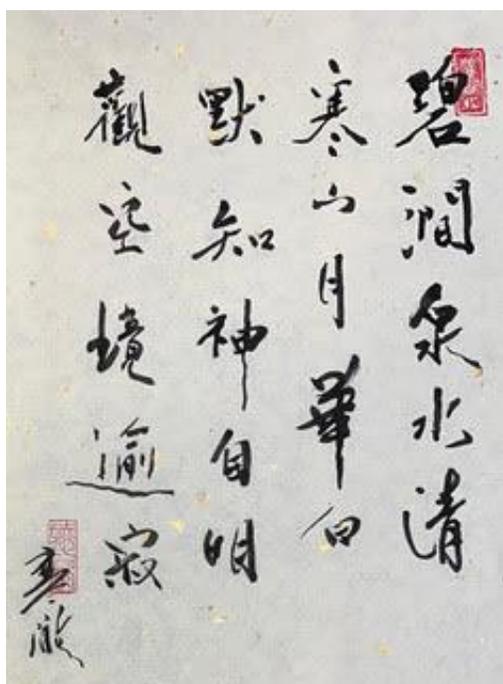


News from Cold Mountain

Summer, 2025



From Cold Mountain Poems

The spring water in the green ravine is clear,
and the moonlight on Cold Mountain is
white.

Knowing silently, the spirit becomes clear;
Observing the empty realm, the mind
becomes still.

Calligraphy Kansetsu Chia-ju Chang



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Review by KanseiPat Andres



Chosha Goes for a Walk

Blue Cliff Record Case 36

Kankan Kurt Spellmeyer

Main Subject

One day, Chosha went for a walk. When he returned to the monastery gate, the head monk said, “Osho [monk], where have you been strolling?” Chosha said, “I have been walking in the hills.” The head monk said, “Where in the hills have you been walking?” Chosha said, “First I went following the fragrant grasses, and now I have returned in pursuit of the falling blossoms.” The head monk said. “You are full of the spirit spring!” Chosha said, “It’s better than autumn dew falling on the lotus leaves!”

Setcho’s Verse

The world without a speck of dust.
 What man's eyes are not opened?
 First following the fragrant grasses
 Returning in pursuit of falling
 blossoms,
 The slender stork perched in the
 wintry tree,
 A crazy monkey shrieking on the
 age-old heights
 Chosha's eternal meaning.

Kurt: Every koan has a “hook,” like the hook hidden in the bait when you go fishing. And once the poor fish catches sight of the bait, it doesn’t suspect the possibility of a hook concealed inside. Maybe the bait is a plastic fish, or a small frog, or a mayfly. But whatever it might be, the fish accepts the bait as real, and when it bites down, it’s hooked.

Personally, I hope that you won’t eat fish or any other sentient creatures. You might

think that we humans are far superior to fish, but all of us are deceived by appearances, and our reliance on conventional reality gets us into endless trouble. The purpose of koan training, you could say, is to hook us so many times that we begin to see how things really are, not how we expect them to be.

This explains why every koan includes some detail that appears quite innocuous at first, but then you can’t get away from it! In this case, the bait is a lot more enticing than a mayfly. Chosha goes for a stroll on a summer day, and when he does, he sees the beautiful hills, he smells the fragrant grasses. And as he explains to the monk at the gate, he’s returns to the temple “in pursuit of falling blossoms.” As I was reading these lines aloud just now, you might even have thought to yourself, “How wonderful to wander freely in the mountains like Chosha! I wish that I could go with him instead of having to vacuum my house this afternoon or mow the grass or drive the kids to soccer.” But when it suddenly occurs to you that this is a koan and not an innocent anecdote, you might start to wonder, “So, where’s the hook? What could possibly be wrong with a walk in the woods on a summer day?” But actually, the hook in this koan is the biggest hook of all.

