MINDFUL AI
FOUNDATION

STEVE JOBS

Legendary Speech and ZEN

How Ancient Eastern Wisdom Shaped the World's Greatest Innovator

KENZO FUJISUE
(Genkō)

President, Mindful AI Foundation
Associate Director, MIT CAMS
Professor, Keio University
Visiting Professor, Technical University of Munich

(Translated by CLAUDE)

INTRODUCTION: WHY THIS BOOK MATTERS NOW

The Night Everything Ended

On the night of July 10, 2022, I sat alone in my campaign office, staring at the wall.

The television was still on, showing the election results. My name was there, with the numbers beside it. Numbers that meant I had lost.

After 18 years in Japan's House of Councillors. After thousands of speeches, millions of handshakes, countless late nights and early mornings. After building a career, an identity, a life around being Senator Fujisue—it was over.

My staff had gone home. The volunteers had drifted away, some in tears, others simply stunned. The office that had been buzzing with energy for months was silent now. Just me and the flickering television and the terrible weight of failure.

I had lost.

Everything I had worked for—gone. Everything I had planned—meaningless. The meetings scheduled for next week, the legislation I was drafting, the causes I was championing—none of it mattered anymore. I was no longer Senator Fujisue. I was just… no one.

In Japanese, we have a word for this feeling: "mu" (無). Nothingness. Emptiness. The void.

That night, I understood "mu" not as a philosophical concept but as a lived reality. Everything I thought I was had been stripped away. What remained was nothing.
A Voice from the Past

Sometime around midnight, still sitting in that empty office, I remembered something Steve Jobs had said.

I don't know why his words came to me at that moment. Perhaps because I had watched his Stanford speech years ago and something had lodged in my memory. Perhaps because, in some deep part of my consciousness, I knew that he had experienced something similar.

Jobs had been fired from Apple—the company he had founded, the company that was his identity, his life's work. He was 30 years old. He had lost everything. And this is what he said about it:

"I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

The lightness of being a beginner again.

I sat with those words in that dark office. The lightness of being a beginner. The freedom of having nothing to lose.

For 18 years, I had carried the weight of being Senator Fujisue. The expectations. The responsibilities. The image to maintain. The positions to defend. It was heavy, that weight. I had grown so accustomed to it that I had forgotten it was there.

Now it was gone. And in its absence, I felt something I hadn't expected.

Space.

For the first time in nearly two decades, I didn't know who I was supposed to be. I didn't know what I was supposed to do. I had no script, no role, no obligations.

It was terrifying. And, I began to realize, it was also a gift.

Something Strange in Silicon Valley

Something strange is happening in Silicon Valley.

The same tech executives who once dismissed spirituality as irrelevant are now meditating in Zen centers, attending silent retreats, and reading ancient Buddhist texts. Mindfulness apps have become billion-dollar businesses. "Zen" has become a marketing buzzword for everything from productivity software to noise-canceling headphones.

Google offers mindfulness training to its employees. Twitter's former CEO Jack Dorsey has done 10-day silent meditation retreats. Marc Benioff of Salesforce has built meditation rooms on every floor of his headquarters. Ray Dalio credits Transcendental Meditation for his success.

But here's the irony: most of this modern interest in Zen can be traced back to one person—a college dropout who never meditated in public, rarely discussed his spiritual beliefs in interviews, and yet built the most valuable company in human history.

Steve Jobs.

Jobs didn't tweet about his morning meditation routine. He didn't write books about mindfulness or give TED talks about the benefits of stillness. He simply practiced—quietly, consistently, for nearly four decades—and let the results speak for themselves.

The Macintosh. The iPod. The iPhone. The iPad. Pixar. These weren't just products. They were expressions of a mind trained by Zen practice—clear, focused, unafraid to see things as they actually are.

This Is Not Another Biography

This is not another business biography of Jobs. Walter Isaacson wrote the definitive one. Plenty of others exist.

This is something different.

This is an exploration of the Zen principles that shaped Jobs's thinking—and how those same principles can transform your life.

I'm not interested in Jobs as a business case study. I'm interested in him as a human being who found a way to live with extraordinary clarity and intensity. I want to understand what he learned from decades of Zen practice, and how that learning expressed itself in everything he created.

More importantly, I want to show you that the same principles are available to you—right now, in your own life, regardless of whether you ever sit on a meditation cushion.

Who Am I to Write This Book?

I write this book not as a detached observer but as a practitioner.

For over three decades, I have sat zazen in Kyoto temples, wrestled with koans under Japanese masters, and tried—often failing—to bring Zen wisdom into my own life.

My path has been unusual. I spent 13 years as a bureaucrat in Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, then 18 years as an elected member of parliament. Now I teach at MIT and Keio University, writing about cybersecurity and artificial intelligence.

Through all of these phases, Zen has been my constant companion. Not because I am enlightened—I am far from it—but because the practice has helped me navigate the chaos of public life.

But I must be honest with you about something.

For all my years of practice, for all my study of ancient texts and hours on the meditation cushion, I never truly understood certain teachings until I lost my election.

Zen masters speak of "dying before you die." They speak of letting go of attachment, of releasing the ego, of accepting impermanence. I had read these teachings hundreds of times. I thought I understood them.

I didn't.

Understanding came only when my identity was stripped away. When I was forced to confront the question: Who am I when I am no one?

The Terror at 3 AM

There is something else I must confess.

I am afraid of death.

Not in an abstract, philosophical way. In a visceral, 3 AM way. The kind of fear that wakes you in the darkness, heart pounding, mind racing through the implications of your own non-existence.

This fear has been with me since childhood. I remember lying in bed as a boy of eight or nine, suddenly understanding—really understanding—that one day I would cease to exist. Not sleep. Not transition to somewhere else. Simply... stop.

The thought was so terrifying that I couldn't breathe. I ran to my parents' room and crawled into their bed, unable to explain what was wrong.
How do you tell your parents that you've just discovered you're going to die?

I have spent decades studying Zen, sitting in meditation, reading about impermanence and the illusion of the self. And still, sometimes, at 3 AM, the terror returns.

I share this because I suspect you may have felt it too. This fear is not a failure of spiritual practice. It is the raw material that spiritual practice works with. It is what makes the teachings urgent, necessary, real.

Jobs and the Terror

Jobs felt this terror too.

When he was 17, he read a quote that changed his life: "If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right."

From that day until his death at 56, Jobs looked in the mirror every morning and asked himself: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?"

This is not the practice of someone who has conquered the fear of death. This is the practice of someone who is wrestling with it daily, using it as a tool, transforming terror into clarity.

When Jobs was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in 2003, he was told to go home and get his affairs in order. The doctors thought he had months to live. As it turned out, he had a rare, treatable form of the cancer. He survived that diagnosis by eight years.

But those hours between the diagnosis and the biopsy results—when he believed he was dying—crystallized everything.

"Remembering that I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

This is what I learned from Jobs—not how to conquer death, but how to use the awareness of death to live more fully.

Living in the Now

The night I lost my election, sitting in that empty office, I was consumed by the past and the future.

The past: all the things I should have done differently. The speeches I should have given. The hands I should have shaken. The decisions I should have made.

The future: the emptiness stretching out before me. No job. No identity. No purpose. Years of… what?

Past and future. Regret and anxiety. This is where suffering lives.

But Jobs's words pointed me somewhere else. Not to the past. Not to the future. To now.

"If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?"

Not yesterday. Not tomorrow. Today. This moment. This breath.

Zen masters have been saying this for centuries. "Be here now." "The eternal present." "This very moment."

I had heard these phrases a thousand times. But hearing is not understanding. Understanding is not living.

That night, in my darkest hour, I finally glimpsed what they meant.

The past was gone. It could not be changed. Grieving over it was like grieving over yesterday's weather.

The future did not exist. It was a story I was telling myself, a projection, a dream. Fearing it was like fearing a ghost.

What was real? This moment. This breath. This body sitting in this chair. This is all there ever is.

And in this moment—in this very moment—I was alive. I was breathing. I was present.

For just an instant, the weight lifted. Not the weight of losing the election—something deeper. The weight of time itself. The burden of carrying the past and dreading the future.

It didn't last. These glimpses never do. But it was enough to show me that another way of being was possible.

The Medicine of Mortality

Here is what Jobs taught me about death.

The fear of death is not the problem. The problem is letting that fear paralyze us, distract us, pull us away from the life we're living right now.

Jobs didn't overcome his fear of death. He harnessed it. He used it as a daily reminder of what mattered. He let it burn away the trivial, the petty, the things that seemed important but weren't.

"Your time is limited," he told the Stanford graduates. "Don't waste it living someone else's life."

This is the medicine of mortality. Not the denial of death, but the embrace of it. Not pushing away the fear, but letting it clarify everything.

If I die tomorrow, does this conflict matter? Does this grudge matter? Does this ambition matter?

Usually, the answer is no. And in that no is freedom.

I still fear death. I suspect I always will. But I have learned to use the fear. When the terror comes at 3 AM, I no longer try to push it away. I sit with it. I let it remind me that this night, this moment, this breath is precious.

And then I ask myself: What will I do with this precious day?

The Rebirth

In the months after my election loss, something unexpected happened.

I started writing. Not policy papers or legislative briefs—the kind of writing I had done for decades—but something different. Philosophy. Reflections on Zen. Explorations of the questions that had haunted me all my life.

I started teaching differently. Not just conveying information but engaging with students as fellow seekers. Not just lecturing but listening.

I started practicing Zen more seriously than I had in years. Not as a stress management technique but as a path. Not stealing a few minutes between meetings but sitting for hours, letting the silence work on me.

And I started to understand something Jobs had said:

"The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again."
— Steve Jobs

I was a beginner again. I didn't know who I was or what I was supposed to do. And that notknowing, which had felt like death, began to feel like freedom.

This book is the fruit of that freedom.

