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10.

Zero

1952

I said, "We take things apart in order that they may become the Buddha. And if that seems too Oriental an idea for you," I said, "Remember the early Christian Gnostic statement, 'Split the stick and there is Jesus!'"

In Suzuki's class at Columbia, as students lean toward him glassy-eyed, he's considering a profound question—perhaps *the* Buddhist question. He wonders: How can it be that all things interpenetrate?

Suzuki answers his own question. He observes that the somethings have no fixed or fundamental essence or identity; they exist only due to causes and conditions. They are empty of any "walls" at all, and that's why they can interpenetrate.

In *Third Series,* Suzuki is never far away from the Heart Sutra, the concentrated essence of Mahayana Buddhism. The Heart Sutra is a dance of the interpenetration and absolute identity of something and nothing, the phenomenal world and its source. Suzuki sums up the turning insight of Buddhist wisdom:

> [T]his world constructed by the notions belonging to the category of causation is declared by Mahayana Buddhists to be empty (*sunya*), not born (*anutpada*), and without self-nature (*asvabhava*).

The Heart Sutra opens onto the scenery of profound enlightenment. The setting is the same as in the Flower Garland, but the viewpoint has shifted. Now we're looking through the eyes of the great bodhisattva of compassion, Avalokiteshvara, whose name translates (loosely) as "one who looks down and hears the suffering of the world."

Avalokiteshvara, who is not from the human realm, has been "doing deep *prajnaparamita*"—that is to say, meditating in the cloudless heart realms of transcendent wisdom. One of the Buddha's principal disciples approaches. Shariputra, the disciple, has attained a certain eminence by studying hard and achieving great things among his peers; in his own mind, perhaps, he might say he has gotten somewhere.

With magnificent and unnerving clarity, Avalokiteshvara sets out to show Shariputra what's what. The opening words of the Heart Sutra flow out of Avalokiteshvara's great heart of compassion:

"Oh Shariputra, form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form. Form is exactly emptiness; emptiness exactly form. Sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness are likewise like this."

Then—rather than telling Shariputra what the world *is*—Avalokiteshvara tells him what it's *not*. All created things are "forms of emptiness; not born, not destroyed, not stained, not pure, without loss, without gain."

In emptiness "there is no form, no sensation, conception, discrimination, awareness"; no realm of the senses and no realm of consciousness; "no ignorance and no end to ignorance; no old age and death and no end to old age and death; no suffering, no cause of suffering," nowhere to go and nothing to attain, "no path, no wisdom, and no gain."

THE HEART SUTRA presents a series of turnings. At the outset, Avalokiteshvara's list of "nots and nos" turns Shariputra's mind toward the Absolute.

In the second turning, the string of negations somehow leads to enlightenment. What's the transformation? Avalokiteshvara, not bothering to explain, just points to how an enlightened being lives: "with no hindrance in the mind; no hindrance, therefore no fear."

Śūnya (or *shunya*) is the Sanskrit word for zero. *Śūnyatā* (or *shunyata*) is usually translated as "emptiness." Zero is the linguistic root of emptiness. (The word is pronounced "shunyata" but can be spelled either way.)

Everything that is born, Suzuki writes, is caught up in a web of cause and effect. We think that's all there is, but we're deeply conditioned by our own senses.

To see the essence, look into "zero," Suzuki tells us.

> This Emptiness of all things . . . enveloping, as it were, all the worlds with their multitudinous objects, is what makes possible the [Flower Garland's] intuition of interpenetration and unobstructedness.

It's *because* everything is empty—it's *because* this world is like a bubble on the stream—that this interlocking chain of cause and effect can arise, can transform, can appear to us as real. If things weren't empty, how could they change?

As the Flower Garland Sutra itself proclaims:

> He who realizes that the nature of things is without solidity
> Appears in all the boundless lands of the ten directions:
> Expounding the inconceivability of the realm of buddhahood,
> He causes all to return to the ocean of liberation.

Suzuki reminds us: "This declaration is not a logical inference, but the intuition of the Mahayanist genius."

THE HEART SUTRA

Chanted and/or sung throughout the Buddhist universe, the Heart Sutra is an invocation—in Sanskrit, a *dharani*—of the path of liberation. In fewer than three hundred Chinese characters, it distills the millions of words of a sutra called Prajna Paramita, or "perfection of wisdom": *prajna* = wisdom; *paramita* = perfection. (The full text of the Heart Sutra is printed at the end of this book.)

The third and final turning is a mantra. Beyond the words, beyond the conceptual mind, beyond the dualities and the walls, just:

"Gaté! Gaté! Paragaté! Parasamgaté! Bodhi Svaha!"

Gone beyond [delusions]! Gone beyond [the ignorance of samsara]! Gone way beyond! Gone to the other shore! Awakened!

D. T. SUZUKI knows how devastating this string of "nos" can seem. The Heart Sutra might scare us into thinking that it's "almost nothing else but a series of negations," Suzuki writes, "and that what is known as Emptiness is pure negativism which ultimately reduces all things into nothingness." He assures us that this appearance of nihilism is not what the sutra is aiming for.

All these negations serve as a koan, Suzuki writes. The koan "defies intellectual interpretation, and thus without explicitly telling us to walk the path of negation it makes us do so."

