


Tentative dust  
jacket design  
by Fran -



# Snail Zen

moment by moment  
meditation

Marian Mountain

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Prologue

The only way is to enjoy your life. Even though you are practicing zazen, counting your breaths like a snail, you can enjoy your life, maybe better than making a trip to the moon. That is why we practice zazen.

Shunryu Suzuki

Snail Zen is an offshoot of four decades of Zen practice that began when I was a 41 year-old, divorced mother of five teenage children. At this pivotal point in my life my karma moved me, and moved an enlightened Japanese Zen Buddhist priest to meet and form a relationship that dramatically changed the course of my life.

During the twelve years that Shunryu Suzuki devoted to his missionary work in the United States, he founded the San Francisco Zen Center, Tassajara Monastery and left a lasting legacy in a book that has become a Zen classic. Millions of readers around the world have received their first true taste of the fruit of Buddha's Bodhi tree preserved on the pages of Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind,<sup>1</sup> a collection of Zen talks given to a small group of beginners who gathered in my home to practice meditation and listen to the teachings of a living buddha.

Shunryu Suzuki's sermons were not prepared ahead of time. They dropped into the hearts of his listeners, moment by moment,

like yellow leaves drifting gently and gracefully down to settle on the humus of our humanity. On May 4, 1979, Shunryu Suzuki passed away, leaving a legacy that included a major Zen Buddhist temple and monastery plus thousands of followers and dozens of disciples to continue his mission of transmitting Shakyamuni Buddha's Way to Westerners suffering from the genetic limitations that accompany the benefits of being born as members of the human race.

Before Snail Zen began to poke its way through the leaf mold of my unconscious mind it lay dormant for 33 years in the form of a meditation journal I kept religiously, except for a period when I took a seven-year sabbatical from conventional Zen practice. One Indian Summer morning in 1979, without warning I felt spontaneously moved to resume the daily practice of Zen meditation. At the end of that first informal meditation session I felt as if I'd arrived home after a long journey.

No longer attached to the conventional accouterments of Japanese Buddhism such as the round, black meditation cushion, the cross-legged posture and the other venerable Eastern traditions that are difficult for many Westerners to integrate into their everyday lives, I allowed my reawakening beginner's mind to guide me. I gave myself permission to try out techniques borrowed from old and new meditative disciplines that I felt

might be more compatible with the physical and mental characteristics of Americans than some of the practices imported from Japan, China and India.

Snail Zen can function as an alternative zen program for Westerners who find the traditional Zen postures too painful to assume. It may also appeal to seekers who would like to explore traditional Zen meditation but don't feel comfortable being associated with any form of organized religion. This unorthodox zen program is designed as a solitary practice that can fit unobtrusively into almost any lifestyle. It may also serve as preparation for those who would prefer to practice traditional Zen meditation but are unable to move to a community with a Zen Center led by an accredited Zen Roshi. Finally, it can be adopted as a complementary zen practice for Western Roshis who received their seal of confirmation decades ago, have attracted a following of devoted students, but have developed the symptoms of "expert's disease" and are looking for a way to reawaken their beginner's mind.

If you are blessed, or cursed, with an adventurous nature and are willing to forge your way through the thorny thickets that line the well-traveled trail of traditional Zen Buddhism to follow the sticky scribbles this wayward snail leaves behind, I hope you will learn from my mistakes. I hope you avoid the stumbling stones and gopher holes that continue to

trip and trap me. I hope you discover, as I have, that counting your breaths like a snail is as fascinating and fulfilling as making a trip to the moon.

Practicing snail zen won't help you find yourself but it may help you lose yourself as you creep along moment after moment, inch by inch, word by word on a pathless path in a vast monastery without boundaries, failing again and again, beginning ~~over~~ again and again; feeling your way ever so slowly and carefully through a nascent universe beyond words and concepts but, at the same time, teaming with ever-expanding conceptual creativity.

## Credits and Notes

## Prologue

Epigram: Shunryu Suzuki; Not Always So: Practicing the True Spirit of Zen; edited by Edward Espe Brown; New York; Harper Collins ; 2002; p. 25. (Shunryu Suzuki gave this Zen talk on July 29, 1969 in San Francisco, the day American Astronauts landed on the moon. I was working in the Tassajara office that day and learned of the event from a visitor I was registering for Guest Season. I read the ~~talk~~ transcription of the talk 33 years later in Not Always So after I'd chosen the title for my book.)

1. Shunryu Suzuki; Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind; Informal talks on Zen Meditation and Practice; Boston; Shambhala Publications; 2006; p. 21.