What You Will Learn

In the chapters that follow, you will explore the Zen principles that shaped Jobs's life and work.

Chapter 1 traces his spiritual journey—from the disastrous trip to India to his discovery of Zen in California.

Chapter 2 examines his famous calligraphy story and the concept of beginner's mind.

Chapter 3 explores the Zen aesthetics behind Apple's design—the power of emptiness, simplicity, and authenticity.

Chapter 4 confronts death directly, examining how Jobs used mortality as a clarifying force.

Chapter 5 analyzes the Stanford speech as a complete Zen teaching.

Chapter 6 shows how Zen principles apply to innovation and leadership.

Chapter 7 offers practical exercises you can use to bring these principles into your own life.

And the Epilogue reflects on Jobs's final words—"Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."—and what they might teach us about how to face our own end.

An Invitation

This book is my attempt to share what I've learned—from Zen, from Jobs, and from my own small death and rebirth.

I don't claim to have all the answers. I'm still practicing, still failing, still learning. Some days, my meditation is deep and clear. Other days, my mind races with anxieties and regrets. I am not a master—just a student who has been practicing long enough to have something to share.

But I believe that the principles in this book can help you.

Not because I invented them—they are ancient wisdom, refined over centuries.

Not because Jobs proved them—though his example is certainly compelling.

But because they work. They work in boardrooms and bedrooms, in moments of triumph and moments of despair. They work for tech executives and teachers, for artists and accountants, for anyone willing to pay attention.

So here is my invitation:

Read this book slowly. Let the ideas settle. When something resonates, pause and reflect. When something challenges you, sit with the discomfort.

And when you finish, don't just return to your normal life. Try the practices. Sit still for a few minutes each morning. Ask yourself Jobs's question: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?"

The answers might surprise you.

They surprised me.

Let's begin.

CHAPTER 1: THE SEEKER

The Question That Wouldn't Go Away

Every great life begins with a question.

For some, the question is clear and conscious: How can I make a difference? What is my purpose? For others, the question is a wordless ache—a sense that something is missing, that life as commonly lived is not enough.

Steve Jobs belonged to the second category. As a teenager in the early 1970s, he couldn't have articulated what he was looking for. He only knew that the conventional path—college, career, family, retirement—felt hollow. There had to be something more.

I recognize this feeling. I felt it myself as a young man in Tokyo, dutifully climbing the bureaucratic ladder at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry. On paper, my life was successful. In reality, I was suffocating. Something inside me was asking questions that my career couldn't answer.

That's when I found Zen. Or perhaps Zen found me.

Jobs found it too—but his path was more dramatic. He didn't discover Zen in a temple in Kyoto. He discovered it after a disaster in India.

A Barefoot Journey to India

In the summer of 1974, a 19 year old Steve Jobs arrived in New Delhi with a shaved head, $200 in his pocket, and a burning question he couldn't articulate.

The journey itself was an act of desperation. Jobs had dropped out of Reed College the year before. He had worked briefly at Atari, the video game company, saving money for this trip. He had taken LSD and read "Be Here Now" by Ram Dass—the book that introduced a generation of Americans to Indian spirituality.

Ram Dass had been transformed by his time with Neem Karoli Baba, a Hindu guru in the foothills of the Himalayas. Jobs wanted that transformation for himself. He wanted to find the guru and learn the secret.

But the universe had other plans.

Neem Karoli Baba had died just months before Jobs's arrival.

Imagine the devastation. You travel halfway around the world, sacrifice everything, endure incredible hardships—and the person you came to see is gone. The door you hoped would open is permanently closed.

Jobs could have gone home. Many would have. Instead, he stayed.

For seven months, he wandered through India. He contracted severe dysentery and lost 40 pounds. He was robbed. He slept in temples and on the streets. He walked through villages where poverty was so extreme that he saw people dying in the gutters.

By any conventional measure, the trip was a disaster.

But something was happening inside him.

The Discovery of Intuition

Years later, Jobs reflected on what he had learned in India:

"The people in the Indian countryside don't use their intellect like we do; they use their intuition instead, and their intuition is far more developed than in the rest of the world. Intuition is a very powerful thing—more powerful than intellect, in my opinion. That's had a big impact on my work."
— Steve Jobs, as quoted in Walter Isaacson's biography

This wasn't a philosophical abstraction. It was an experience.

In the villages of India, Jobs encountered people who had almost nothing—no education, no technology, no material wealth—and yet possessed a kind of wisdom he had never seen. They didn't analyze their way through life. They felt their way. They trusted something deeper than thought.

Western education teaches us to think. It trains the intellect, sharpens reasoning, develops analytical skills. These are valuable—but they are not everything.

The villagers Jobs met had developed something different: a direct perception of reality that bypassed conceptual thought. They knew things without knowing how they knew them. They made decisions without deliberation. They lived in harmony with their circumstances in a way that no amount of analysis could achieve.

Jobs would spend the rest of his life trying to access that deeper knowledge.

And he would find it—not in India, but in a modest Zen center in suburban California.

My Own Search

I want to pause here and share my own experience, because I think it illuminates something important about the spiritual search.

In my twenties, I too was drawn to India. I had read the same books Jobs read, been moved by the same stories of transformation. I planned an elaborate trip—ashrams to visit, gurus to meet, practices to learn.

But life intervened. My job at METI became demanding. I got married. Children came. The India trip kept getting postponed—next year, I told myself. When things settle down.

Things never settled down. I never went to India.

For years, I considered this a failure. I had missed my chance at spiritual transformation. I was stuck in the mundane world while others were achieving enlightenment in exotic locations.

But gradually, I began to understand something that Jobs also discovered: the location doesn't matter.

Jobs didn't find enlightenment in India. He found dysentery. The transformation came later, in California, sitting on a cushion in an ordinary room with an ordinary teacher.

I found Zen not in a Himalayan ashram but in a small temple in Kyoto, during a business trip. I had a few free hours and wandered in, curious. A monk was sitting zazen. He gestured for me to join him. I sat.

Nothing dramatic happened. No visions, no revelations, no cosmic consciousness. Just sitting. Just breathing. Just being present in that moment, in that room, in that body.

And yet, something shifted. A door opened that has never closed.

The spiritual search is not about finding the right location or the right teacher. It's about being ready. When the student is ready, the teacher appears—sometimes in India, sometimes in California, sometimes in an office building in Tokyo.

Jobs was ready when he met Kobun Chino Otogawa. That readiness had been forged in the disasters of India.

The Zen Center of Los Altos

When Jobs returned to California in late 1974, he was a different person. The restless seeker hadn't found answers in India, but he had found a direction. He knew that the knowledge he sought wasn't intellectual. It was experiential. It required practice, not just study.

Through a friend, he discovered the Los Altos Zen Center, a modest building where a Japanese priest named Kobun Chino Otogawa taught Zen meditation to small groups of Americans.

Kobun was an unusual teacher.

Born in 1938 in Japan, he was the son of a Soto Zen priest and had been raised in the temple tradition. He trained at Eiheiji, one of the two head temples of Soto Zen Buddhism, where the discipline is legendary. Monks at Eiheiji wake at 3:30 AM, sit for hours in meditation, perform physical labor, and study ancient texts. The training is designed to break down the ego and reveal the Buddhanature beneath.

Kobun completed this training. He studied under some of the most rigorous masters in Japan. He was qualified to lead a major temple, to become an important figure in the Soto establishment.

Instead, he came to America.

Not to build an empire of meditation centers. Not to become a celebrity guru. Just to sit. Just to practice. Just to share what he had learned with anyone who was interested.

This humility was itself a teaching. In a culture obsessed with growth and achievement, Kobun modeled a different way: do the practice, let go of the results.

Learning to Sit Still

Jobs later recalled his first impression of Kobun:

"He was the most spiritual person I ever met. He was the first person I knew who made me understand what it meant to live spiritually."
— Steve Jobs

What did Jobs learn from Kobun? Not doctrines or beliefs. Not rituals or ceremonies. Not a philosophy or a worldview.

He learned to sit still.

This sounds simple. It is not.
For a hyperactive young man who had spent his life rushing from one idea to the next, sitting still was revolutionary. Jobs's mind was a torrent of thoughts, plans, criticisms, and visions. He couldn't stop thinking any more than he could stop breathing.

But in zazen—seated meditation—there is nothing to do. You sit. You breathe. Thoughts come, and you let them go without grasping. Thoughts go, and you let them go without chasing. You don't try to achieve anything. You don't try to become anything. You just sit.

The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki described it this way:

"When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself."
— Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

Jobs burned himself completely in everything he did—including sitting still. He sat with Kobun for years, sometimes daily, sometimes weekly. He sat through boredom, through restlessness, through the endless chatter of his own mind.

And gradually, something changed.

The chatter didn't stop—it never stops—but Jobs developed a different relationship to it. He learned to hear the silence beneath the noise. He learned to trust intuition over analysis. He learned that the deepest insights come not from thinking harder but from thinking less.

"You can't just ask customers what they want and then try to give that to them. By the time you get it built, they'll want something new."
— Steve Jobs

Where did this insight come from? From sitting still. From learning to trust the silence beneath thought. From discovering that the answers are already present—you just have to stop making so much noise to hear them.

The Wedding at Kobun's Temple

The depth of Jobs's relationship with Kobun is revealed by a simple fact: Kobun officiated Jobs's wedding.

In 1991, Jobs married Laurene Powell in a ceremony at Yosemite National Park. Kobun presided, conducting the service in a blend of Zen Buddhist and Western traditions. The ceremony was held outdoors, with the mountains as backdrop. It was simple, intimate, and profound.

Kobun also gave Jobs's daughter, Lisa, her name.
These are not the acts of a casual acquaintance. Kobun was Jobs's spiritual teacher for nearly two decades, a constant presence through the founding of Apple, the exile from Apple, the creation of NeXT and Pixar, and the triumphant return. When Jobs faced his greatest challenges, Kobun was there—not giving advice, not solving problems, but simply being present, holding space for whatever needed to emerge.