After years of wrestling with the koan, young inquiring minds will "come to an explosion some day." They, too, will reach a zero point.

At that turning moment, Suzuki says, "mountains are there, the cherries are in full bloom, the moon shines most brightly in the autumnal night; but at the same time they are more than particularities, they appeal to us with a deeper meaning, they are understood in relation to what they are not."

The mountains, after being nothing at all, are now mountains again. We are in the heart of the Heart Sutra, Suzuki says. The mountains are mountains, *and* they are empty.

"And at the end of all these negations," he adds, "there is neither knowledge nor attainment of any sort."

No path, no wisdom, and no gain.

SUZUKI WARNS US that a dharani (such as the Heart Sutra) is not an intellectual exposition. "'*Gaté, gaté,* etc.' does not seem to give any sense," he exclaims. "What has been so far clear and rational goes at once through a

miraculous transformation." The Heart Sutra "is turned into a text of mystic formula, a book of incantation."

[Q:] *In your Eastern itinerary, first there was India, then the Far East.*

[Cage:] *Yes, you could conclude an evolution of that kind from my works. The early ones could have been considered expressive. It sometimes seemed to me that I managed to "say" something in them. When I discovered India, what I was saying started to change. And when I discovered China and Japan, I changed the* very fact of saying anything: *I said nothing anymore. Silence: since everything already communicates, why wish to communicate?...*

The silences speak for me, they demonstrate quite well that I am no longer there.

[Q:] *They are no longer expressive silences?*

[Cage:] *No. They say nothing. Or, if you prefer, they are beginning to speak* Nothingness!

IN THE QUIETEST PLACE

It's early summer 1952. By now, Cage has been thinking and writing and talking about something and nothing for months. He hasn't yet noticed there's a problem: In his mind, something and nothing—earth and heaven remain conceptually divided. That's how they were when he wrote "Lecture on Something." He said back then: "All the somethings in the world begin to sense their at-one-ness when something happens that reminds them of nothing."

After a whole semester of Suzuki's class, "something" and "nothing" have planted themselves in Cage's thinking, and some radical act is needed to detonate the dualism they perpetrate. Cage needs to make a leap of the heart. Fortunately, an explosion is headed his way.

In August 1952, as we know, he returns to Black Mountain with M[illegible]

Cunningham and David Tudor. In the company of many friends, and in this place of wide-open experiment, Cage sets out to honor his teachers of transcendent wisdom. Gratitude practice is an inevitable result of what he's been through. Gratitude leads him to read *The Huang Po Doctrine of Universal Mind* to the Black Mountain assembly. Gratitude to Suzuki's teachings on the Flower Garland Sutra creates the interpenetrating form of *Theater Piece #1.*

Now it's near the end of August and he's on his way to Boston. After leaving Black Mountain, he stops in at "America's first synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island," and feels gratified to see the chairs arranged in the same pattern of four isometric triangles he used in his event, so that "the congregation was seated in the same way, facing itself." Then he tells us:

> *From Rhode Island I went on to Cambridge and in the anechoic chamber at Harvard University heard that silence was not the absence of sound but was the unintended operation of my nervous system and the circulation of my blood. It was this experience and the white paintings of Rauschenberg that led me to compose* 4'33", *which I had described in a lecture at Vassar College some years before when I was in the flush of my studies* [sic] *with Suzuki.*

Cage was not his own best historian. As we know, it's impossible that he could have studied with Suzuki in 1948. Then why do we trust him with this date of 1952 for his encounter with the anechoic chamber? (Elsewhere he says it was 1951.)

But let's say it's 1952, for a couple of reasons: First, the story of his visit to the synagogue has the advantage of a clear sequence of events. Second, it seems likely that the anechoic chamber gave Cage the final impetus to bring *4'33"* into being.

For years, Cage has been trying to find perfect silence: looking for God and for perfect ceasing. Ramakrishna has offered the promise that silence = God. Meister Eckhart has told Cage that His word is heard in silence. The Hindus speak of the silence of Brahman. Cage has been inserting passages of silence into his works for years.

And now D. T. Suzuki is telling his students to "see into where there is

no 'something.'" Cage is naturally curious about what Zen masters are so urgently pointing to. Since sound has always been Cage's path, it seems logical to assume that perfect silence will give him entry into "nothing." the Absolute.

He knows that Harvard University has an anechoic chamber, a sound-proof box lined with sound-absorbing baffles, guaranteeing the most perfect silence on earth. Perhaps he has heard news stories praising this "remarkable room" that absorbs "99.8 or more per cent" of the energy of a sound wave.

Cage takes his seat in the anechoic chamber (and we invisibly take a seat alongside him). The door softly shuts and he's alone here in this cozy womb-like absorbent-walled chamber of "nothing." And he's stunned! It's not what he's been expecting! Where's the silence!?! He's hearing a dull roar and a high whine!

In this moment of voidness, Cage's ears fill up with sound. He rushes from the anechoic chamber and urges the engineer to explain. The engineer asks Cage to describe the sounds. Cage tells him. The high whine, says the engineer, is the firing of his neurons. The dull roar is the blood flowing through Cage's veins.

