

Zen Guitar

philip toshio sudo



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tracy, naomi,

and those yet unborn



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ichigo ichie

Foreword by Ben Sherman

The first time you heard Hendrix. Your first look at a Dalí painting. Your first glimpse of the stars through a telescope. We all have had those pivotal moments. Before, you thought you had a clear picture of your world, but after, you realize you need a bigger frame. If this is your first time reading *Zen Guitar*, you are about to experience a "before/after" moment—one that changes everything.

When I read ZG for the first time back in the late 1990s, I had already spent twenty years as a guitarist and full-time professional musician. The thing I remember most is feeling a sense of recognition. I found myself saying over and over, "Yes, yes, yes!" Phil was expressing some deep philosophical wisdom, and showing how it connected to making music. It was profound, and yet in a way it seemed so obvious. Until Phil, no one had found the means to express it in such a concise, downto-earth way. So it's worth asking, how did he do it? How did this book come to be?

Phil Sudo was Japanese-American, and during his youth

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lived for years in both Japan and the United States. He has spoken about how he grew up fully immersed in and influenced by Western pop culture, while at the same time deeply absorbing traditional Eastern philosophy. He clearly enjoyed exploring many divergent paths. Fortunately for us, he eventually gravitated to journalism, and took up guitar. Two callings, and both became passions for this brilliant and intense young man. The seeds of *Zen Guitar* were planted.

One of Phil's favorite books was *The Book of Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi, a renowned Japanese samurai of the 1600s. Phil saw that Musashi was writing about swordsmanship not just as a tutorial, but also as a metaphor, a way to teach a Zen philosophy of living. It occurred to Phil that you could talk about guitar playing in the same way, and he started writing a book that merged his love of rock guitar with his devotion to Zen philosophy. The result was a masterpiece.

Phil intended that Zen Guitar be accessible to anyone, not just musicians; he once said that guitar was simply the "point of entry" to help the reader gain access to a greater understanding of Zen. (He employed a similar process in his next two books, Zen Computer and Zen Sex.) Nevertheless, the book is called Zen Guitar, and there's no doubt that musicians, at whatever level of skill or professional experience they may have, will hear this book speaking to them. It's a guide book on how to play music with honesty, integrity, passion, and humility. But ZG is also about how all the attributes of an admirable human being can be cultivated by applying Zen principles to whatever you are doing or experiencing—anywhere, anytime.

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So what is this book really about: understanding Zen or becoming a better musician? Well, whenever Zen is involved, one must be prepared to encounter contradiction and paradox. I advise you to just go with the flow and decide for yourself.

In this brilliant collection of short essays, Phil covers many qualities and attributes that a follower of Zen would strive for, and describes exactly how they would apply to playing music. Here's a key quote that gets right to the heart of it: "Zen Guitar is nothing more than playing the song we're all born with inside—the one that makes us human." He also offers many superb examples of well-known musicians who have these qualities, and quotes from them to show their perspectives. For example, this great quote from Jimi Hendrix: "My own thing is in my head. I hear sounds and if I don't get them together nobody else will."

It is hard for me to imagine that it's been twenty years since ZG was first published, because for me it's like no time has passed. I carry it in my mind and heart every day. I too am passionate about guitar, and have also been drawn to the meeting points of Western and Eastern culture and philosophy, so I immediately connected with what Phil was saying at many levels. But he inspired me to go further. ZG helped me to see how being a working musician, performing in public on a regular basis, was more than just "gigging"—it was actually an opportunity to learn and practice the art of being fully human.

I think Phil wanted to help people throw off the notion that philosophy and spirituality are systems of thought best studied in lofty monasteries by people who are utterly serious and de-

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tached from real life. I had a chance to meet and talk with Phil after the ZG book first came out, and he was anything but that. The man I met was funny, smart, worldly, generous, empathetic, and most of all, fully engaged. It was very heartwarming to meet someone who had inspired me so much but at the same time made me feel like a comrade, a brother.

One concept Phil talks about in *Zen Guitar* is *ichigo ichie*. It's a Japanese phrase meaning, literally, "one time, one meeting." It comes from Zen Buddhism and is particularly associated with the Japanese tea ceremony. In the ceremony, the host invites the guest into his home and offers the tea with great care, preparation, and consideration, with all the generosity of his heart, with no expectation of reciprocity. The underlying meanings of the ceremony are deep and have many layers. *Ichigo ichie* reminds the participants to treat each ceremony as a unique and special event, a once-in-a-lifetime experience. It is a teaching that has great relevance to the relationship between musician and audience, as Phil so elegantly explains.

Phil was practicing *ichigo ichie* when he met with me. Your encounter with this book is also one of those moments. Phil prepared *Zen Guitar* with the utmost thoughtfulness and care, and invested it with his wisdom, heart, and soul. I hope you will read it, take it to heart, live it, and share its joy with others who haven't yet discovered this gem of a book.

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welcome

the dojo

W elcome to the Zen Guitar Dojo. Please leave the door open.

My name is Philip Toshio Sudo, and I have established this dojo for anyone who wants to make music. It makes no difference to me whether you're a musician. You're welcome here if you're of the spirit to make a sound.

I began playing the guitar as a child in Japan, the land of my ancestors, and have continued playing in the United States, the land of my birth. Over the years I've learned from many different teachers, both Japanese and American. As the product of these two cultures, I've sought a way to blend the wisdom of East and West into a universal philosophy of life.

The way I've found is Zen Guitar.

Zen Guitar is nothing more than playing the song we're all

born with inside—the song that makes us human. Any one of us can do it. The music is waiting there to be unlocked.