Kobun died in 2002, drowning while trying to save his daughter, who had fallen into a pond. Jobs was devastated. He had lost not just a teacher but a father figure, a spiritual anchor, a guide through the chaos of his life.

But the teaching remained. What Kobun had planted continued to grow.

The Paradox of the Koan

Zen training traditionally involves the study of koans—paradoxical riddles or stories that cannot be solved by logical thinking.

The most famous koan is "Mu."

A monk asked Master Zhaozhou: "Does a dog have Buddhanature?"

Zhaozhou answered: "Mu." (No / Nothing / Without)

This seems simple—just a "no." But Buddhist doctrine clearly states that all sentient beings have Buddhanature. The scriptures are explicit: every creature, from the highest bodhisattva to the lowliest insect, contains the seed of awakening.

So why would a great master contradict the scriptures?

The answer is that Zhaozhou wasn't giving a logical answer. He was trying to break the monk's mind free from the tyranny of yes and no thinking.

The monk's question assumed a binary framework: either dogs have Buddhanature or they don't. Yes or no. True or false.

But reality doesn't fit into such neat categories. Reality is fluid, interpenetrating, constantly changing. The question "Does a dog have Buddhanature?" is like asking "What color is jealousy?" or "How much does love weigh?" The question itself is malformed.

Zhaozhou's "Mu" shatters the question. It refuses to play the game of yes and no. It points beyond language to direct experience.

Jobs's "Mu"

Jobs spent his life giving "Mu" answers.

In the 1980s, everyone knew that computers should be beige. Beige was professional. Beige was serious. Beige was what businesses expected.

Jobs said Mu.

The original Macintosh was beige, but Jobs was never satisfied. When he returned to Apple, he introduced the iMac—in translucent blue, green, orange, pink, and purple. The industry was shocked. Consumers were delighted. The iMac saved Apple.

In the 2000s, everyone knew that smartphones needed physical keyboards. BlackBerry had proven it. Business users demanded it. Typing on glass was ridiculous.

Jobs said Mu.

The iPhone had no keyboard. Just a screen. Within five years, BlackBerry was irrelevant.

In 2010, everyone knew that tablet computers had failed. Microsoft had tried. Many others had tried. The market had spoken.

Jobs said Mu.

The iPad created an entirely new product category worth hundreds of billions of dollars.

In each case, Jobs's "no" wasn't a negation—it was an opening. He refused to accept the assumptions that everyone else took for granted. He cleared away the conventional thinking so something new could emerge.

This is the koan in action. Not as a meditation exercise but as a way of engaging with reality.

The Limits of Language

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote in his Tractatus Logico Philosophicus (1921):

"Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent."
— Ludwig Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein was pointing to the limits of language. There are truths that cannot be expressed in words—not because they are vague or mystical, but because language is a particular kind of tool with particular limitations.

You cannot describe the taste of coffee to someone who has never tasted it. You cannot explain color to someone born blind. You cannot convey the experience of falling in love through a dictionary definition.

Zen goes further than Wittgenstein. It suggests that the most important truths—the truths about who we really are, about the nature of mind, about our place in the universe—cannot be spoken. They can only be experienced directly.

The koans are designed to push practitioners beyond language. When you wrestle with "Mu" long enough, when every logical answer fails, when you've exhausted your conceptual mind—something else can happen. A direct perception, unmediated by words. Satori. Awakening.

Jobs's design philosophy embodied this understanding. He didn't explain Apple products—he showed them. The famous product launches were demonstrations, not lectures. Jobs would hold up the device, let the audience see it, feel the reality of it.

"People don't know what they want until you show it to them."
— Steve Jobs

You can't describe an iPhone to someone who has never seen one. You can't explain the experience of using it. You can only show it. You can only let them touch it.

This is Zen epistemology applied to product design: the deepest knowledge is experiential, not conceptual.

The Seeker Finds a Path

Jobs went to India seeking enlightenment and found dysentery. He came home and found Zen.

This is not a failure. It's the way the spiritual path usually works.

We think we know what we're looking for. We imagine enlightenment as a dramatic experience, a peak moment, a cosmic revelation. We travel to exotic locations and seek out famous teachers, hoping they will give us what we lack.

But what we're looking for is usually right in front of us. The dramatic experience we seek is actually ordinary experience, seen clearly. The cosmic revelation is the realization that this moment—right here, right now—is the only moment there is.

Jobs found this in Los Altos. I found it in Kyoto. You may find it somewhere else entirely.

The location doesn't matter. The teacher doesn't matter—not ultimately. What matters is readiness: the willingness to sit still, to face the chaos of your own mind, to let go of what you think you know.

When you're ready, the teaching is everywhere.

The question that drove Jobs to India never fully resolved. Seekers don't stop seeking. But he found a practice—a way to engage with the question, to live inside it, to let it fuel his work rather than torment his mind.

That practice was Zen.

And from that practice came everything else: Apple, Pixar, the Macintosh, the iPhone, the transformation of entire industries, the legacy that continues to shape our world.

It all began with a seeker who couldn't find what he was looking for—and discovered something better instead.

CHAPTER 2: THE CALLIGRAPHER

The Art of Uselessness

Before we explore Jobs's calligraphy story, I want to tell you about my own encounter with seemingly useless learning.

In 1985, when I was a young bureaucrat at Japan's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, I made a decision that puzzled my colleagues. I enrolled in an evening class in classical Chinese—the ancient language of Confucian texts, Buddhist sutras, and Tang dynasty poetry.

"Why?" my supervisor asked. "How will this help your career?"

I had no good answer. Classical Chinese had no practical application in industrial policy. It wouldn't help me negotiate trade agreements or draft legislation. It was, by any professional measure, a waste of time.

But something drew me to it. The characters themselves fascinated me—each one a compressed universe of meaning, evolved over three thousand years. The poetry moved me in ways I couldn't explain. And the discipline of learning to read texts written before the birth of Christ felt like a form of time travel.

I studied classical Chinese for three years. I never became fluent. I never used it professionally. And yet...

Thirty years later, when I began writing about Zen philosophy, that "useless" knowledge became essential. The Zen masters wrote in classical Chinese. The koans were composed in that language. The nuances that translation loses—the puns, the paradoxes, the multiple meanings compressed into single characters—became accessible to me precisely because of those evening classes.

The dots connected. But I couldn't have known they would.

This is what Jobs discovered at Reed College. And it's what Zen has been teaching for a thousand years.

Reed College: A Sanctuary for Seekers

To understand Jobs's calligraphy story, you need to understand Reed College.

Reed was—and remains—one of the most unusual institutions in American higher education. Founded in 1908 in Portland, Oregon, it rejected the conventional markers of academic success. It had no fraternities or sororities. It didn't release student grades to employers. It required every senior to write an original thesis and defend it orally.

Reed attracted seekers—students who cared more about ideas than credentials, more about exploration than career advancement. The campus culture was intensely intellectual, fiercely independent, and deeply countercultural.

It was also expensive. In 1972, Reed's tuition was among the highest in America. For Steve Jobs's workingclass parents—Paul, a mechanic, and Clara, a bookkeeper—sending their son to Reed required extraordinary sacrifice.

Jobs knew this. And after six months, he couldn't justify it.

"I naively chose a college that was almost as expensive as Stanford, and all of my workingclass parents' savings were being spent on my college tuition. After six months, I couldn't see the value in it."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

This wasn't academic failure. Jobs was intellectually capable of succeeding at Reed. It was something deeper—a refusal to follow a path he didn't believe in.

So he dropped out.

Dropping Out, Dropping In

But Jobs didn't leave Reed. He did something stranger: he dropped in.

"I dropped out of Reed College after the first six months, but then stayed around as a dropin for another eighteen months or so before I really quit."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, June 12, 2005

What does "dropping in" mean?

Jobs stopped paying tuition. He gave up his dorm room and slept on the floors of friends' rooms. He returned Coke bottles for the fivecent deposits to buy food. He walked seven miles across town every Sunday to get a free meal at the Hare Krishna temple.

And he took whatever classes interested him—for free, without credit, without any plan.

This was not a strategy. It was not a calculated move to maximize learning while minimizing cost. It was something more radical: a complete surrender to curiosity.
In Zen, there's a concept called "mushotoku" (無所得)—literally "no gaining mind." It means acting without expectation of reward, without calculation of benefit. The purest form of practice is practice for its own sake.

Jobs, at age 17, without knowing the terminology, was practicing mushotoku. He was learning for the sake of learning, following his interests wherever they led, trusting that the universe would somehow take care of him.

It's worth pausing to appreciate how terrifying this must have been.

Jobs had no money. He had no degree. He had no plan. His parents had sacrificed everything to send him to college, and he had quit. By any conventional measure, he was throwing his life away.

And yet, he stayed. He kept learning. He kept following his curiosity.

This takes a kind of courage that business schools don't teach.

The Calligraphy of Lloyd Reynolds

The calligraphy class that would change computing history was taught by a man named Lloyd Reynolds.

Reynolds was a legend at Reed. He had taught there since 1929 and had singlehandedly made calligraphy central to the campus culture. Under his influence, Reed's posters, signs, and publications were handlettered with extraordinary care. The campus became a living museum of beautiful writing.

Reynolds wasn't just teaching penmanship. He was teaching a philosophy.

"Calligraphy is the art of writing beautifully," he told his students. "But it's also the discipline of paying attention. When you form a letter, you must be completely present. Your mind cannot wander. The instant your attention drifts, your hand betrays you."

This is essentially a description of Zen practice.

In zazen (seated meditation), the practitioner is instructed to focus on the breath or on a koan. When the mind wanders—as it inevitably does—the practitioner

notices the wandering and gently returns to focus. This process of wandering and returning, over and over, trains the mind to stay present.