And it appeared to me, when I went through my work, or what was to become my work, that the experience I had had in the sound-proof room at Harvard was a turning point. I had honestly and naively thought that some actual silence existed. So I had not really thought about the question of silence. I had not really put silence to the test. I had never looked into its impossibility. So when I went into that sound-proof room, I really expected to hear nothing. With no idea of what nothing could sound like. The instant I heard myself producing two sounds, my blood circulating and my nervous system in operation, I was stupefied. For me, that was the turning point.

But what kind of turning point was it? What did he see?

In other words, there is no split between spirit and matter. And to realize this, we have only suddenly to a-wake to the fact.

In the anechoic chamber, Cage realizes he has been dividing the world into dualisms—something and nothing, earth and heaven—but now he sees his error. In the quietest place on earth, he hears *himself.* Seeking silence—looking for the vacuum where "he" is not—Cage hears the ceaseless buzz of *being.* There is *no such thing as silence.* The concept is a head trip, a fiction of language. Everything interpenetrates—Suzuki said so, and Cage knows he's right. Form *is* emptiness and emptiness *is* form.

Suzuki's teachings suddenly make sense.

And what Suzuki said is that all the somethings are present right here, in each moment, springing from the nothing that is their basis.

In the quietest place on earth, John Cage hears the music of the world.

Form is what interests everyone and fortunately it is wherever you are and there is no place where it isn't. Highest truth, that is.

The anechoic chamber inspired a profound turning. Cage never forgot the message. The experience was still vivid in 1967 when he appeared in a film, *Sound,* paired with another rising star: raucous jazz saxophonist Rahsaan Roland Kirk. In *Sound,* the portly Kirk dazzlingly plays three saxophones at a time—jamming them into his mouth and whacking at them with his fingers—while he passes out whistles to children. Cage, by contrast, is a cool hipster, handsome and intense in a long black coat, with the stony, soulful gravitas of Humphrey Bogart in *The Maltese Falcon.* He sweeps through various settings, pronouncing koan-like sayings about music. First he asks: "Is there such a thing as silence?" Then he does nonsensical things: rides a hobbyhorse, scoots down a children's slide, stalks around an empty room. "And so contemporary music is not so much art as it is life," he intones loftily. At last he answers his own question: "There is no such thing as silence. Get thee to an anechoic chamber."

[S]ilence is not acoustic. It is a change of mind, a turning around.

ON THE ROAD TO WOODSTOCK

It's the end of August, 1952. Carolyn and Earle Brown, John Cage, David Tudor, and M. C. Richards are all driving up the Hudson Valley together headed to the little Catskills art colony of Woodstock. The Browns have just moved to Manhattan, and already they're on an adventure. Cage carries a new score, which will prove to be his most notorious, most perplexing creation. The turning moment of silence in the American arts is about to be given its debut.

Tudor is on the bill as the featured pianist at the Maverick Concert Hall in a benefit sponsored by the Woodstock Artists Association for its Artists' Welfare Fund. The Maverick is a drafty, hand-built barn—a "rustic music chapel"—built on the property of turn-of-the-century novelist and poet Hervey White.

Maverick concerts in the early 1950s drew a clique of traditional musicians. Among them was composer and concert violinist William Kroll, who founded the Kroll Quartet, taught in New York and Baltimore, and divided his summers between Woodstock, New York, and Tanglewood in the Berkshires of Massachusetts, where he was director of the chamber music series. Leon Barzin, another local luminary, pulled weight as conductor, violinist, and musical director of the National Orchestral Association and the New York City Ballet.

In 1952, Maverick had its own Society for New Music, at which all the same names repeat. Maverick audiences were drawn from an equally small pool; new faces were rare enough to occasion a comment in the local press.

Into this tempest-tossed teapot came John Cage.

BY NOW, Cowell has shed his troubles. In this woodsy community of creative people, nobody cares about his prison past. Cozied into his little white frame house a few miles up a country road in Shady, Henry is well connected in the local arts scene. Woodstock legend (as well as logic) suggests that Cowell is the go-between in devising this concert. He has promised the Maverick a stimulating evening of new music.

A homegrown Woodstock newspaper has described the event as a "lecture-recital" by the "experimental composer" John Cage. The rest of the program is stacked with the music of Cage's cohorts: Christian Wolff (*For Piano* and *For Prepared Piano*), Morton Feldman (*Extensions #3* and *5 Intermissions*), Earle Brown (*3 Pieces for Piano*), and Pierre Boulez (*Première Sonate*). The evening will end with the eerie piano-string wails of Henry Cowell's *The Banshee.*

THE PERFORMANCE

Carolyn, Earle, M.C., and John settle onto hard wooden benches and chairs in the Maverick. Behind them, the gambrel roof of the barn holds an arch of old window sashes, a homegrown Woodstock version of a cathedral's stained-glass rose window. In front of them is a small, shin-high stage, low enough so a performer can step up in one hop.

Outside, the soft gray sky is sultry and threatening rain. Peeking at the program, the audience can see Cage's music listed twice. The first piece of the evening is identified simply by the date. Later titled *Water Music*—a first cousin of *Water Walk*—it's scored for such noisemakers as a duck call, three whistles, a deck of cards, water gurgling from containers, a radio, and a stopwatch. (Cage has already presented this piece at the New School for Social Research in May and at Black Mountain College on August 12.)