This koan hooked me many years ago when I worked on it with my teacher, Genki Roshi. All of my life, as most of you know, I’ve turned to the natural world whenever things become overwhelming. Even now, I sometimes have to put my work aside. I’ll pack a lunch, check the oil in my car and the air pressure in the tires, and drive up to Stokes State Forest for a free day in the beautiful Poconos. Instead of looking at your phone constantly, you can turn your attention to the lush terrain, the sound of water rushing over stones, the shadows of

big hemlocks surrounding you, the patches of blue sky that you see through the dark branches overhead. I feel better just thinking about it!

When you immerse yourself in the natural world, even for a few hours, you feel more grounded, connected, safe, and secure. And then you might ask yourself, “Why do I waste so much of my time with things that don’t matter at all—trivial distractions that produce so much unnecessary stress?” We cling to all sorts of trivialities for reasons we don’t understand, but whenever we finally put them aside, we realize all over again how unnatural our lives have become. And maybe this is what the koan wants us to learn. Get away from this so-called “civilization,” and return to nature.

A return to nature—many people think that this is the essence of Zen Buddhism, and so they did in Chosha’s time. But they would be mistaken. If you were working on this koan and you gave that answer to me in dokusan, I would regard it as a pretty good response. But it wouldn’t go far enough. With koans, I should explain, there isn’t a “right answer.” Instead, there are degrees of depth in your investigation of reality that the koan leads you to. You could say that the koan is taking you on a journey that will end with a glimpse of enlightened mind. First, the koan takes you here, and then it takes you there. And then there and there.

If you set out in the wrong direction, the teacher might just say, “I’m sorry, but you’re out in left field.” When I studied with Genki Roshi, he would simply ring a little bell, meaning, “No! Next student!” But in my own teaching, I try to be more supportive. On occasion, a student will deliver an absolutely fantastic response—like an arrow coming to rest at the exact center of the target—but more typically, the arrow hits the

target, yes, but lands in the third circle from the bullseye or the second. When that happens, I say, “Keep going! Do some more meditation and then take another shot next time!”

When you’re out in nature, your experience can feel far more present and alive than when you’re hypnotized by the screen on your iPhone or laptop. But is the “nature” in front of you genuinely real or is it just another screen? Maybe all we ever see are screens, not unmediated reality. And no matter what you think about this issue, how can you be sure? Please don’t trust what other people say or even what you assume you know. Set to work on the cushion.

When you have the chance to go outside for some extended period, please explore these questions for yourself. You should sit quietly, watch your breath, and then drop into emptiness, deep mu-hsin. Now when you notice the movement of the wind or the calls of nearby birds, ask yourself if what you hear or see is really different from your experience of sounds and images on your phone? Quite apart from *what* you see or hear, can you truly say that seeing and hearing are any different than before?

In the Mahayana, including Zen, there’s a lot of complicated talk about “Mind,” but very few people know what Mind really is. The Zen way to discover Mind is quite direct but somewhat crude: you sit for so long that your legs start to hurt, or your neck or your shoulders. Wherever you experience this kind of pain, you can’t get free from it unless you go very deeply into emptiness. You watch the breath and you watch the breath and then, all of a sudden, it’s as though an empty space opens up in front of you, a space where there’s no pain at all. In that space there’s no sensation, no thought, not even any residual memory. In Zen, we

call this space “emptiness,” but it’s actually Mind.

When you look for the Mind any other way, you won’t be able to find it. You might assume that Mind is the same as your thoughts, but your thoughts are actually the *contents* of the Mind. They’re *in* the Mind but not Mind itself. The same is true for everything else you’re aware of. Mind is always hiding, you could say, behind each thing in your awareness, and because people focus on the thing instead of stepping back to take in a wider view, they rarely notice the Mind that contains it all.