Calligraphy works the same way. The brush (or pen) is unforgiving. Every moment of inattention shows in the stroke. The practice demands presence.

Jobs, sitting in Reynolds's classroom in 1972, was learning more than typography. He was learning a form of meditation—though he might not have recognized it as such.

"I learned about serif and sansserif typefaces, about varying the amount of space between different letter combinations, about what makes great typography great. It was beautiful, historical, artistically subtle in a way that science can't capture, and I found it fascinating."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Notice what Jobs emphasizes: beauty, history, artistic subtlety, fascination. Not utility. Not career advancement. Not return on investment.

This is the language of someone following their curiosity—someone practicing beginner's mind.

The Uselessness of Beauty

"None of this had even a hope of any practical application in my life," Jobs admitted in his Stanford speech.

This is crucial. Jobs wasn't taking the calligraphy class because he thought it would be useful. He took it because it was beautiful. Because it fascinated him. Because he had nothing better to do.

In our hyperoptimized, productivityobsessed culture, this is almost incomprehensible. We're taught to maximize utility, to invest our time strategically, to always be building toward something. The idea of spending eighteen months studying something "useless" seems like madness.

But Zen teaches otherwise.

The great Zen master Dogen wrote in the 13th century:

"To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."
— Dogen Zenji, Genjokoan

Notice the paradox: you study to forget. You accumulate knowledge to transcend knowledge. The goal is not to gain something but to dissolve the barrier between yourself and the world.

Jobs's calligraphy study worked this way. He wasn't acquiring a skill to add to his resume. He was losing himself in the beauty of letterforms, in the history of typography, in the subtle relationships between shapes. He was forgetting Steve Jobs the college dropout and becoming simply... a student of beauty.
This forgetting would later make him capable of seeing what no one else could see.

The TenYear Gap

Here's what makes Jobs's story so remarkable: nothing happened for ten years.

Jobs took the calligraphy class in 197273. The Macintosh was introduced in 1984. For more than a decade, that "useless" knowledge sat dormant, apparently serving no purpose.

During those ten years, Jobs:

- Cofounded Apple in 1976
- Built the Apple II into a massive success
- Launched the Lisa computer (a commercial failure)
- Was pushed out of the Macintosh team
- Fought bitter battles with Apple's board
- Brought in John Sculley as CEO

Through all of this, calligraphy was irrelevant. Jobs wasn't designing fonts. He wasn't thinking about typography. He was building circuits, writing code, negotiating with suppliers, fighting for control of his company.

And then, suddenly, the dots connected.

The Macintosh team was designing the graphical user interface. For the first time in computing history, ordinary people would see actual fonts on their screens—not the blocky, monospaced characters of earlier computers, but proportionally spaced, beautifully designed typefaces.

Jobs knew what beautiful typography looked like. He had studied it for eighteen months, learned its history, understood its subtleties. He insisted that the Mac include multiple fonts—Chicago, Geneva, New York, Monaco—each one carefully crafted.

"If I had never dropped in on that single course in college, the Mac would have never had multiple typefaces or proportionally spaced fonts. And since Windows

just copied the Mac, it's likely that no personal computer would have them."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Think about that. Every document you've ever written on a computer. Every website you've ever visited. Every presentation you've ever created. The fonts you chose, the typography you take for granted—all of it traces back to a college dropout taking a "useless" class in 1972.

Connecting the Dots Backward

"You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

This is one of the most quoted passages from Jobs's speech. But I don't think it's fully understood.

Jobs isn't saying that everything happens for a reason. He's not promising that your struggles will be rewarded. He's saying something more subtle and more Zen:

You cannot know the future. You cannot calculate the value of your experiences in advance. All you can do is act with integrity in each moment—follow your curiosity, do good work, pay attention to what fascinates you—and trust that the pattern will emerge.

This is a profoundly Buddhist idea.

The concept of "pratityasamutpada" (dependent origination) teaches that everything arises from causes and conditions. Nothing exists independently. Every moment is the product of infinite preceding moments, and every moment will influence infinite moments to come.

But—and this is crucial—the chain of causation is too complex for any human mind to understand. We cannot trace all the causes that led to this moment. We cannot predict all the effects that will flow from our actions.

What we can do is pay attention. We can notice what draws us. We can follow our curiosity with integrity. We can trust that we are part of a larger pattern, even if we cannot see it.

The calligraphy class was a cause. The Macintosh typography was an effect. But between them lay a thousand other causes and conditions—the development

of bitmap displays, the invention of the mouse, the work of Xerox PARC, the contributions of dozens of Apple engineers. Jobs's calligraphy knowledge was necessary but not sufficient. It was one thread in an impossibly complex tapestry.

"Connecting the dots backward" means looking at the tapestry after it's woven and seeing—with humility and wonder—how the threads came together. It does not mean controlling the weaving.

Beginner's Mind (Shoshin)

The Zen concept most relevant to Jobs's calligraphy story is "shoshin" (初心)—beginner's mind.

Shunryu Suzuki, the Japanese Zen master who founded San Francisco Zen Center, wrote:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."
— Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind (1970)

This is one of the most misunderstood concepts in popular Zen.

Beginner's mind doesn't mean ignorance. It doesn't mean pretending you don't know things. It means approaching each situation with openness, curiosity, and freedom from preconception.
The expert's mind is efficient but rigid. It knows what to look for, which means it often misses what it's not looking for. It categorizes quickly, which means it often miscategorizes. It has answers, which means it stops asking questions.

The beginner's mind is inefficient but flexible. It doesn't know what to look for, so it looks at everything. It doesn't have categories, so it sees things as they are. It doesn't have answers, so it keeps asking questions.

Jobs's willingness to take a "useless" calligraphy class was beginner's mind in action.

The expert's mind would have calculated: What's the return on investment? How does this advance my career? What's the opportunity cost of this time?

The beginner's mind simply asked: What's interesting?

And because Jobs approached calligraphy with beginner's mind, he saw things that typography experts missed. He saw that beautiful letterforms could be applied to computer screens. He saw that ordinary people cared about aesthetic quality. He saw that technology could be art.

These insights seem obvious now. They were not obvious in 1984.

The Expert's Trap

Here's the paradox of expertise: the more you know, the less you see.

I experienced this firsthand in my years as a politician.

When I was first elected to Japan's House of Councillors in 2004, I approached every issue with curiosity. I read voraciously. I asked questions that veterans found naive. I challenged assumptions that everyone else took for granted.

And I was effective. I proposed legislation that more experienced politicians had never considered. I saw connections between issues that specialists missed. My "beginner's mind" was an asset.

But over time, I became an expert. I learned how the legislative process worked. I learned which proposals would pass and which wouldn't. I learned the unwritten rules, the political realities, the limits of the possible.

And slowly, my vision narrowed. I stopped proposing radical ideas because I "knew" they wouldn't work. I stopped asking naive questions because I "knew" the answers. I became efficient, practical, realistic.

I became an expert. And my effectiveness declined.

It took losing my election in 2022 to shake me back to beginner's mind. Suddenly, I didn't know anything. I didn't know who I was, what I should do, or where I was going.

And in that notknowing, possibilities opened up. I started writing books. I began teaching differently. I asked questions I hadn't asked in years.

Defeat gave me back my beginner's mind. It was the greatest gift of my political career.

The Courage to Follow Curiosity

There's one more aspect of Jobs's calligraphy story that deserves attention: the courage it required.

Jobs was a college dropout with no money and no prospects. His parents had sacrificed enormously to send him to Reed. Society was telling him he had made a terrible mistake.

In this situation, most people would scramble to recover. They would look for practical skills, marketable credentials, anything to get back on the conventional path.

Jobs did the opposite. He took a calligraphy class.

This required a kind of courage that's hard to appreciate from the outside. It meant trusting his own curiosity more than society's expectations. It meant believing that beauty mattered, even when no one else seemed to think so. It meant acting without any guarantee of reward.

The Japanese Zen tradition has a concept called "shikantaza" (只管打坐)—"just sitting." It means sitting in meditation without any goal, without seeking enlightenment, without expecting anything. Just sitting.

Jobs's calligraphy study was a form of shikantaza. Just learning. Not for credit. Not for career. Not for anything. Just learning.

This "just" is harder than it sounds. Our minds constantly ask: What's the point? What will I get from this? How will this help me?

To silence these questions—to simply do something because it's worth doing—requires deep trust. Trust in yourself. Trust in the process. Trust that the universe is not hostile.

Jobs had that trust. It's one of the things that made him extraordinary.

Practical Lessons

What can we learn from Jobs's calligraphy story?

First: follow your curiosity, even when it seems useless.

The most important learning often happens outside formal education, outside career paths, outside any plan. Pay attention to what fascinates you. Give yourself permission to explore it—even if you can't justify the time, even if no one else understands.

Second: trust the dots will connect.

You cannot see the pattern while you're in it. You cannot know which experiences will prove valuable and which won't. All you can do is act with integrity in each moment and trust that the pattern will emerge.

Third: cultivate beginner's mind.

The more expert you become, the more you need to practice notknowing. Question your assumptions. Ask naive questions. Look at familiar things as if you've never seen them before.

Fourth: have the courage to be “useless.”

Some of the most valuable learning appears useless at the time. Don’t let society’s definition of utility constrain your exploration. Beauty matters. Curiosity matters. Following your fascination matters—even when no one else can see why.

Finally: remember that the dots connect backward.

You will look back on your life and see patterns you couldn’t see while you were living it. The “useless” calligraphy class became the foundation of modern computing. Your own “useless” explorations may prove equally transformative.

You just can’t know it yet.

And that’s okay.

That’s the whole point.

CHAPTER 3: THE DESIGN OF EMPTINESS

A Lesson in Subtraction

I learned about the power of emptiness in an unexpected place: the Japanese parliament.

In 2008, I was working on a major telecommunications bill. The draft legislation was 247 pages long—a dense thicket of regulations, exceptions, and technical specifications. Every stakeholder had added their requirements. Every ministry had inserted their concerns. The bill had become a monster.