Just before Cowell's *The Banshee,* the program lists a second work by Cage.

To play it, Tudor sits at the piano, sets out a stopwatch, carefully closes the keyboard lid, studies the score, and doesn't move for thirty seconds. He raises the lid and looks at the stopwatch.

He carefully closes the lid, studies the score, and doesn't move for two minutes and twenty-three seconds, as wind gusts through the wide-open doors at the rear of the hall and rain titters on the roof.

He raises the lid and looks at the stopwatch. He carefully closes the lid, studies the score, and doesn't move for one minute and forty seconds, while people mutter and rustle in their seats. Then he stands up and walks offstage.

Cage dryly observes the interesting sounds people make as they walk out of the hall.

That's it. Not much, right?

Then the aftermath begins. And it has proved momentous.

THE WRATH OF THE SCORNED

The furor that arose around *4'33"* inflamed the town for weeks afterward. The anger was so great, Cage observed, that he lost friends. "They missed the point," he said. "There is no such thing as silence."

Eleven days later, on October 9, a letter scorched the pages of a now-defunct local newspaper. The writer chose to be anonymous, and was identified only as "an internationally known musician, composer and conductor." The newspaper clipping betrays the fury of a music lover scorned.

> We had been told that Cage's show had been quite impressive in New York last winter and we were all looking forward to a stimulating evening of musical experimentation. Precedents were to be broken. The Maverick was to be alive with music on a weekday evening, the sacred hall was at last going to ring with something new. We anticipated an honest, though controversial musical adventure.
>
> What did we get? A poorly timed comedy show with worn-out musical gags repeated over and over again, boredom extended ad infinitum, yea, ad nauseam.

The duck calls and water pitchers were bad enough, but the worst offender, *4'33",* brought the letter writer to stuttering outrage.

> This form of phony musical Dadaism built up by sensational publicity, frightens audiences away from the real music of our times. The arrogance of its nihilistic sophistries might be just amusing to most people. But there is a war of nerves against common sense today particularly in all fields of art. And if we don't check these insipid fungus growths

that eat into the common sense of our people, their destructive influence will grow and gradually undermine the health and vitality of our civilization.

4'33" EVER SINCE

Over the next half century, *4'33"* has continued to be confounding on many fronts at once. Practically everything about it—including its informal title, the "silent piece"—is contested in one way or another.

One can easily get lost in the minutiae of *4'33"*—the several scores, the differing instructions, the later versions—and miss the big issues. Cage was still trying to get the message across in 1988, four years before his death:

[Cage:] *I knew that it would be taken as a joke and a renunciation of work, whereas I also knew that if it was done it would be the highest form of work. Or this form of work: an art without work. I doubt whether many people understand it yet.*

[Q:] *Well, the traditional understanding is that it opens you up to the sounds that exist around you and . . .*

[Cage:] *. . . and to the acceptance of anything . . .*

[Q:] *. . . yes . . .*

[Cage:] *. . . even when you have something as the basis. And that's how it's misunderstood.*

[Q:] *What's a better understanding of it?*

[Cage:] *It opens you up to any possibility* only *when nothing is taken as the basis. But most people don't understand that, as far as I can tell.*

Stepping gingerly around the bog of interpretations, we go to Suzuki and ask his advice. "Properly speaking, Zen has its own field where it functions to its best advantage," he tells us at the beginning of *Third Series*. "As soon as it wanders outside this field, it loses its natural colour and to that extent ceases to be itself. When it attempts to explain itself by means of a philosophical system it is no longer Zen pure and simple; it partakes of something which does not strictly belong to it."

So—let's predict—all the musicological interpretations of *4'33"* are doomed to fail. They all consist of tossing sticks (forms) into emptiness.

Then what is *4'33"*? Before anything else, it's an experience.

David Tudor walks across the stage and sits down within the boundaryless universe. He crosses his legs (so to speak) and begins an interval of non-doing.

As the stopwatch ticks, he will perform "nothing."

In these four-plus minutes an opening occurs.

No expression of will or ego.

No walls between composer and performer.

No walls between the pianist and the people listening.

No dualistic divisions into "high" or "low," "good" or "not good."

No "art" versus "life."

No value judgments and no lack of value judgments.

No arising and no lack of arising.

No separation of any kind—no walls at all—and therefore perfect interpenetration.

No form and no lack of form, no emptiness and no absence of emptiness.

No sensation and no lack of sensation.

No music and yet the music of the world.

Well, I use it constantly in my life experience. 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. . . .

But the important thing, surely, about having done it, finally, is that it leads out of the world of art into the whole of life. When I write a piece, I try to write it in such a way that it won't interrupt this other piece which is already going on.

Cage had (two years earlier) decided to adopt Zen discipline in the form of chance operations. Music was silent prayer—he knew that already. For almost a decade he had been seeking the perfect vehicle. So is *4'33"* Cage's version of zazen? Okay, that's fine—but what is zazen? Crossing one's legs? Watching the breath? Saying nothing? Waiting for the bell to ring? That's where the beginner begins.

After a bit more practice, however, zazen expands.

