE THE HEART BEATS

JOHN CAGE,  
ZEN BUDDHISM,  
AND THE INNER LIFE  
OF ARTISTS

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## PRELUD E

*My intention has been, often, to say what I had to say in a way that would exemplify it; that would, conceivably, permit the listener to experience what I had to say rather than just hear about it.*

—John Cage

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki was eighty years old when he set foot in New York City in 1950, and was renowned around the world as an author, speaker, translator, and living embodiment of Zen. For all that, Dr. Suzuki was something of an anomaly.

He was barely over five feet tall, and almost invariably wore sports jackets and slacks. He had not actually graduated from a university—the “Dr.” was an honorary degree. He was occasionally so immersed in his thoughts that his audiences had trouble hearing him. And he was not a Zen master, having spent a mere four years as a young lay student practicing Zen in the renowned Engakuji, a sprawling monastery-temple complex set within a canopy of dark trees south of Tokyo, in the Kamakura region of Japan.

What Dr. Suzuki had in his favor was a powerful mind and a humble demeanor, coupled with a quiet desire to transmit the way of Zen to the West, and to all mankind. His learning was prodigious, and almost entirely of his own doing. He taught himself Sanskrit from a book. He was fluent in Pali (a language of the early sutras, closely related to Sanskrit), as well as Japanese, English, and classical Chinese. He could get by in Tibetan Sanskrit (a derivative of the Indian) and several European languages. He applied these gifts to teachings that are upwards of two thousand years old

and that, in the early twentieth century, were in the process of being translated for a modern world.

The Japanese teachers who would arrive in America in subsequent decades were true Zen masters, and looked like it in their black robes, their shaved heads tanned by wind and sun. In the 1950s, though, Suzuki didn't intimidate his Western friends. He was probably just Zen enough, at the time.

Buddhist texts had been circulating in the West for a hundred years, but they were a rarefied taste for a scholarly few. In the 1950s, all that was changing. An oncoming Beat Generation of "dharma bums" was getting ready to popularize the teachings and make Buddhism into something cool and useful to a new image of freedom. Suzuki arrived in New York just as the Beat era began. By the end of the decade he would have his own *New Yorker* profile, and celebrity status to match.

JOHN CAGE WAS thirty-eight years old in 1950. He had earned a bit of notoriety for his percussion music, which honored the voices of ordinary objects as instruments. His music was being performed alongside dances choreographed by Merce Cunningham, but the New York establishment was stubbornly indifferent. He was living downtown, amid modern artists who were also being ignored while they squabbled among themselves in the "gold rush" toward a new American art.

From 1950 to 1952, Cage's work and life changed dramatically. He made a great leap of the heart, a "turning"—the word "conversion" comes from *vertere*, to turn—that opened his eyes to the boundless sky all around him. He introduced chance, indeterminacy, process, and a host of other new ideas into his music. At the high point of the leap, in August 1952, he accompanied David Tudor to a little rustic music barn in Woodstock, New York, and handed his friend a score that instructed the pianist to sit quietly at the keyboard for four minutes and thirty-three seconds. The title of the piece was *4'33"*.

Beginning in 1951, when he discovered an "accomplice" in twenty-five-year-old neophyte Robert Rauschenberg, and all through the 1950s, Cage was "teaching" and "preaching" to some very young and eventually very

famous artists. His circle of students and allies originated what we now know as Pop Art, Happenings, Fluxus, performance art, installation art, Process Art, and Minimalism. He became the “John Cage” of legend, the pioneer of a new vanguard—the inventor of “the ephemeral and transitory poetics of the here and now,” in the memorable phrasing of an exhibition at the Reina Sofia museum in Madrid in 2010.

“Cage was the river that dozens of avant-garde tributaries flowed into and from,” Kyle Gann eloquently praised him in an obituary in the *Village Voice*.

The sound of no-sound has gone round the world. Link to YouTube, the Internet video outlet, and you can watch the BBC Symphony Orchestra as it performs *4'33"* at the Barbican Centre in London: four minutes and thirty-three seconds of dead-stop quiet, televised all over Britain in 2004.

“I promise you, this is the piece everyone here tonight has come to experience,” says the boyishly cheerful announcer, Tommy Pearson.

The BBC cameras turn toward the audience. People fill every seat to the rafters. Conductor Lawrence Foster walks to the podium amid loud applause. For the next three silent “movements”—plus two interludes when audience and orchestra stretch, breathe, rustle, then resume their concentration—a collective crescendo builds. The hall is one body, one mind. Everyone is awake and full of questions.