One evening, a senior colleague—a man who had served in parliament for thirty years—looked at the draft and shook his head.

"Fujisuesan," he said, "do you know why this bill will fail?"

I assumed he would point to some political obstacle, some coalition that needed to be built.

"It's too long," he said. "No one will read it. No one will understand it. And what people don't understand, they fear. What they fear, they reject."

He took out a red pen and began crossing out sections. Whole pages disappeared. Paragraphs that had taken weeks to negotiate vanished with a single stroke.

"But those provisions are important," I protested. "The industry associations specifically requested—"

"What's more important?" he interrupted. "Including everything, or passing something?"

The final bill was 31 pages. It passed unanimously.

That lesson has stayed with me for fifteen years. Clarity comes from subtraction, not addition. What you remove is as important as what you keep.

Steve Jobs understood this better than anyone in the technology industry. And he learned it, at least in part, from Zen.

The 90Day Crisis

When Steve Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, the company was 90 days from bankruptcy.

This wasn't an exaggeration. Apple's cash reserves were nearly depleted. Its market share had fallen below 4%. The stock price had collapsed to a twelveyear low. Industry analysts were openly speculating about who would acquire Apple's remains.

The problem wasn't just financial. It was existential. Apple had lost its identity.

In Jobs's absence, the company had proliferated into chaos. There were over 350 products in the lineup—dozens of variations of Macintosh computers, printers, monitors, servers, PDAs, and accessories. There were twelve versions of the Macintosh alone, with names that confused even Apple employees: Performa 6400, Power Macintosh 7300, Twentieth Anniversary Macintosh, PowerBook 3400c.

No one—not customers, not retailers, not even Apple's own salespeople—could explain the difference between these products or why anyone should buy one over another.

Jobs's response was radical subtraction.

The TwobyTwo Grid

In one of his first meetings with Apple's top managers, Jobs stood at a whiteboard and drew a simple twobytwo grid.

Across the top, he wrote: Consumer / Professional
Down the side, he wrote: Desktop / Portable

Four quadrants. Four products.

"That's it," he said. "We're going to make four great products. One in each quadrant. Everything else gets canceled."

The room was stunned. Apple had been defined by its product proliferation. Jobs was proposing to kill 70% of everything the company made.

Engineers who had spent years developing products saw their work eliminated with a single line on a whiteboard. Marketing teams who had built campaigns around specific models watched those models disappear. Executives who had staked their careers on particular product lines found themselves suddenly irrelevant.

It was brutal. It was necessary.

"Deciding what not to do is as important as deciding what to do," Jobs later said. "That's true for companies, and it's true for products."

Within two years, Apple was profitable again. Within a decade, it was the most valuable company in the world.

The twobytwo grid had saved the company. But where did Jobs learn to think this way?

Ma: The Power of Empty Space

In Japanese aesthetics, there is a concept called "ma" (間).

Ma is usually translated as "negative space" or "emptiness," but these translations miss its essence. Ma is not the absence of something—it's the presence of nothing. It's not a void to be filled but a space that has meaning precisely because it is empty.

Consider a traditional Japanese room. In Western interior design, we tend to fill rooms with furniture, decorations, and objects. The more we add, the more "complete" the room seems.

A Japanese room works differently. The tatami mats are largely bare. A single scroll hangs in the tokonoma alcove. Perhaps there is a flower arrangement—one branch, one bloom. The walls are empty.

This emptiness is not poverty or minimalism for its own sake. It's an invitation. The empty space invites attention. It creates calm. It allows the mind to rest.

Ma appears throughout Japanese culture:

In music, ma is the pause between notes—the silence that gives the notes meaning.
In theater, ma is the pregnant pause between lines—the moment of tension before resolution.
In conversation, ma is the respectful silence after someone speaks—the space that honors their words.
In architecture, ma is the courtyard, the garden, the room with nothing in it.
In painting, ma is the unpainted space that makes the painted space powerful.

The great Zen painter Sesshu Toyo, working in the 15th century, was a master of ma. In his famous "Splashed Ink Landscape," mountains emerge from vast expanses of empty paper. The mountains are suggested with just a few bold strokes. Everything else is white.

That white space is not emptiness. It's mist. It's atmosphere. It's the infinite possibility of the unseen. The painting works precisely because of what Sesshu didn't paint.

Digital Ma

Look at any Apple product and you'll see ma everywhere.

Open an iPhone. The home screen is a field of empty space punctuated by small, perfectly spaced icons. There's no clutter, no visual noise, no competing demands for attention. The apps float in a sea of calm.

Walk into an Apple Store. The tables are nearly empty—just a few products, widely spaced, inviting touch. The walls are bare. The ceiling is high. The experience is one of breathing room in a world of visual assault.

Open a MacBook. The desktop is clean. The dock is minimal. The interface assumes you want to focus on one thing at a time, not juggle a dozen windows.

Unbox any Apple product. The packaging is spare, elegant, with far more empty space than contents. The experience of opening the box is itself a form of meditation—layer after layer revealing simplicity.

This is digital ma. Jobs understood that in a world of information overload, emptiness is luxury. The scarcest resource is attention, and attention is drawn to what stands alone.

"Simple can be harder than complex: You have to work hard to get your thinking clean to make it simple. But it's worth it in the end because once you get there, you can move mountains."
— Steve Jobs

The twobytwo grid was an act of ma. By removing 70% of Apple's products, Jobs created space—space for attention, space for focus, space for excellence.

The Fish Tank Test

There's a famous story about the development of the original iPod that perfectly illustrates Jobs's relationship with emptiness.

The engineering team had been working for months on the device. They had achieved something remarkable—a hard drivebased music player that could hold a thousand songs and fit in your pocket. They presented Jobs with a prototype, proud of their accomplishment.

Jobs examined the device. He turned it over in his hands. He weighed it. He studied its proportions.

Then he walked over to the aquarium in the corner of the room and dropped the iPod into the water.

Everyone watched in shock as bubbles rose to the surface.

“Those are air bubbles,” Jobs said. “That means there’s space in there. Make it smaller.”

The story is often told as evidence of Jobs’s impossible standards or his cruelty to employees. But look at it through the lens of ma.

Those air bubbles represented wasted space. Not external space—the iPod was already remarkably small—but internal space. Empty volume that served no purpose. Complexity masquerading as necessity.

Jobs was asking: Is every cubic millimeter of this device essential? Is there anything here that doesn’t need to be here?

The engineers went back to work. They found ways to compress the components further, to eliminate the wasted space. The final iPod was even smaller, even more elegant.

This is ma applied to engineering. Every unnecessary element is removed until only the essential remains.

WabiSabi: The Beauty of Imperfection

There’s an apparent contradiction in Jobs’s aesthetic philosophy.

Zen teaches wabisabi (侘寂)—the beauty of imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. Think of a cracked tea bowl whose fractures have been repaired with gold. Think of a weathered wooden beam, its grain revealed by centuries of use. Think of a garden designed to look wild, untamed, natural.

Wabisabi finds beauty in asymmetry, roughness, and the marks of time. It values the handmade over the machinemade, the natural over the artificial, the irregular over the perfect.

Apple products, by contrast, seem obsessively perfect. Flawless aluminum machined to tolerances measured in microns. Curves so precise they seem computed rather than designed. Glass so smooth it feels like frozen water.

Where is the wabisabi in an iPhone?

The answer requires understanding wabisabi at a deeper level.

The Beauty of Authenticity

The original Macintosh, introduced in 1984, had an unusual feature: Jobs insisted that the interior of the computer—which no user would ever see—be as carefully designed as the exterior.

The circuit board had to be beautiful. The routing of the wires had to be elegant. The engineers' signatures were molded into the inside of the case, invisible to everyone except those who manufactured and repaired the machines.

"When you're a carpenter making a beautiful chest of drawers, you're not going to use a piece of plywood on the back, even though it faces the wall and nobody will see it," Jobs explained. "You'll know it's there, so you're going to use a beautiful piece of wood on the back. For you to sleep well at night, the aesthetic, the quality, has to be carried all the way through."

This is wabisabi at its deepest. Not imperfection on the surface, but integrity through and through. Not the appearance of authenticity, but authenticity itself.

The Zen tea master Sen no Rikyu, who codified the tea ceremony in the 16th century, said:

"Though many people drink tea, if you do not know the Way of Tea, tea will drink you."
— Sen no Rikyu (16th century)

Rikyu wasn't talking about the physical act of drinking tea. He was talking about the spirit behind it. If you perform the tea ceremony mechanically, without understanding its essence, you become a slave to the forms. But if you understand the Way, the forms become expressions of something deeper.

Jobs understood this. He wasn't just making products—he was practicing a Way. And the Way required that nothing be false, nothing be merely for show, nothing be designed to deceive.

The invisible beauty of the Macintosh's interior was not wasted effort. It was integrity. It was the commitment to quality that permeated everything Apple made.

My Grandfather's Chisel

I think about wabisabi whenever I use my grandfather's chisel.

My grandfather was a carpenter in rural Japan. He worked with hand tools his entire life, building houses, furniture, and the small wooden objects that fill traditional Japanese homes.

When he died, I inherited his tools. Most were worn beyond use, their blades thinned by decades of sharpening, their handles smoothed by countless hours of work. But one chisel remained usable—a mediumsized blade with a wooden handle that fit my hand as if it had been made for me.

That chisel is not beautiful in any conventional sense. The blade is slightly uneven from years of sharpening. The handle has a dark patina of oil and sweat. There are small chips and scratches everywhere.

But when I hold it, I feel connected to my grandfather. I feel the thousands of hours he spent with this tool in his hands. I feel the houses he built, the furniture he crafted, the life he lived.

