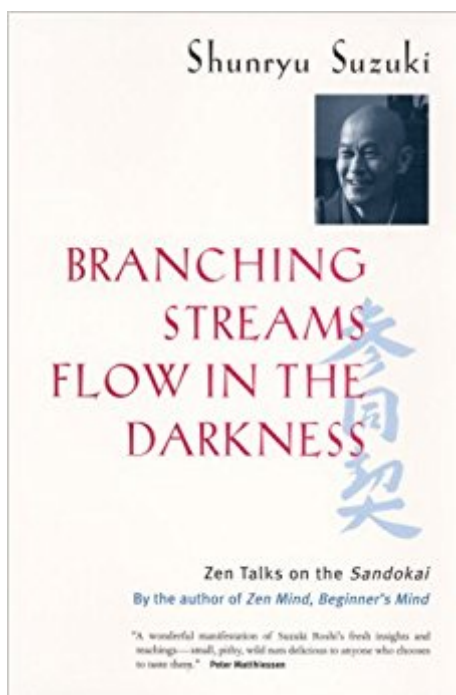


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Branching Streams Flow In The Darkness: Zen Talks On The Sandokai



Synopsis

When Shunryu Suzuki Roshi's *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* was published in 1972, it was enthusiastically embraced by Westerners eager for spiritual insight and knowledge of Zen. The book became the most successful treatise on Buddhism in English, selling more than one million copies to date. *Branching Streams Flow in the Darkness* is the first follow-up volume to Suzuki Roshi's important work. Like *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, it is a collection of lectures that reveal the insight, humor, and intimacy with Zen that made Suzuki Roshi so influential as a teacher. The Sandokai—a poem by the eighth-century Zen master Sekito Kisen (Ch. Shitou Xiqian)—is the subject of these lectures. Given in 1970 at Tassajara Zen Mountain Center, the lectures are an example of a Zen teacher in his prime elucidating a venerated, ancient, and difficult work to his Western students. The poem addresses the question of how the oneness of things and the multiplicity of things coexist (or, as Suzuki Roshi expresses it, "things-as-it-is"). Included with the lectures are his students' questions and his direct answers to them, along with a meditation instruction. Suzuki Roshi's teachings are valuable not only for those with a general interest in Buddhism but also for students of Zen practice wanting an example of how a modern master in the Japanese Soto Zen tradition understands this core text today.

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Customer Reviews

This book is billed as a sequel to *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, Suzuki's classic collection of talks on Zen, but it stands on its own considerable merits as an eloquent, humorous series of lectures on the

Sandokai, an eighth-century poem central to the Soto Zen tradition. These lectures show Suzuki, head priest of Tassajara monastery in California until his death in 1971, using his line-by-line exposition of the poem to illuminate what it means to practice Zen Buddhism. He stresses the simultaneity of the relative and the absolute, skillfully using words to direct his listeners toward understanding, all the while emphasizing that words are merely fingers pointing at the moon of enlightenment. Suzuki's devaluation of the verbal frees him to embrace humor and paradox as teaching methods; his examples range from ancient Chinese stories to anecdotes about weeding in the Tassajara garden and encountering an earwig. Readers of his previous book will be familiar with his earthy, clear, intense style. This book also conveys the texture of monastery life; it recounts 12 consecutive talks and includes the question-and-answer sessions at the end of each talk. These exchanges offer some of the most fascinating parts of an already excellent book, as they explicate some of the unclear points and illuminate the indirect yet confrontational quality of traditional Japanese Zen teaching. (Nov.) Copyright 1999 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Suzuki (1904[^]-1971) came to San Francisco in 1959, established the first Zen Buddhist monastery in the U.S., and wrote the seminal Zen text for Westerners, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind* (1972). Toward the end of his life, Suzuki presented a series of talks based on the Sandokai, an eighth-century poem written by the Chinese Zen master Sekito Kisen. An elegant set of 22 couplets, it addresses a number of dichotomies, such as light and dark and sharp or dull, and it is chanted daily in Zen temples. In his cogent discussions and the question-and-answer sessions that follow--edited for publication by Mel Weitsman of the Berkeley Zen Center and Michael Wenger of the San Francisco Zen Center--Suzuki worked his way through the entire poem, expounding on the meanings of the Sandokai's imagery and its relevance to Buddhist practice and to life.