Everything interpenetrates, right? Sitting silently, where are you? Who are you? What are you sitting within?

As you cross your legs on the cushion, singing a dharani of transformation, the whole world flows in and through you, and all around you. The totality of Creation is sitting with you. Where are the walls? Sitting zazen, you take apart the bricks one at a time, look at them carefully, and set them down. At the end of the process, where are the walls?

[A] religious spirit in which one feels there is nothing to which one is not related. . . . This is the experience of silence.

Suzuki's mindstream pervades this moment like a perfume. We notice that *4'33"* is not an *interpretation* of Suzuki's teachings, but it *embodies* them perfectly.

In this interval of silence and non-doing, *4'33"* is always itself.

It is always wide open to everything that passes through it.

The ego-oval is emptied out to welcome the flow from all directions.

Not a single thought arises in *4'33"*.

The ego noise of the audience, on the other hand, is deafening.

The composer has not expressed anything.

Instead, he has expressed nothing.

And the "music of the world" arises from the ground that is no ground at all—unnamed and unnameable, empty of categories, beyond anything that can be said about it—the nothing that sings.

I've seen *4'33"* in many locations and circumstances. At Carnegie Hall in New York, pianist Margaret Leng Tan theatrically raised her arms over the piano keyboard. Her descending hands halted just above the keys. The well-trained audience froze, respectfully. The overheated room seemed to have soaked up all the music ever played within its walls.

At the Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, on Fifth Avenue, I slipped through a door into the garden. On a green lawn enclosed by a low wall that did nothing to keep out the roar of Manhattan, a percussion ensemble got the message and stood with their hands folded and their heads slightly bowed. A traffic helicopter whacked by overhead. Taxi drivers leaned on their horns.

At the Maverick Hall in Woodstock, recitalist Pedja Muzijevic stepped to the stage and took David Tudor's former seat at the piano. Muzijevic, whose path has led him from Sarajevo to the touring pianist's universe, introduced *4'33"*: "The reason we do anything from the past is because it has application to the present. The whole interest of 'nothing coming at you' is so different now than it was in 1952." We are bombarded now, he said. He sat, unmoving, without lifting his hands or changing position. Everyone simply sat silently with him, gratefully.

> *[E]veryday life is more interesting than forms of celebration, when we become aware of it. That* when *is when our intentions go down to zero. Then suddenly you notice that the world is magical.*

We observe that *4'33"* is always itself, and it's always wide open to everything. This apparent paradox is actually the piece's perfection. It give-

perfect freedom to performers, even though they may misunderstand and misinterpret. And it gives a perfect opening to people, who will unfailingly reveal who they are: arrogant, dismissive, argumentative and/or peaceful, accepting, reverent. The sarcastic comments on YouTube in response to the Barbican's performance of *4′33″* are a case in point.

Having seen the emptiness of ego noise, however, we are unruffled. Even the flaming rage of the anonymous Woodstock letter writer takes its place in a world of shadows.

LINES IN A WHITE VOID

Cage's music of the early 1950s was circling around the great spiritual questions, so it's perhaps not surprising that those questions re-arise in *4′33″*. It's intriguing to see how far and how fast Cage was moving. A year and a half after his discovery of chance operations—and Morton Feldman's invention of indeterminate scores—Cage was well beyond the compositional device of throwing coins, even as he continued to use it.

Instead, *4′33″* beats Feldman hands down. It's the most indeterminate piece of music ever written.

The only "determinate" part of *4′33″* is its score. And the score is just some lines on paper. Interesting. Those lines—what are they? Just marks, like Suzuki's chalk-drawn oval. Traditional scores fill their pages with symbols that suggest to performers what sounds they should make. Cage, however, is signifying only durations—mental divisions that are not dividing anything. In the score of *4′33″* there is no "should." The score is empty, just like its performance.

> *Once when I was to give a talk at Teachers College, Columbia, I asked Joseph Campbell whether I should say something (I forget now what it was I was thinking of saying). He said, "Where is the 'should'?"*

Cage created three versions of the score of *4′33″*. The first—according to David Tudor, who in 1989 reconstructed the now-lost original—consisted of ordinary music-composition paper that had almost nothing written on

it. The second score, dedicated to Irwin Kremen, dates from 1953 and is written in proportional notation on blank paper. Vertical lines indicate the length of the durations; one page (Cage tells us) equals seven inches equals fifty-six minutes.

The third score was published by C. F. Peters in 1961 (copyright 1960). It's a single sheet of paper. At the top is a short text:

I
TACET
II
TACET
III
TACET

"Tacet" is the instruction in a score that tells one instrument to be silent in the midst of the sounding of the other instruments of the orchestra.

The Peters-published score includes Cage's instruction that "the work may be performed by any instrumentalist or combination of instrumentalists and last any length of time."

IN CREATING SEVERAL versions of the score, Cage must have known what he was doing. How could it be otherwise? He would understand that the score of *4'33"* is as empty as the performance; that it could be "written" in many ways.

The score of *4'33"* is a proposition. It says, in notational shorthand: Stop for a moment and look around you and listen; stop and look; stop and listen.

The roar of *being* never ceases. Cage has "divided" what can never be divided. We have to assume that he knew it couldn't be divided. He would have been aware that in *4'33"* he was making marks on the river of infinity.