This is wabisabi. Not the aesthetic of imperfection, but the beauty of a life lived fully. The chisel is beautiful not despite its wear but because of it. Every scratch tells a story. Every imperfection is evidence of use, of care, of purpose.

Jobs's products don't have this patina—they're too new, too pristine. But they have something related: the integrity of complete commitment. Every detail, visible or invisible, reflects a total dedication to excellence.

That dedication is its own form of wabisabi. It's the beauty of authenticity, carried all the way through.

Kanso: Simplicity

Beyond ma and wabisabi, there's a third Zen aesthetic principle that shaped Jobs's design philosophy: kanso (簡素).

Kanso means simplicity, but not the simplicity of reduction. It's the simplicity of essence—what remains when everything nonessential has been removed.

The Zen master Sengai Gibon, painting in the 18th century, created an image called "Circle, Triangle, Square." It consists of just three shapes: a circle, a triangle, and a square, drawn with minimal brushstrokes.

This painting is considered one of the masterpieces of Zen art. Why? Because it reduces the visual world to its geometric essentials. Every form in nature can

be understood as some combination of these three shapes. By painting nothing but these shapes, Sengai painted everything.

Jobs pursued the same kind of essential simplicity.

The first iPod had no on/off switch. Why? Because users didn't need one. The device slept when not in use and woke when touched. The switch was unnecessary—so it was eliminated.

The iPhone eliminated the physical keyboard that every smartphone manufacturer considered essential. Why? Because a software keyboard could adapt to every situation. The physical keyboard was unnecessary—so it was eliminated.

The MacBook Air was so thin that Jobs introduced it by sliding it out of a manila envelope. Why? Because most of a laptop's thickness was unnecessary—so it was eliminated.

"Design is not just what it looks like and feels like. Design is how it works."
— Steve Jobs

Kanso isn't about looking simple. It's about being simple. It's about identifying the essence of what something should do and removing everything that doesn't serve that essence.

The Designer as Zen Practitioner

There's a deeper connection between Jobs's design philosophy and Zen practice.

In Zen, the practice of meditation is often described as removing obstructions. The Buddhanature is already present in every being—it doesn't need to be created or acquired. But it's obscured by attachments, delusions, and habits of mind. Meditation removes these obstructions, allowing the Buddhanature to shine through.

The great Zen master Dogen wrote:

"To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be enlightened by all things."
— Dogen Zenji, Genjokoan

Notice the movement: study, forget, be enlightened. You begin by examining yourself—your attachments, your assumptions, your habits. Then you let go of what you find—you "forget" the constructed self. And in that forgetting, you become open to reality as it is.

Jobs's design process followed a similar arc.

First, he studied the problem deeply. What were customers really trying to do? What were the existing solutions? What assumptions were everyone making?

Then, he forgot the assumptions. He asked: What if we didn't have to do it this way? What if we started from scratch? What if we eliminated everything that wasn't essential?

And in that forgetting, the essential design emerged—not created so much as discovered, revealed by the removal of everything that obscured it.

The iPhone was always there, waiting to be discovered. It just took someone willing to forget everything the industry "knew" about phones.

Practicing Emptiness

How can you apply these principles to your own life?

First, practice subtraction.

Look at your calendar. How many of your commitments are truly essential? How many are there because you've always done them, or because someone else expected them, or because you were afraid to say no?

Look at your possessions. How many do you actually use? How many are kept out of habit, or guilt, or the vague sense that you might need them someday?

Look at your projects. How many are moving toward completion? How many are halffinished initiatives that drain your energy without producing results?

Subtract. Remove. Eliminate. Create space.

Second, seek integrity rather than perfection.

Perfection is about surfaces—about how things appear. Integrity is about essence—about how things are.

Ask yourself: If no one were watching, would I still do it this way? If this were never seen by anyone, would I still care about its quality?

Do your hidden work with the same care as your visible work. Let your integrity be complete.

Third, find the essence.

In any project, any problem, any situation, ask: What is this really about? What is the one thing that matters most?

Then remove everything that doesn't serve that essence. Be ruthless. Be willing to disappoint people who want more. Be willing to abandon work you've already done.

The essence, unobscured, is always more powerful than the essence buried under additions.

Fourth, embrace ma.

Create empty space in your life. Time with nothing scheduled. Rooms with nothing in them. Conversations with silence.

This emptiness is not waste. It's the space where new things can emerge. It's the pause that gives meaning to the notes. It's the blank canvas that makes the brushstroke visible.

Jobs filled Apple's products with emptiness—with ma. The result was focus, clarity, and beauty.

You can do the same with your life.

The Zen of Less

There's a famous Zen story about a professor who visits a master to learn about Zen.

The master serves tea. He pours the professor's cup full, then keeps pouring. The tea overflows onto the table, onto the floor.

"Stop!" the professor says. "The cup is full! No more will go in!"

"Like this cup," the master says, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Jobs's genius was his willingness to empty the cup.

When he returned to Apple, the cup was overflowing—with products, with projects, with complexity. He poured it out. He started with emptiness.

From that emptiness came the iMac, the iPod, the iPhone, the iPad—products that changed the world precisely because they contained so little.

The Zen of design is the Zen of less.
Not less as deprivation. Less as liberation.

Not less as poverty. Less as clarity.

Not less as absence. Less as presence—the presence of what truly matters, finally visible because everything else has been removed.

This is what Jobs understood.

This is what Zen teaches.

And this is what you can practice, starting today.

CHAPTER 4: FACING DEATH

The Terror That Wakes You at 3 AM

I need to tell you something that I rarely discuss publicly.

I am terrified of death.

Not in an abstract, philosophical way. In a visceral, physical way that sometimes wakes me at 3 AM with my heart pounding and my sheets soaked with sweat. The terror of nonexistence. The incomprehensible fact that one day, I will cease to be.

I have felt this terror since childhood. My earliest memory of it comes from when I was seven years old, lying in bed in my family's small apartment in Tokyo, suddenly realizing that my parents would die someday. And then realizing that I would die too. The world spun. I couldn't breathe. I ran to my mother's room and crawled into her bed, unable to explain what was wrong.

This terror has never fully left me. It has driven much of my life—my restlessness, my ambition, my search for meaning. And it is what drew me to Zen.

I share this because I believe Steve Jobs felt something similar. His obsession with mortality wasn't philosophical posturing. It was a response to the same terror that haunts every human being who allows themselves to feel it.

The difference is what you do with that terror.

You can run from it, numb it, distract yourself until the final moment arrives. Or you can face it directly and let it transform your life.

Jobs chose to face it. And that choice made him who he was.

The Diagnosis

In October 2003, Steve Jobs had a CT scan for kidney stones.

The scan revealed something unexpected: a tumor on his pancreas.

Pancreatic cancer. The words themselves are almost a death sentence. Pancreatic cancer is one of the deadliest forms of the disease, with a fiveyear survival rate below 10%. Most patients die within months of diagnosis.

Jobs's doctor told him to go home and get his affairs in order. This is the medical way of saying: you have a few months to live. Say goodbye to your family. Make your peace with the world.

Imagine receiving this news.
You are 48 years old. You have just completed the greatest comeback in business history, returning to Apple and transforming it from a company on the verge of bankruptcy into a cultural phenomenon. You have a wife you love, three young children, a life full of projects and possibilities.

And now a doctor is telling you it's over.

Jobs went home. He told his wife, Laurene. He sat with the reality of his death.

And then—a reprieve.

A biopsy revealed that Jobs had an extremely rare form of pancreatic cancer: a neuroendocrine tumor, also called an islet cell carcinoma. Unlike the common form of pancreatic cancer, this type is potentially curable with surgery. Jobs had been given a death sentence—and then, within hours, an unexpected pardon.

"This was the closest I've been to facing death. And I hope it's the closest I get for a few more decades."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

It wasn't. The cancer would return. Jobs would fight it for eight years, trying every possible treatment—conventional and unconventional. He would have a liver transplant in 2009. He would take medical leaves from Apple. And on October 5, 2011, he would die at home, surrounded by his family, at the age of 56.

But that first brush with mortality in 2003 crystallized something he had been thinking about for years. It transformed a philosophical understanding into a lived reality.

The Mirror Every Morning

In his Stanford speech, Jobs revealed a practice he had maintained for 33 years:

"When I was 17, I read a quote that went something like: 'If you live each day as if it was your last, someday you'll most certainly be right.' It made an impression on me, and since then, for the past 33 years, I have looked in the mirror every morning and asked myself: 'If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today?' And whenever the answer has been 'No' for too many days in a row, I know I need to change something."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Let's pause on this.

Jobs wasn't occasionally thinking about death. He was confronting it every single morning for over three decades. Every day, he looked in the mirror and asked himself whether today's activities were worthy of his finite time on Earth.

This is not a casual practice. It requires courage. Most of us avoid thinking about death because it's uncomfortable, even terrifying. Jobs did the opposite—he made it part of his morning routine, as regular as brushing his teeth.

And this practice had consequences.

When the answer was "no" for too many days, something had to change. Jobs left relationships that weren't working. He abandoned projects that didn't excite him. He made enemies by refusing to waste time on what he considered trivial.

People called him demanding, difficult, impossible to please. But from Jobs's perspective, he was simply refusing to waste his limited time on Earth. When you truly believe that each day could be your last, you become very selective about how you spend it.

The Samurai's Morning Meditation

Jobs's practice echoes an ancient tradition: the samurai's death contemplation.

In feudal Japan, samurai warriors were taught to begin each day by meditating on their death. They would sit in stillness and imagine their death in vivid detail—being cut down in battle, feeling the blade enter their body, bleeding out in the mud, their corpses left for crows.

This practice, called "maranasati" in Buddhist tradition or "death contemplation" in samurai culture, served a specific purpose. A samurai who fears death cannot fight effectively. His movements will be hesitant. His mind will be divided between the present moment and the terrifying possibility of its end.