If you were a fish in the ocean, you could swim freely wherever you chose. Imagine it! You’d see coral everywhere, variously shaped and brightly colored; you’d see red lobsters scrambling cautiously along the ocean floor. You’d have to watch out for the bigger fish, and you’d eat any smaller fish that came your way. But for the whole of your long or short life as a fish, you might remain completely oblivious to the existence of the water. Unless, of course, you took somebody’s bait and found yourself squirming on the hook. Then you’d be hoisted into the air to behold a place unlike anything you’d ever seen, so strange you couldn’t describe it. But if, through some miracle, you managed to escape—or if the fishing license said “catch and release”—you could return to the ocean, your old home. But you’d never see that ocean the same way again because you would understand how things really are: “Oh my God, I’m in *Water!*”

And once you’ve *felt* the water of Mind surrounding you, you know the truth from your own experience: the mountains and the forests can’t help you connect because you’ve been connected all along—in Mind. When you go out into nature, then, the

difference is in you, not the place itself. Leaving your home and your responsibilities, you give yourself permission to freely enjoy being what you’ve always been—absolutely everything. In his commentary, Setcho puts it this way:

The slender stork perched in the
wintry tree,

A crazy monkey shrieking on the
age-old heights.

It’s like seeing your own face in a mirror!



Seeing Mother’s Face for the Last Time

Chia-ju Chang

A monk asks, “What about when both parents die?” Yumen answered, “Let’s put aside the deaths of your parents to consider this question: Which one is your real parent?” The monk replies, “Deep pain.” Yumen replied, “absolutely, absolutely.”

-- from Yunmen Kuangzheng’s *Sayings*

This winter, like a migrating bird, I returned from the cold of New York to spend time at my mother’s home in Taiwan. But the unpredictable weather soon sent my mother to the emergency room. A cold front hit, and she suffered a severe stroke. In less than two weeks, she was gone.

During this time, I experienced firsthand the workings of modern clinical medicine—from emergency treatment to transfer to the intensive care unit. Initially, doctors expected her to survive less than a week.

However, against the odds, she began breathing again. The doctor informed us that she was no longer eligible for hospice care, and her fate shifted from “dying comfortably” (*haosin* Mandarin) to “just living” (*laihuozhe*)—unconscious and dependent on life-support. In Taiwan, the medical philosophy prioritizes prolonging life above all else, regardless of its quality. In the ICU, she was kept alive by a ventilator and a nasogastric tube. We only knew her coma index but could not determine if she was aware of anything. I often wondered whether she could feel the discomfort caused by the tubes. While the doctor claimed there was no scientific proof that she could experience pain or awareness, a nurse contradicted this, telling me, “Of course, she knows pain! If I pinch her, her eyes will open!” She demonstrated this on the spot, but my mother’s eyes remained shut and unresponsive.

This experience of medical intervention and life prolongation raised important questions about the way we view life in modern society. The modern medical system has reduced life to a purely biological function, devoid of meaning or purpose. The focus is not on the quality of life, but on the extension of survival, which leads to a view of life as something to be managed rather than lived meaningfully.

The result of this medical philosophy is a society that treats life as an object to be preserved at all costs. As the Chinese saying goes, “It’s better to be alive than to die.” This perspective has turned health into a form of management—a science and industry dedicated to avoiding suffering, illness, and death.

Medical technology has made survival the primary goal, and people invest heavily in health maintenance through regular checkups, fitness routines, and wellness products. However, this extended life is often devoid of narrative or meaning; it

becomes merely survival without purpose. From a capitalist perspective, death represents the end of consumption, and without the ability to consume, the capitalist system loses its profit. Survival, therefore, is essential for the continuation of this system. This mindset has commercialized everything from fitness regimens to health apps, making “health” into an industry focused on prolonging life—while subtly dismissing the concepts of aging, illness, and meaningful living.

In today’s digital age, even those who are not yet ill are treated as potential patients. Technologies like genetic screening and health-monitoring apps like Apple Health or Fitbit encourage us to obsess over every minor change in our health, leading many to rely on medical services to prevent problems. This trend has transformed health into an all-consuming purpose, pushing people to focus on the superficial aspects of wellness and ignore deeper existential questions about living a meaningful life.