This dojo will give you the key.

y intention here is to share what I've learned in the hope it might encourage you to strum a new song in the world.

As the name implies, Zen Guitar is based largely on the prin-

ciples of zen philosophy. Zen is most easily understood as a commonsense approach to all things. Some people come to know zen through meditation, others through the martial arts, or archery, or flower arranging. All these are paths to the same wisdom.



Zen

Here we seek to know zen through music.

I named this the Zen Guitar Dojo because it is a place of work



and contemplation. Dojo is a Japanese word meaning, literally, "Place of the Way"-the ultimate Way of life and death that governs nature and the universe. It is through our endeavors in the dojo that we discover the Way.

A good dojo is like a school, practice hall, and temple rolled into one. The aim is to train body, mind, and spirit together, at the same time.

Dojo

You can make a dojo anywhere. Just as a believer does not need a house of worship to pray, a student of music needs no special place to play Zen Guitar. A bedroom, basement, garage, porch, or street corner will serve just fine. All that's required to make a dojo is the proper frame of mind.

My approach to the guitar brings in various teachings from the zen arts of Asia: martial arts such as karate and aikido, brush-style calligraphy, samurai swordsmanship, and the Japanese tea ceremony. As in the tradition of these great arts, I believe that learning to play the guitar is inseparable from learning to harmonize body, mind, and spirit. To truly play from your soul, you must have all aspects of yourself working together as one.

As you develop this harmony, it will carry through to everything you do. In other words, what you learn in this dojo will apply to your work, school, athletics, relationships, home life—how you think, see, feel, and hear all day long. Because ultimately, the path of Zen Guitar is the path of life itself.

This dojo is for beginners and advanced students alike, with no distinction made for age or past experience. Anyone who wants to train here, regardless of ability, starts at the same point: wearing the white belt, just as one would in studying a martial art. Even a black belt in karate, for example, must put on a white belt when beginning the study of another martial art like judo. It is no different here, no matter how long you've been playing or who your other teachers have been.

Donning the white belt does not mean you are a novice,

though there is no shame in being one. In fact, in many ways, novices have an advantage over those who come from other schools and may have to unlearn certain ways of thinking. Wearing the white belt merely signifies that you are willing to learn the Way of Zen Guitar.

Vou should know from the beginning that Zen Guitar is not a conventional how-to program of instruction. It is *alternative*, meaning it requires a do-it-yourself spirit. There are no chords or tunings or music theory in this dojo; you won't find lessons on how to read music, play the blues, fingerpick, or copy "Stairway to Heaven." All of that is *information*. Information is something you can get from a gamut of sources—magazines, books, classes, friends, videos, computer networks. The world is swimming in information. Any student with enough dedication knows how to acquire information.

But information alone cannot teach you what you need to know to play your song. At the Zen Guitar Dojo, our aim is not to acquire information but wisdom. The idea here is to train and to experience; it is only through the experience of our senses that we truly gain wisdom. One cannot learn Zen Guitar simply by reading. Just as no words can teach us how to ride a bicycle, the only way we can learn to play our song is through the direct experience of our bodies. To learn through experience—that is the path of Zen Guitar. There is a zen saying, "Paths cannot be taught, they can only be taken." So it is with Zen Guitar.

My function here will be to act as your guide. I do so in the

spirit of the Japanese *sensei*—not "teacher," as the word is commonly translated but, literally, "one who has gone before." I do not claim to know all the answers. But what I have learned, I'll gladly share with those who wish to make a



similar journey. If I can inspire you to follow your own path, this dojo will have served its purpose. 先生

Sensei

Those who train here I regard not as students, but *unsui*. In Japanese, unsui means traveling monk or truth-seeker. Literally, it translates as "cloud and water." To be an unsui is to embody the spirit of Zen Guitar—float-

ing, flowing, at once with and without form. If you learn to view yourself in this way, your journey on the path of Zen Guitar will have no end.

Beginning students often ask, "How long will it take me to learn the Way of Zen Guitar?" My answer is, as long as you live—that short. Your playing may progress enough to impress your friends in a year's time, perform onstage in two years, or turn professional in three. But if those are the ends you seek, your concern is not Zen Guitar. The Way of Zen Guitar is learned day by day, minute by minute, second by second, now to eternity. There is no faster way.

Beginning students also commonly ask, "How long until I get my black belt?" To them I say, you'll never earn a black belt

so long as you ask that question. To be obsessed with the destination is to remove the focus from where you are. The only way to progress in Zen Guitar is to put everything into this step, right now.

While it's true that in some schools a student formally graduates from one belt level to the next, in the Zen Guitar Dojo there is no such graduation. Students here receive one belt and one belt only: the white belt. Those who put in the time, training, and effort will find their belt getting so soiled that eventually it turns black of its own accord. Only then will they have achieved black-belt status.

In Zen Guitar, the black belt is not a goal or an end anyway. At other schools, the black belt may signify ultimate achievement, but in Zen Guitar it is only a point along the path. I have great respect for those who reach the black-belt level; it takes sincere commitment. But the true Way of Zen Guitar asks black-belt players to redouble their training until their belt becomes so worn and frayed it begins to lose color and returns to white. Only through completion of that circle white to black, black to white—can one know the depth of the Way.

T hus, I have divided my teaching into five stages, each signifying progression along the path of Zen Guitar.

The first stage, *White Belt*, establishes the proper mindset for starting out on the path—a mindset the student must maintain every step thereafter. This is what's called the *beginner's mind*.