But a samurai who has already died—who has experienced his death a thousand times in meditation—can act with total freedom. He has nothing to lose because he has already lost everything. He can commit completely to each moment because he knows there may be no next moment.

The Hagakure, a classic text of samurai philosophy compiled in the early 18th century, puts it directly:

"The way of the warrior is death. This means choosing death whenever there is a choice between life and death. It means nothing more than this. It means to

see things through, being resolved."
— Yamamoto Tsunetomo, Hagakure

This sounds morbid to modern ears. But it's actually liberating.

"Choosing death" doesn't mean seeking death. It means accepting death so completely that it no longer controls you. When you have chosen death, when you have accepted that this moment could be your last, you are free to act without hesitation, without fear, without the constant calculation of selfpreservation.

Takuan Soho and the Unfettered Mind

The Zen master Takuan Soho (15731645) was famous for his teachings to samurai, including the legendary swordsman Yagyu Munenori. His letters on the relationship between Zen and swordsmanship were collected in a text called "The Unfettered Mind."

Takuan wrote:

"The mind that does not stop at one thing is called mushin. It is like water that flows without stopping. When the mind stops at one thing, it loses its freedom. When facing an opponent, if your mind stops at his sword, his stance, his expression—you have already lost."
— Takuan Soho, The Unfettered Mind

This is the connection between death contemplation and effective action.

If your mind "stops" at the fear of death, you cannot act freely. Every decision becomes contaminated by selfpreservation. Every choice is filtered through the question: "Will this keep me safe?"

But if your mind flows through death—if you have accepted mortality so completely that it no longer causes your mind to "stop"—you can respond to each situation freshly, without hesitation, without the drag of fear.

Jobs's mind didn't stop at death. He had contemplated it every morning for 33 years. He had faced it directly in 2003 when the diagnosis came. And he flowed through it, letting it clarify his priorities rather than paralyze his action.

The Antenna Press Conference

Let me give you a concrete example of how this worked in practice.

In June 2010, Apple launched the iPhone 4. It was a beautiful device—the thinnest smartphone ever made, with a revolutionary "Retina" display. Customers lined up for hours to buy it.

Then the complaints started.

Some users reported that when they held the phone a certain way, the signal would drop. The problem was traced to the antenna, which was integrated into the phone's external band. If you covered the lowerleft corner with your hand, you could bridge the antenna gap and cause signal loss.

The media frenzy was immediate. "Antennagate," they called it. Consumer Reports refused to recommend the iPhone 4. Competitors ran ads mocking Apple. Analysts predicted a recall that would cost billions.

Most executives in this situation would have panicked. They would have issued a groveling apology, announced a recall, and promised to do better. They would have been driven by fear—fear of lost sales, fear of damaged reputation, fear of shareholder lawsuits.

Jobs held a press conference.

He acknowledged the problem. He showed data demonstrating that all smartphones have antenna issues when held in certain ways. He invited journalists to test competing phones and see for themselves.

Then he offered a solution: free cases for everyone who wanted one. The cases solved the problem. End of story.

He did not apologize. He did not grovel. He did not act like a man whose world was ending.

Because it wasn't.

Jobs had faced death. He had been told he had months to live. Compared to that, what was a bad news cycle? What was a stock price dip? What was the mockery of competitors?

The Antennagate press conference is a perfect example of mushin—the unfettered mind. Jobs's response wasn't stopped by fear. He acknowledged reality, offered a solution, and moved on. No drama. No panic. No wasted energy.

My Father's Death

In 2019, my father died at the age of 89.

He had lived a full life. He had been born in Taiwan during the Japanese colonial period, survived World War II, built a career in Japan, raised a family. His death was not a tragedy in the conventional sense—it was the natural conclusion of a long journey.

And yet, when I stood beside his hospital bed in those final hours, I was overwhelmed.

Not by grief—that would come later. By the sheer reality of death. Here was my father, the man who had shaped my life, who had always been there, who had seemed as permanent as the mountains. And he was leaving. His breath grew shallow. His eyes closed. And then he was gone.

In that moment, all my philosophical understanding meant nothing. I had studied death for decades—in Zen texts, in Heidegger, in the samurai classics. I had meditated on impermanence countless times. I thought I understood.

I didn't understand. Not really. Not until I watched it happen.

Death is not a concept. It is an event—the event that makes all other events meaningful.

In the months after my father's death, something shifted in me. The terror I had felt since childhood didn't disappear—it deepened. But it also transformed. I began to understand, not just intellectually but viscerally, what the Zen masters meant when they said that death is the great teacher.

Watching my father die taught me that I too will die. Not someday, in an abstract future, but actually, really, finally. This body that I have inhabited for sixtyplus years will cease to function. The consciousness that is reading these words will end.

And strangely, this knowledge is liberating.

Not because I no longer fear death—I do. But because the fear has been joined by acceptance. And acceptance, paradoxically, makes life more vivid, more precious, more urgent.

Death as Life's Change Agent

In his Stanford speech, Jobs made a startling claim:

"No one wants to die. Even people who want to go to heaven don't want to die to get there. And yet death is the destination we all share. No one has ever escaped it. And that is as it should be, because Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Death as "the single best invention of Life."

This is a radical reframing. Most people see death as an enemy—the thing that steals meaning from life, the shadow that darkens every joy, the inevitable defeat that renders all victories temporary.

But Jobs saw it differently. He saw death as the source of meaning, not its enemy.

Think about it. Without death, nothing would matter. If you had infinite time, why do anything today? Why commit to anything? Why love anyone? You could always do it later—infinitely later.

Death is what makes time precious. Death is what makes choices matter. Death is what forces us to prioritize, to commit, to act.

Jobs continued: "Right now the new is you, but someday not too long from now, you will gradually become the old and be cleared away. Sorry to be so dramatic, but it is quite true."

This is not pessimism. It's realism. And in that realism is a kind of freedom.

If you are going to be "cleared away," if your time is limited, if this moment will never come again—then this moment matters. This choice matters. This relationship, this project, this conversation—it all matters, precisely because it is finite.

Heidegger's BeingTowardDeath

The German philosopher Martin Heidegger made mortality central to his analysis of human existence.

In his masterwork "Being and Time" (1927), Heidegger argued that most people live in a state he called "inauthenticity." We distract ourselves from death. We

talk about it in the third person—"one dies"—rather than facing the firstperson reality: "I will die." We fill our lives with busyness and chatter to avoid confronting the abyss.

But Heidegger proposed an alternative: "Beingtowarddeath" (SeinzumTode).

Beingtowarddeath means authentically confronting our mortality. Not morbidly dwelling on it, but clearly acknowledging that death is our "ownmost possibility"—the one possibility that is uniquely, inescapably ours. No one can die my death for me. It is mine alone.

When we authentically face death, Heidegger argued, we are freed from the tyranny of "the They"—the anonymous social pressure that tells us how to live. We stop living according to what "one does" and start living according to what we genuinely care about.

"If I take death into my life, acknowledge it, and face it squarely, I will free myself from the anxiety of death and the pettiness of life—and only then will I be free to become myself."
— Martin Heidegger

Jobs lived this philosophy. His daily confrontation with death freed him from conventional expectations. He didn't care what "one does" in the tech industry. He cared about what he genuinely believed was excellent.

Ikkyu's Lightning

But Zen masters were teaching this a thousand years before Heidegger was born.

Ikkyu Sojun (13941481) was one of the most colorful figures in Zen history. A brilliant poet and calligrapher, he was also a rebel who refused to follow monastic conventions. He frequented brothels, drank sake, and scandalized the Zen establishment with his unorthodox behavior.

But beneath the scandal was a profound understanding of impermanence. Ikkyu wrote:

"Like vanishing dew, a passing apparition, or the sudden flash of lightning—already gone—thus should one regard one's self."
— Ikkyu Sojun

“Already gone.”

This is the key. Not “will be gone someday” but “already gone.” The self that exists in this moment is already vanishing. By the time you finish reading this sentence, the you who started it no longer exists.

This sounds nihilistic. It’s actually liberating.

If you are “already gone,” you have nothing to protect. You have no reputation to maintain, no status to defend, no future self to worry about. You are free to act in this moment, for this moment, without the burden of selfpreservation.

Ikkyu’s wild behavior wasn’t license—it was freedom. He had so completely accepted his own impermanence that he no longer cared about social conventions. He lived authentically, moment to moment, until his death at age 87.

The Freedom of Mortality

Jobs expressed this freedom in his Stanford speech:

“Remembering that I’ll be dead soon is the most important tool I’ve ever encountered to help me make the big choices in life. Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important.”
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Notice what “falls away”:

External expectations—what others think you should do.
Pride—the need to look good, to be admired.
Fear of embarrassment—the worry about what happens if you fail publicly.
Fear of failure—the terror of trying and not succeeding.

These are the things that stop most people from pursuing their true callings. They’re the reasons people stay in jobs they hate, relationships that don’t work, lives that feel hollow.

But in the face of death, they lose their power.

What does it matter if you’re embarrassed? You’re going to die anyway.
What does it matter if you fail? You’re going to die anyway.
What does it matter what others think? They’re going to die too.

This is not cynicism. It’s clarity. When you truly accept death, the trivial falls away and the essential remains.

Practicing Death

How can you bring this teaching into your own life?

First, practice Jobs's morning question. Look in the mirror and ask: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?" Don't rush past the question. Sit with it. Feel the reality of your mortality.

Second, contemplate death directly. Not obsessively, but regularly. When you wake in the night with that 3 AM terror, don't run from it. Stay with it. Let yourself feel the reality that you will die. Notice how everything looks different afterward—more vivid, more precious, more urgent.

Third, let death clarify your priorities. What would you regret not doing if you died tomorrow? What relationships would you wish you had repaired? What words would you wish you had spoken? Don't wait. The time is now.

Fourth, practice mushin—the unfettered mind. When fear arises, notice it, but don't let your mind "stop" there. Flow through the fear to the action required. Remember that you have already died a thousand times in your imagination. One more death holds no power over you.