The Korean-German philosopher Byung-Chul Han explores the phenomenon of the technological and capitalist reduction of life in his book *Burnout Society*. Han invites us to consider that under neoliberal capitalism, life has become an endless pursuit of survival, with people trapped in the illusion that more capital and technology can extend their existence. In doing so, we strip life of its richness and vitality, reducing it to a mere biological process devoid of meaning.

Even when death approaches, we still cling to the illusion of “health,” using technology and medicine to stave off its inevitable arrival. However, this preservation of biological function is neither truly living nor truly dying. Those caught in this system lose their sense of narrative and purpose, existing in a mere “undead” or zombie-like state, unable to connect with the deeper, richly felt texture of being alive or awake.

Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* has been on my mind lately. In the story, Gregor Samsa, an office worker, transforms into a beetle and is gradually alienated from his family and society. Ultimately, he is discarded like an object by those who once loved him. This alienation mirrors the experience of modern medical systems, which reduce life to a biological process and treat individuals as mere subjects to be managed until death inevitably arrives.

The night my mother was rushed to the emergency room, she underwent a series of painful and invasive procedures without painkillers or sedatives. When I asked them to stop resuscitating her, the phrase "give up resuscitation" sounded shockingly unfilial within a Taiwanese society deeply rooted in Confucian values. But I couldn't bear to see her suffer in such a way. My younger brother whispered to me, "Mom once said, 'Save if you can.'" But where is the line in all this 'saving'?

For the system, death is the end—everything is erased. But from a Chan Buddhist perspective, death and suffering are inseparable from the truth of life. We must resist the capitalist economic and medical systems that focus solely on the prolongation of existence while neglecting the suffering and dignity of the individual. In the context of Kafka's alienated characters, we can understand modern patients like my mother as victims of a "disease dissociation" within the indifferent medical system—reduced to mere objects of medical intervention until they are discarded and forgotten.

At the funeral, I saw my mother's face again—my first time since I had left the ICU. This time, her entire body was wrapped in a white, silky cloth. Only her face was visible—familiar, yet unfamiliar—pale face that had endured days of turmoil, weeks of freezing and thawing, and had finally been covered with makeup. The dramatic streaks

on either side of her mouth had become a symbol of this moment. That day, the ceremony at Xinhai Second Funeral Hall unfolded like a stream of consciousness: a silent face, white bones, and the urn lowered into the ground. It was drizzling in Jinshan with biting wind through their.

In the evening, while sitting in deep concentration, I meditated on my mother's face as she lay still in the coffin. Then I was struck by a realization: the face I saw in the coffin was our first meeting, not the last. There is never a last encounter. Meeting my mother's face at different stages of life (and death) teaches me to recognize the myriad facets of impermanence and the illusory nature of life and death.

Then I thought to myself: how could I have fallen into the illusion of a "last encounter"?



Interview with Louise Coolidge

CMZ: How did you find CMZ?

Louise: Before I joined CMZ, I was a committed and active Quaker for several years. The 2016 election was devastating, and I was appalled by my own anger regarding the political and social circumstances. As it was abundantly clear that I couldn't change the outside, I needed to focus my attention on who I was, yet I didn't know how to overcome my own negative reactions. I started investigating Buddhist organizations, along with a standing interest that I had put off for many years.

My first exposure to Buddhism was through the Princeton Buddhist Meditation Group. While I appreciated what I learned

there, I found myself drawn to the Zen approach. I met Kurt professionally when I attended the Rutgers Graduate Program in Political Science and taught off and on in the Writing Program. I was aware that he directed a Zen center at Rutgers and began attending Zoom meetings of Cold Mountain Zen in 2020.

CMZ: 2020 was the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Kurt pivoted to Zoom right away. Even though many people came during 2020 and 2021, you persisted and became part of our Sangha, and now you're an officer of the board.

Louise: Yes! I am very grateful to have found you!