[A]nd what other important questions are there? Than that we live and how to do it in a state of accord with Life.

ZERO = INFINITY

In Suzuki's world—the world of Hua-yen Buddhism and the Heart Sutra—zero is a metaphor for shunyata. As Suzuki said in *Third Series,* shunya = zero. Shunyata, then, is zero magnified to a universal principle, a statement about the Absolute.

Suzuki doesn't say much about zero in *Third Series,* and he probably didn't devote much time to it in the first classes at Columbia, since he was rushing to present the complex teachings of the Flower Garland Sutra and the Heart Sutra. But at other times, according to people who attended his Columbia course, he would devote whole class sessions to zero.

And he did write about zero elsewhere. In an article he prepared for *Zen and the Birds of Appetite,* a little book by the American Catholic monk Thomas Merton, Suzuki said this:

> Metaphysically speaking, it is the mind that realizes the truth of Emptiness, and when this is done it knows that there is no self, no ego, no *Atman* [an eternal ego soul] that will pollute the mind, which is a state of zero. It is out of this zero that all good is performed and all evil is avoided. The zero I speak of is not a mathematical symbol. It is the infinite—a storehouse or womb (*Garbha*) of all possible good or values.
>
> zero = infinity, and infinity = zero.
>
> The double equation is to be understood not only statically but dynamically. It takes place between being and becoming.

A few pages later, Suzuki gently warns against the illusion that we are achieving something or going somewhere by "emptying out." What would you get rid of? Where is the trash bin? He continues:

> Zen emptiness is not the emptiness of nothingness, but the emptiness of fullness in which there is "no gain, no loss, no increase, no decrease," in

which this equation takes place: zero = infinity. The Godhead is no other than this equation.

And when the Godhead (emptiness) is not dualistically separated from the world (form)—when *form is emptiness* and *emptiness is form*—then it's all right here. Where else would it be? The non-dual Tao is the Way, Suzuki continued, in words that recall the koan about eating the piece of cake:

The strange thing, however, is: when we experience it [Suzuki writes] we cease to ask questions about it, we accept it, we just live it. Theologians, dialecticians and existentialists may go on discussing the matter, but the ordinary people . . . live "the mystery." A Zen master was once asked:

Q. What is Tao? (We may take Tao as meaning the ultimate truth or reality.)

A. It is one's everyday mind.

Q. What is one's everyday mind?

A. When tired, you sleep; when hungry, you eat.

Inevitably, Cage ran into interviewers who insisted on turning shunyata, the Godhead, into an intellectual experience. He kept urging them to "eat the cake" (so to speak), but—not surprisingly—they didn't get it. Just live the mystery, he said. But they struggled through their fog and confusion.

[Q:] *It would then be false to think that Zen sets an end, a stop, a goal for itself—which would, for example, be the state of illumination in which all things reveal themselves as nothingness.*

[Cage:] *This nothingness is still just a word.*

[Q:] *Like silence, it must cancel itself out.*

[Cage:] *And consequently we come back to what exists; to sounds, that is.*

[Q:] *But don't you lose something?*

[Cage:] *What?*

[Q:] *Silence, nothingness. . . .*

[Cage:] *You see quite well that I'm losing* nothing! *In all of this, it's not a question of* losing, *but of* gaining!

INTO THE MUSIC

Cage has just given *4'33"* its public airing. He has finally been able to find a form for the silence he's been nurturing for decades. In that null zone, that place of quiet and surcease, that zero of transformation, there is a pivot.

Cage has reached the peak of the mountain. Up here the view is glorious and inhospitable. His hair is tumbled and frosted by a stiff wind. He balances precariously on the rocky summit. He is a human projectile in the domain of blue. Below him lies the ordinary world's woven carpet of trees, roads, kitchens, beds. All around him, up here, an element bubbles through his bloodstream yet alienates his body. Where he stands, sky is everywhere; there is nowhere that isn't touched by it. The view is vast and empty.

He can't grasp it. And he can't live here.

Now what? A Zen teacher will tell you: The next step always leads back down, into the music.

[Q:] *The basic message of Silence seems to be that everything is permitted.*

[Cage:] *Everything is permitted if zero is taken as the basis. That's the part that isn't often understood. If you're nonintentional, then everything is permitted. If you're intentional, for instance if you want to murder someone, then it's not permitted. The same thing can be true musically.*

NOT ENOUGH OF NOTHING

It's 1954, two years after the debut of *4'33"*. Cage and Tudor are scheduled to perform at the Donaueschingen music festival in Germany that September. In October, Cage will go on to speak at the Composers' Concourse in London. He expects to have time to prepare the London talk while he and Tudor sail to Europe. But the ship collides with another vessel and returns to port, and Cage and Tudor are forced to fly to Amsterdam. Cage loses his anticipated free time to write.

As he relates in *Silence,* he feverishly pieced together the speech in trains and hotel lobbies and restaurants during his European tour. The London talk, "45' for a Speaker," uses chance operations to wedge together fragments of earlier texts and new realizations. Huang Po's instructions to let go of thoughts interpenetrate with comments on chance and the *I Ching,* and occasional phrases from "Lecture on Nothing" and "Lecture on Something."