What is this silence? Why is it so riveting?

And what do we make of it?

This book is conceived as a conversation with Cage, who died in 1992. My model is the conversations Cage devised with Erik Satie, one of his mentors and predecessors, long after Satie’s death. Cage speaks here in italicized excerpts from his writings and recorded talks, like the one below. He speaks in his own voice, as I think he would want to do.

He loved to tell D. T. Suzuki stories. Here is one:

*Before studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. While studying Zen, things become confused. After studying Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. After telling this, Dr. Suzuki was asked, “What is the difference between before and after?” He said, “No difference, only the feet are a little bit off the ground.”*

It's just one of those mystifying Zen sayings—until it happens to you.

IN 1986, I toured Japan with nine other art professionals on a trip sponsored by the Bunkacho, the Japanese government's ministry of culture. We stopped for the night in a little inn on the flank of a ridge near Mount Fuji. At 4:00 a.m., with three friends, I crossed a stream in the predawn chill and stepped into a tiny Zen temple. We sat down on black cushions facing a long, low table on the floor. The room was completely dark—lit only by candles next to the priest opposite me. Three monks sat on his right, facing us down the row. Glints of gold from the flame glanced off gold bells and bowls. The priest began intoning a chant in Japanese.

At the time I had no idea what I was hearing—although I do now. Every morning in temples all over the world, Buddhists chant the Heart Sutra. In a few phrases the Heart Sutra sums up millions of words of teachings and two millennia of practitioners' wisdom. Midway through the service I said to myself, “I'm a Buddhist.” I had no idea what that meant.

Nothing came of it for eight years. I was far too busy with what I used to call my ten-day-a-week job.

The seed grows in darkness and silence.

Then the job abruptly ended, and I found myself walking through a heavy oak door into an American Zen monastery in the Catskill Mountains of New York State. I sat down on a black cushion and began to meditate intensively, unrelentingly, as though my life hung in the balance.

This book is being written to honor what happened next.

*What I do, I do not wish blamed on Zen, though without my engagement with Zen (attendance at lectures by Alan Watts and D. T. Suzuki, reading of the literature) I doubt whether I would have done what I have done.*

THE STRUCTURE OF this book follows the arc of revelation. In the first part, mountains are mountains. Suzuki studies Zen in Kamakura. Cage is born in California and pursues his sunny investigations into the joy of sounds, until a personal crisis threatens to destroy his peace of mind and his belief in music.

In the second part, Cage meets Suzuki, the mountain flies apart and vanishes, and we walk with Cage into spaciousness and emptiness. In Suzuki's class on Zen Buddhism at Columbia University, Cage hears teachings that crack open his mind and show him a way out of suffering on a path of transformation.

In the third part, Cage has been transformed, and the “green light” that shines in his life illuminates a way forward for those whose paths cross his. Many—but not all—are artists.

Then comes a moment when the heart of art, culture, and society cracks open and a riotous new world pours out with Cage at its center.

What is the light? And how is it transmitted?

*Our intention is to affirm this life, not to bring order out of chaos nor to suggest improvements in creation, but simply to wake up to the very life we're living, which is so excellent once one gets one's mind and one's desires out of its way and lets it act of its own accord.*

CAGE SAID THAT he regarded 4'33"—his “silent piece”—with utmost seriousness. For him it was a statement of essence. Three years before he died, he told an interviewer: “No day goes by without my making use of that

piece in my life and in my work. I listen to it every day. . . . I don't sit down to do it; I turn my attention toward it. I realize that it's going on continuously. So, more and more, my attention, as now, is on it. More than anything else, it's the source of my enjoyment of life." The important thing about having done it, he said, "is that it leads out of the world of art into the whole of life." And so it does.

In Suzuki's teachings, and in all of Buddhism, "silence" and "emptiness" are shorthand terms for the inconceivable ground luminosity—the Absolute "nothing"—out of which all the "somethings" of the world arise in their multitudinous splendor.

This is the teaching at the heart of the Heart Sutra, the brief text that is the heart of Buddhism.

Cage was taking Suzuki's class, he tells us, but he just couldn't understand what Suzuki was talking about. A few days later he was walking in the woods looking for mushrooms. Not thinking. Not trying. Just paying attention. Then, as he wrote, "it all dawned on me."

What was that dawn? He didn't say.

The story of what John Cage didn't say fills this book.