CMZ: You came to Zen as an older woman. What led you to Buddhism in general?

Louise: I would say that I've had four journeys or pathways. The first was when I was a child and was raised Catholic. My parents were very devoted to Catholicism and sent me and my siblings to Catholic School.

CMZ: That was in the sixties, right?

Louise: Yes, I graduated from high school in 1971, and I left the Catholic Church at the same time. I then joined a Gurdjieff-Ouspensky Group that claimed to teach esoteric truths. It was quite a commitment for the next twelve years. I lived for a while on their 900-acre ranch in the Sierra foothills of California, purchased with monies collected from members' tithes. Members attempted to do "the work" according to the ideas of George Gurdjieff and P.D. Ouspensky. A quick synopsis of their ideas is that humans are machines and that we are unfinished. In order to 'awaken', we need to divide our attention between the many parts of us, the many "I's and the real 'self'. I can

see similarities (and significant differences) with Buddhism. I left that in my thirties.

CMZ: What made you decide to leave?

Louise: I felt I was not getting anywhere personally. The fact that the leader of the group had 'feet of clay,' let us say, became more obvious. The group still exists but I have not been a member for a long time.

My third process or spiritual journey was with the Quakers for thirty years. The major point of Quakerism that I think relates to Buddhism is the idea that the divine is within everyone. So some of those messages from those earlier spiritual journeys have informed my understanding of Buddhism. I'm trying to let those go, too, so I don't encumber my continued journey.

CMZ: That's quite a journey. What about your earlier experiences or your early Zen practice has informed your current experience?

Louise: I have a couple of intertwining thoughts. The first is my exposure to rituals through Catholicism, and an appreciation for their value. Rituals were relatively rigid during my time as a Catholic, and while that may seem like a negative, it allowed everyone to participate at the same level outwardly. This provided a sense of cohesion and friendship among the participants. At the same time, each person came to worship from where the person was internally. In my experience, though, this did not seem to require that the individual make an effort to develop spiritually.

The second thought has to do with surrender. From one perspective, rituals allow one to surrender one's belief in personal control. Sesshin is an example of this for me. It is a pleasure to relinquish decisions about what to do with oneself over the course

of designated days. It takes so much less energy! At the same time, however, Zen practice is based on personal experience. I can't escape my personal responsibility to practice. This adds a different dimension to ritual and surrender.

CMZ: We would have to say that sesshin is ritualized as to when to bow and when to chant. All of that serves as a scaffold so that each one of us can enter into the deeper parts on our own. Encouraging us to maintain silence and avoid eye contact also helps us to be together while continuing our inner focus. It is good to remember not to allow any of these rituals to become ends in themselves.

CMZ: What has it been like for you to practice Zen off the cushion?

Louise: My experience with Buddhism has been quite different from past spiritual endeavors, because the realizations or insights I may have result in throwing me off-balance. I have one experience in mind at the moment: I was on a crowded city street with strangers, and I could see they felt confident in their view of life, no matter how different each view may be. Everyone believed they had control by clarifying and classifying with their discriminatory minds, and yet I was experiencing not having control at all. I felt like I was tilting to one side. What a fascinating process.

CMZ: We have zazen with CMZ, which includes koan practice, dokusan, and sesshin. Then we have sutra study. The koans are all informed by the sutras to some degree. There's a cross-fertilization in koan practice and sutra studies. How has sutra study cross-fertilized your practice?

Louise: For me, sutra study has been far more than an intellectual exercise. It has shattered my ideas, pushing me to start afresh in terms of where I am in my practice.

It is definitely a progressive process that I need to recognize and accept. This is true for my meditation practice, too. For instance, in the very beginning, I thought, "Well, Ok, fine. Once I'm able to control my thoughts, then I'll be done, right?" And yet the process of sitting down on the cushion keeps changing. An understanding and experience of emptiness informs me the next time I sit down on the cushion, so that it keeps changing—this simple thing of sitting down and trying to let go of my thoughts. I find that amazing.