This talk is something of a chopped salad, so it's intriguing that Suzuki's teachings on zero are flavoring Cage's thinking. In "45' for a Speaker," Cage has noticed the emptiness of the categories and rules advocated by Schoenberg and the proponents of twelve-tone music.

> *However there is a story I have found very helpful. What's so interesting about technique anyway?* What if there are twelve tones in a row? *What row? This seeing of cause and effect is not emphasized but instead one makes an identification with what is here and now. He then spoke of two qualities. Unimpededness and Interpenetration.*

"*What if there are twelve tones in a row?* What row?"—Could Cage have written that observation without Suzuki's lectures on the Heart Sutra?

Cage adds instructions to the talk—"Bang fist on table"—"Yawn"—"Lean

on elbow"—that must have turned the piece into performance art. These nonsensical actions are scattered among phrases from his great turning moments, such as the one in the anechoic chamber:

Form
is what interests everyone and fortunately
it is wherever you are and there is
no place where it isn't. Highest truth,
that is.

WHERE THE HEART BEATS

A couple of years later, Cage created an imaginary dialogue between himself and a composer he fiercely admired: Erik Satie.

Cage had honored Satie in 1948 in his talk at Black Mountain. Back then, it had seemed that Satie's free Gallic spirit offered the perfect counterpoint to society's obsessive Beethoven worship. Among other things, Satie couldn't care less about scandal, and thus represented a ruthless independence from habitual musical thinking, a viewpoint that naturally won Cage's allegiance.

So Cage returned for another look at a composer he loved—not only for the music, but also for the way Satie lived, and the openness of his mind. Satie fit Cage's new image of a Zen master / experimental composer / samurai artist unafraid to "die"—disinterested, not hanging on anywhere, uncompromising to the end. Since Satie was long dead, Cage made up both halves of their conversation, mingling his own thoughts with borrowed fragments of Satie's writings.

Because he died over thirty years before, neither of us hears what the other says.

Satie's voice speaks always in italics—here I use quotation marks—and begins the conversation:

"There'll probably be some music, but we'll manage to find a quiet corner where we can talk. . . .

"Nevertheless, we must bring about a music which is like furniture—a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself."

Satie is not bowed by the criticisms of his peers, Cage observes. Instead the old master keeps himself aloof from Art (capitalized)—its fetters and obligations, its desires for fame and achievement, its aesthetic boundaries and walls, its grandeur and self-importance, its rationales and calculations.

*An artist conscientiously moves in a direction which for some good reason he takes, putting one work in front of the other with the hope he'll arrive before death overtakes him. But Satie despised Art ("*J'emmerde l'Art*"). He was going nowhere.*

Satie can remain profoundly independent because he is at every moment arising anew from the source:

Satie appears at unpredictable points springing always from zero.

Then Cage skewers the high-minded Art (capitalized) of Arnold Schoenberg and Pierre Boulez and their followers, in language that mimics the twelve-tone system's fussy mathematics:

Curiously enough, the twelve-tone system has no zero in it. Given a series: 3, 5, 2, 7, 10, 8, 11, 9, 1, 6, 4, 12 and the plan of obtaining its inversion by numbers which when added to the corresponding ones of the original series will give 12, one obtains 9, 7, 10, 5, 2, 4, 1, 3, 11, 6, 8 and 12. For in this system 12 plus 12 equals 12. There is not enough of nothing in it.

A few paragraphs later, he thinks back to the ego walls that separated him from the sky.

Why is it necessary to give the sounds of knives and forks consideration? Satie says so. He is right. Otherwise the music will have to have walls to defend itself, walls which will not only constantly be in need of repair, but which, even to get a drink of water, one will have to pass beyond, inviting disaster.

And he remembers how, in the anechoic chamber, he heard his own *being* arising in the silence of non-intention.

It is evidently a question of bringing one's intended actions into relation with the ambient unintended ones. The common denominator is zero, where the heart beats (no one means *to circulate his blood).*

Then he immediately adds:

Of course "it is another school"—this moving out from zero.

SUZUKI MOVES ON

It's June 1953. D. T. Suzuki, gently balancing on his eighty-three-year-old legs, is taking in the brilliant flowers in the gardens of a villa on the shore of Lake Maggiore in Ascona, Switzerland. The blue waters of this inland sea flow between the turtle-shell peaks of the southern Alps; at the end of his gaze the lake wanders into northern Italy. The tropical foliage and tile-roofed palaces along the shore bake in the palm-fringed Mediterranean summer.

Suzuki's reputation as a Zen philosopher has earned him an invitation to the Eranos Conference. Since 1933, scholars of the spirit have been meeting yearly in the grand estate of a Dutch heiress for an eight-day retreat. After the conference ends, Suzuki will set off on a summerlong lecture tour that will take him to Paris, London, Zurich, Munich, Rome, and Brussels.

In the previous two summers, he returned to Japan, but now his notoriety is blooming. On this trip he will meet Carl G. Jung, Martin Hei-

degger, and Karl Jaspers. In the summer of 1954 he'll be back at the Eranos Conference, trading thoughts with historian Arnold Toynbee and British Orientalist Arthur Waley. After Eranos he will set off on an even more ambitious speaking tour through France, Germany, Austria, Italy, and Great Britain.