Zen practitioners recite the venerable Chinese poem "Identity of Relative and Absolute" on a regular basis, but comprehending its paradoxes seems out of reach to many. This book is a compilation of talks given by Shunryu Suzuki, founding Roshi of the San Francisco Zen Center, a year before his death. Suzuki Roshi breaks down the poem into two- or four-line stanzas and discusses each one with a group of students, with a question-and-answer section at the end of each chapter. Although the reader may not come away with instant understanding, there is plenty of food for contemplation. Suzuki Roshi's profound wisdom and humor make this a one-of-a-kind book on Zen.

Publication of "Branching Streams," the commentary on the Sandokai by Shunryu Suzuki is a great

benefit to those of us learning about Zen, and life, here in the West. Also, to those of us who "practice" or try to learn about Zen without benefit of teachers, and the guided life of a monastery. With this book we are there with Zen monks, sitting in the Dharma Hall learning the wisdom passed down by the "ancient sages" from the golden age of Zen. Of course, this is also a great benefit to those, such as monks, living a life dedicated to enlightenment and living the Way. I can't begin to explain the Sandokai itself, or Master Suzuki's insightful commentary--suffice it to say that its true wisdom presented in a skillful way to help anyone living the most more mundane and ordinary life.

IMHO a brilliant text on Zen Buddhism by the foremost Zen Buddhist teacher in America, the late Shunryu Suzuki! The impermanence of form and transmitting the lamp outside of the teaching is as always realizing egolessness, selflessness or no-mind--true composure--and living a beneficial life. That is all. That is Zen Buddhism. It is understood in the relative sense by a basic reading of the Ten Grave Precepts. Suzuki's teaching however is full of wit, honesty, kindness and compassion.

This is a collection of talks about the Sandokai, an ancient Chinese poem that is regularly chanted in Zen circles. The poem itself is quite obscure when you first read it and the talks are similarly obscure at first. The rational mind finds it difficult to understand how you can, to take one of his examples, kill earwigs without violating the Buddhist precept against killing. Shunryu Suzuki uses such examples to try to help us move past our usual dualistic thinking. And, somehow, it works. By the end of the book when the poem is repeated in Suzuki's translation, it makes sense. He has successfully lead us into a place of darkness, that is a place beyond intellectual understanding. A book to be read slowly, in small doses, and to be contemplated, rather than analyzed and thought about.

Shunryu Suzuki books have the right blend of knowledge, inspiration and humour. This one captures a course he taught on a famous short piece of zen literature called the Sandokai. He knows how to interpret, explain and reveal without being pedantic, abstruse or arrogantly vague. Shunryu Suzuki's lectures on the Sandokai is an occasion for understanding zen, ourselves, and living everyday life.

This book is largely a well-executed editing effort of a number of talks that Suzuki Roshi gave of the Sandokai, a poem written in the early zen years. The poem, written by the Eighth Ancestor in China, Sekito Kisen, was intended to bridge a perceived (and I am hesitant to say) 'philisophical' gap

between two zen schools of the time. One appealed to the 'clever', and the other appealed to the 'dull'. The Sandokai reveals that Buddha-nature transcends all such interpretations. Each talk addresses a different section of the poem. Each chapter begins with the section of the poem that will be discussed. At the end of each talk there is discussion, consisting of questions from the students followed by the Roshi's response. While superficially, bridging the gap between the "northern school" and the "southern school" was the impetus, we learn from the Roshi the poem's many deeper meanings. By reading the talks one begins to realize the great import of this poem as a primary and essential work. Anyone who has read Suzuki's first book can attest to the Roshi's keen ability to impart the most complex subjects on a simple and understandable level. He does so in a way that also recognizes the limitations of such talks. While this text was clearly not intended to be an introduction to practice, those who regularly practice will find it an invaluable work, and those, such as I, who have worn out the covers of 'Zen Mind Beginner's Mind' over many, many years won't be disappointed. The Sandokai is addressed by the Master in a most refreshing, sometimes humorous, and most enlightening way. I look forward to wearing out this book as much as the first.

Zenji Suzuki is a master with a mission, to help us unenlightened get a deeper and clearer understanding of what his committed practice of zazen have lead him to: insight into his own nature - his "original face before he was born". He talks directly to us in a clear and non-esoteric way, a way designed to inform us and hopefully lead us into the same path he undertook many years ago. The path is not the understanding of the path, however, as he stresses to us. This book is the menu, but it is not the food.

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