CMZ: Yes, it is an adventure. No two sits are the same. It sounds like you're reexperiencing that. In each sit we build on where we were in the last sit. And now sutra study is adding to that process.

Louise: Yes, I believe they are intricately connected.

CMZ: This conversation leads us to consider how we change through our practice. Over time a dynamic develops within a person that they might not see right away. You might have to just trust. You might have to spend time with nothing to keep you going but trust.

Louise: That's interesting that you would say "trust." Where my mind was going was "doubt."

CMZ: Well, that's two sides of the same coin.

Louise: Yes, I'm thinking of doubt not in the sense of "You have to keep proving to me," which is a common form of doubt. But it's doubt in the sense of doubting one's own inability. One has to doubt one's own perspectives in a way that opens doors as opposed to closing them. One of the interesting things about Buddhism and especially my experience so far with Cold

Mountain Zen is the advice to keep letting go as opposed to piling on. Many spiritual ideas keep us building a fortress. And this business of stripping away takes trusting the process, accepting living with uncertainty, and overcoming doubt that we can't do it.

CMZ: What has surprised you about practice?

Louise: Finding that letting go is the more important process, becoming free and unencumbered. It's a different pathway than I thought it was going to be. I have loved learning and gathering information over the course of my lifetime. In the past, I was enamored with the process of gathering. But this is so different, this letting go, this having less and less to show or to prove. Sometimes I feel like I might float away and disappear. It makes me yearn for more.



Book Review: Suzuki, Shunryu, Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness: Zen Talks on the Sandokai. Eds. Mel Weitsman and Michael Wenger. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

If you're reading this newsletter you've probably heard of Shunryu Suzuki, and you might have read his *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, one of the most influential works on Zen Buddhism in the West. First published in 1970, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* is a collection of talks on Zen compiled and

edited by Suzuki's students. Like that work, *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness* brings together talks Suzuki gave to his students, but this time the focus is on the Eighth-Century Chinese poem by Sekito Kisen, the *Sandokai*.

The talks were delivered during the summer of 1970, when Suzuki and his students from the San Francisco Zen Center were practicing many hours of zazen meditation daily and building the first Zen Buddhist monastery in America, Zenshinji (Zen Mind Heart Temple) at Tassajara in the mountains near the central coast of California. There are twelve talks devoted to a close reading and interpretation of several lines of the forty-four line ancient Chinese poem, and two additional talks, one on zazen and one delivered to a group of visiting philosophy students.

In the first two talks, Suzuki offers background on the author, translates the title, and provides historical context for interpreting the first four lines of the poem which are as follows:

The mind of the great sage of India
is intimately transmitted from West
to East.

While human faculties are sharp or
dull,

The way has no Northern or
Southern Ancestors.

As Suzuki explains, the author of these lines, Sekito Kisen (in Chinese, Shitou Xiqian, 700-790), "is the dharma grandson of the Sixth Ancestor, Daikan Eno (Ch. Dajian Huineng), and the direct descendent of Seigen Gyoshi (Ch. Qingyuan Xingsi)... Among the Sixth Ancestor's many disciples, the most prominent were Seigen Gyoshi and Nangaku Ejo. Later,

Master Tozaan Ryokai continued Seigen's lineage as the Soto school, and Master Rinzai Gigen (Ch. Linji Yixuan) continued Nangaku's lineage as the Rinzai school. Soto and Rinzai eventually became the dominant schools of Zen."

Between these two schools, there has sometimes been a competitive mentality. As dramatized in *The Platform Sutra*, Jinshu (Shenxiu), a great scholar, was presumed to inherit the robe and bowl and become the Sixth Ancestor, but Eno (Huineng), who was pounding rice in the kitchen, became the Sixth Ancestor instead. Jinshu's school was called Northern Zen, which promoted gradual enlightenment, while Eno's school became Southern Zen, which espoused sudden enlightenment. During Sekito's time, conflict and contention prevailed between the two schools. According to Suzuki, "Sekito's understanding is that the true teaching of the great sage, Shakyamuni Buddha, includes both the Southern school and the Northern School without any contradiction.... This is why he wrote the *Sandokai*. From Sekito's point of view there is no need for contention."