Far from letting this acclaim go to his head, Suzuki is constantly practicing *mushin,* "no mind," a quiet and unflappable composure that isn't swayed by circumstances. His Zen simplicity never falters.

"Being well aware of the relativity and inadequacy of all opinions, he would never argue," Alan Watts wrote, honoring the old man. Watts recalled that when a student tried to provoke Suzuki into criticizing a noted Buddhist professor, Suzuki responded: "This is very big world; plenty of room in it for both Professor Takakusu and myself." Facing down an attack from a Chinese scholar, Suzuki merely cautioned: "The Zen master, generally speaking, despises those who indulge in word- or idea-mongering, and in this respect Hu Shi and myself are great sinners, murderers of Buddhas and patriarchs; we are both destined for hell."

"I have never known a great scholar and intellectual so devoid of conceit," Watts concluded. "Academic pomposity and testiness were simply not in him."

Suzuki's unflappable poise would prove to be one of his most powerful instruments for penetrating the well-defended ramparts of Western intellectualism. Carl Jung himself recognized Suzuki's skillful means, and honored it in his foreword to Suzuki's *Introduction to Zen Buddhism:* "Suzuki's works on Zen Buddhism are among the best contributions to the knowledge of living Buddhism that recent decades have produced," Jung wrote. "We cannot be sufficiently grateful to the author, first for the fact of his having brought Zen closer to Western understanding, and secondly for the manner in which he has achieved this task."

[A]s Suzuki said in response to the [student's] *question, "Why do you say death one day and life the next?"—in Zen there's not much difference between the two.*

"THANK YOU! THANK YOU!"

Impervious to the waves he has been sending out, Suzuki will retire from Columbia after the spring semester of 1957. He spends the summer months in a conference on Zen and psychoanalysis at Erich Fromm's villa in Cuernavaca, Mexico, and the fall semester lecturing at universities (Harvard, M.I.T., Brandeis, Radcliffe, and others) in the vicinity of Cambridge, Massachusetts. Though based in Japan, he speaks at the Belgian World's Fair in 1958, and joins the Third East-West Philosophers' Conference in Hawaii that summer. In 1960, at age ninety, he tours India for a month as guest of the state. In 1964, he finally meets monk and longtime correspondent Thomas Merton in New York, where the Asia Society is giving Suzuki a medal. At age ninety-five, increasingly frail yet vital and mentally clear, he resumes editing the journal *The Eastern Buddhist*. He dies in 1966 from a twisted intestine, with Mihoko Okamura by his side. His last words: "Don't worry. Thank you! Thank you!"

Before that, Cage visited him twice in Japan, in 1962 and 1964. Cage was on tour in 1962 with David Tudor, who was playing Cage's music. Merce Cunningham and his company were performing in Japan in 1964 and Cage came, too.

A couple of years after Suzuki died, Cage began writing a kind of free verse. He had always thought of himself as a writer, even in his high school years, but characteristically, when he turned toward poetry, he invented a new form. He called it "mesostics." The name is an allusion to the puzzle form known as "acrostics," in which a capitalized word descends down the left side of the poem. In an acrostic, each letter of the descending word also serves as the beginning of another word or phrase running horizontally.

Cage borrowed this format but moved the descending column of capital letters to the middle of the poem. He didn't say why he made the move, but we recall that the Middle Way is the Buddha's name for Buddhism.

Since then I have written them as poems, the capitals going down the middle, to celebrate whatever, to support whatever, to fulfill requests, to initiate

my thinking or my nonthinking . . . to find a way of writing that, though coming from ideas, is not about them but produces them.

A mesostic is a poetic form that interpenetrates. The descending capital letters present a single word or a short phrase. ALLEN GINSBERG, for instance, runs down the center of a series of mesostics Cage wrote in celebration of the poet's sixtieth birthday. The mesostic form seems to echo Suzuki's description of "an infinite mutual fusion or penetration of all things"—although here Cage has combined two elements.

The vertical "spine" of the poem is like a strand of DNA. It remains the same even when it generates infinite variations in the horizontal text.

If the spine corresponds to the root cause, then the poem as a whole is akin to reality as we encounter it. We read horizontally, ransacking the words for meaning. We ask: Does this poem have something to say to *me*? The phenomenal world is so dense with personal import that we easily get lost in it. We wander from form to form, sensation to sensation, glorying in the infinite diversity. But do we remember to look within?

Whether we look or not, the root word remains in the center position, pointing to another level of information beyond the poem. It's when we penetrate the chaos to see the root—when we "split the stick," as Cage said—that inherent structure (buddha-nature) is revealed within the phenomenal world.

In later years, Cage wrote a mesostic in memory of Suzuki, using the root word "TAKIGUCHI," most likely the name of a friend of Toshi Ichiyanagi, the poet and art critic Shuzo Takiguchi (1903–1979), who introduced Surrealism to Japan:

"THERE IS NOT MUCH DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TWO."
(SUZUKI DAISETZ)

iT
is A long time
i don't Know how long
sInce
we were in a room toGether now i hear
that yoU are dead but when i think of
you as now i have the Clear impression
tHat
tenderly smIling you're alive as ever