The poem's title, *Sandokai*, refers to a reconciliation between what the dualistic mind would see as opposing forces. The word *sanin Sandokai* means "things" or "many things," and *do* means "sameness" or "oneness." *Kai* literally means "to shake hands." As Suzuki explains, "So our understanding is that there is one whole being that includes everything, and that the many things are found in one whole being.... 'Many' and 'one' are different ways of describing one whole being. To completely understand the relationship between one great whole being and the many facets of that one great whole being is *kai*." Although the title is sometimes translated as "The *Identity* of Relative and Absolute," Suzuki instead uses the title, "The *Harmony* of Difference and Equality."

He wants readers to see that the differences don't get absorbed into oneness and then disappear. They remain, but in harmony with the whole.

The poem uses imagery and metaphors to carry this essential message that everything is Buddha Mind, and that everything is the Source. He coins the phrase "things-as-it-is" to capture the fundamental nature of reality which the *Sandokai* reveals poetically, that all phenomena are at once distinctly themselves and also the One.

The lines that occasion the title of book are an excellent example of "things-as-it-is" as non-contradictory, non-binary:

The spiritual source shines in the light;

The branching streams flow on in the dark.

Grasping at things is surely delusion;

[But harmonizing] with sameness is still not enlightenment.

Suzuki's line-by-line interpretation focuses on the ineffability of the source, which is absolutely beyond description, beyond discrimination. As he says, "The source is something that only a Buddha knows. Only when you practice zazen do you have it."

Yet, while the true source shines in the light, it is also one with the branching streams that are flowing all around us. "There is no difference," Suzuki explains, between "pure source and stream... The pure source is flowing all over, even though you don't know it. This 'don't know' is what we call 'dark,' and it is very important." Though the poem instructs us not to grasp at things, it also asserts that to ignore them "is still not enlightenment." Suzuki explains that every being is one with the pure source, and the

pure source is nothing but every being. He concludes, an “enlightened person does not ignore things and does not stick to things, not even to the truth.”

In almost every talk, Suzuki refers to the importance of practice, the importance of zazen. In the fourth talk, for example, he discusses the lines, “All the objects of the senses/interact and yet do not.” Here he points out that “when [we are] sitting, thoughts will come and go. It’s okay when they come in and it’s okay when they go out. That is zazen. When we practice in this way, even though we do not try, our mind includes everything.” And in a later talk he discusses these lines: “In the light there is darkness/but don’t take it as darkness./In the dark there is light/but don’t see it as light.” Ordinary consciousness wants to see everything as either bright or dark, good or bad. We imagine that our challenges and disappointments will no longer look dark to us once we finally awaken. But when we sit deeply, we can accept challenges as challenges, and disappointments as disappointments, because they are enlightenment, too. We don’t need to make them into something else.

Zazen allows us to accept differences because it takes us to nonduality: “You are sitting and the stream is running, and you hear it. Even though you hear it, you have no idea of stream and no idea of zazen. You are just on the black cushion. You are just there.”

The Sandokai is a teaching poem that is recited daily in many Soto Zen communities. It is poetic, philosophical, and instructional. The final lines combine all three qualities:

Practice is not a matter of far or near,
but if you are confused, mountains
and rivers block your way.

I respectfully urge you who study the
mystery,

don’t pass your days and nights in
vain.

To paraphrase Suzuki’s explanation of these lines, practicing zazen without striving to attain a goal is actually enlightenment. The Way is always right here; if we are looking somewhere else, we will be blocked.

In his characteristically straightforward approach to this complex Chinese poem, Suzuki summarizes the final lines this way: “Don’t goof off.”