Finally, remember Ikkyu's teaching: you are "already gone." The self you are protecting doesn't exist. The future you are worried about may never come. All you have is this moment—and this moment is already vanishing.

This is not morbid. This is liberating.

Jobs understood it. The samurai understood it. The Zen masters have always understood it.

Death is not the enemy of a meaningful life.

Death is what makes life meaningful.

Oh Wow

Steve Jobs died on October 5, 2011, at his home in Palo Alto, surrounded by his family.

According to his sister, Mona Simpson, his final words were: "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

What did he see?

We will never know. But I like to think it was something like what the Zen master Bassui described to his students as he was dying in the 14th century:

“Look directly! What is this? Look in this manner and you won’t be fooled!”
— Bassui Tokusho

Jobs had spent his life looking directly—at technology, at design, at life, at death. He refused to be fooled by convention, by fear, by the comfortable illusions we use to hide from reality.

In the end, facing the ultimate reality, he looked directly one more time.

And he saw something that made him say “Oh wow.”

That’s the promise of facing death: not that it becomes less frightening, but that it becomes a doorway. A doorway to something we cannot name but can only experience.

“Oh wow.”

May we all face our deaths with such wonder.

CHAPTER 5: THE STANFORD SPEECH AS ZEN TEACHING

The Most Watched Commencement Speech in History

On June 12, 2005, Steve Jobs stood before the graduating class of Stanford University and delivered a 15minute speech that would become the most watched commencement address in history.

The speech has been viewed hundreds of millions of times on YouTube. It has been translated into dozens of languages. It is quoted in business books, selfhelp seminars, and motivational posters around the world.

But few people recognize it for what it is: a Zen teaching in disguise.

Jobs didn't mention Zen once in the speech. He didn't quote any Buddhist texts. He didn't use any Japanese terminology. And yet, the speech is structured around three stories that embody the core principles of Zen practice.

The first story is about trust. The second is about loss. The third is about death.

Together, they form a complete teaching—a practical guide to living with clarity, courage, and authenticity.

Let's examine each story through the lens of Zen.

The Structure of a Sermon

Before we dive into the content, notice the structure of Jobs's speech.

It begins with a humble opening: "I am honored to be with you today at your commencement from one of the finest universities in the world. I never graduated from college. Truth be told, this is the closest I've ever gotten to a college graduation."

Then it announces a simple plan: "Today I want to tell you three stories from my life. That's it. No big deal. Just three stories."

And it delivers exactly that—three stories, told simply, without jargon or pretension.

This structure itself is Zen. The great Zen masters didn't deliver elaborate philosophical treatises. They told stories. They pointed at things. They used concrete, direct language.

The famous Zen master Linji said:

"When hungry, eat. When tired, sleep. Fools laugh at me. The wise understand."
— Linji Yixuan

Jobs's speech has this same directness. He doesn't explain what his stories mean. He doesn't draw explicit lessons. He trusts the listeners to find their own understanding.

This is masterful teaching—and it's distinctly Zen.

Story One: Connecting the Dots

The first story is about Jobs dropping out of Reed College and taking a calligraphy class.

We've already explored this story in detail. But in the context of the Stanford speech, it takes on additional significance.

Jobs is speaking to graduates who have just completed a carefully planned educational journey. They chose their major, selected their courses, optimized their grades. Everything they did was calculated to lead to this moment—and to the careers that will follow.

And Jobs tells them: I dropped out. I took random classes. I had no plan. And it worked out.

This is subversive. It challenges the entire premise of higher education.

But then Jobs delivers the key insight:

"You can't connect the dots looking forward; you can only connect them looking backward. So you have to trust that the dots will somehow connect in your future. You have to trust in something—your gut, destiny, life, karma, whatever. This approach has never let me down, and it has made all the difference in my life."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

In Zen, this trust is called "shinjin" (信心)—faithmind.

But shinjin is not faith in a god or a doctrine. It's not belief in something external. It's faith in the process of life itself—trust that if you act with integrity, the results will take care of themselves.

The Zen master Sheng Yen explained it this way:

"Just practice. Don't worry about attainment. If you practice correctly, attainment will take care of itself."
— Master Sheng Yen

Jobs didn't take the calligraphy class because he had calculated its future value. He took it because he was drawn to it. He trusted his curiosity. He practiced without worrying about attainment.

Ten years later, the dots connected. But he couldn't have known they would.

The Problem of Planning

There's a deeper teaching here about the limits of planning.

Our culture worships planning. We make fiveyear plans, tenyear plans, career roadmaps, life goals. We believe that if we plan carefully enough, we can control our futures.

Zen teaches otherwise.

Planning has its place, but reality is too complex to be captured in any plan. The future is influenced by millions of variables we can't see, understand, or control. The calligraphy class was one variable. The invention of bitmap displays was another. The decisions of dozens of other people—engineers, investors, competitors—were still others.

Jobs couldn't have planned his way to the Macintosh. The path was too complex, too contingent, too dependent on factors beyond his control.

What he could do was act with integrity in each moment. Follow his curiosity. Do good work. Trust that the pattern would emerge.

This is not passivity. Jobs worked incredibly hard. But his hard work was directed by curiosity, not by a master plan.

The Zen master Dogen wrote:

"Do not think that time merely flies away. Do not see flying away as the only function of time. If time merely flies away, you would be separated from time."
— Dogen Zenji, Uji (BeingTime)

Jobs didn't see his calligraphy class as time "passing" while he waited for his real life to begin. He was fully present in that class, in that moment. And that presence is what allowed the dots to connect.

My Own Dots

I want to share how this teaching has played out in my own life.

In 1998, when I was a midlevel bureaucrat at METI, I took an assignment that no one else wanted: representing Japan at an obscure international conference on digital signatures.

Digital signatures were a minor technical issue at the time. The internet was still young. Ecommerce barely existed. My colleagues thought I was wasting my time on a deadend topic.

But I was curious. I found the technology fascinating. I threw myself into understanding it.

Over the next decade, that "deadend topic" became one of the most important issues in the digital economy. Cybersecurity, encryption, digital identity—all the things I now teach at MIT—grew out of those early questions about digital signatures.

Looking backward, the dots connect perfectly. Looking forward, in 1998, I had no idea.

When I lost my parliament seat in 2022, I could have seen it as a catastrophe. My career plan had been destroyed. Everything I had worked toward for 18 years was gone.

But I remembered Jobs's teaching. I couldn't see how the dots would connect. I could only trust that they would.

Now, two years later, I'm writing books, teaching at two universities, and doing work I find more meaningful than anything I did in parliament. The dots are connecting—in ways I never could have planned.

Story Two: Love and Loss

The second story is about Jobs being fired from Apple at age 30.

This is the emotional heart of the speech. Jobs's voice changes when he tells this story. The pain is still audible, even 20 years later.

"I was a very public failure, and I even thought about running away from the valley. But something slowly began to dawn on me—I still loved what I did. The turn of events at Apple had not changed that one bit. I had been rejected, but I was still in love. And so I decided to start over."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

Jobs had cofounded Apple in his parents' garage. He had built it into a multibilliondollar company. He had created the Macintosh, the most revolutionary personal computer ever made. His identity was Apple. Apple was him.

And then, after a power struggle with CEO John Sculley and the board of directors, he was forced out. At age 30, the thing he had built was taken from him.

In Zen terms, his "Buddha" had been killed.

Kill the Buddha

The Chinese Zen master Linji (Rinzai in Japanese) said:

"If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him. If you meet your father, kill your father. If you meet your mother, kill your mother. Only then will you be free."
— Linji Yixuan (9th century)

This is one of the most shocking statements in Zen literature. What does it mean?

Linji is not advocating violence. He's pointing to a spiritual truth: we must let go of all attachments, even attachment to the most sacred things.

If you're attached to the idea of "Buddha"—to enlightenment as something to achieve, to spiritual success as a goal—that attachment becomes an obstacle. You have to "kill" it. You have to let it go.

The same is true for any identity: founder, CEO, senator, professor, father, mother. These identities can become prisons. They can limit who we are and what we can become.

Jobs's identity as "Apple founder" was killed when he was fired. He didn't choose this death. It was forced on him. But the result was liberation.

"I didn't see it then, but it turned out that getting fired from Apple was the best thing that could have ever happened to me. The heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of being a beginner again, less sure about everything. It freed me to enter one of the most creative periods of my life."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

The lightness of being a beginner again. This is shoshin—beginner's mind—rediscovered through loss.

The Wilderness Years

After leaving Apple, Jobs spent 11 years in the wilderness.

He founded NeXT, a computer company that made beautiful machines almost no one bought. He bought Pixar, a small graphics company that would eventually revolutionize animated film. He struggled. He failed. He learned.

These "wilderness years" are often glossed over in the Jobs mythology. But they were essential.

At NeXT, Jobs learned to listen. The perfectionism that had alienated people at Apple was tempered by experience. He discovered that being right wasn't enough—you also had to bring people with you.

At Pixar, Jobs learned to collaborate. He worked with creative geniuses like John Lasseter and Ed Catmull, people whose expertise he couldn't claim. He learned to support other people's visions, not just impose his own.

When he returned to Apple in 1997, he was a different leader. Still demanding, still intense, but more mature. More capable of building a team that could execute his vision.

The wilderness had transformed him.

This is the Zen teaching of loss. Sometimes we have to lose everything to gain what we need. Sometimes the Buddha must be killed so a new Buddha can be born.

My Own Wilderness

I'm still in my wilderness.

Losing my parliament seat was my "getting fired from Apple." My identity as "Senator Fujisue" was killed. Everything I had built over 18 years was taken from me.

In the first months after my defeat, I felt lost. I didn't know who I was anymore. I had defined myself by my position, my power, my ability to influence policy. Without those things, what was I?

But gradually, something began to shift.

I discovered that I still loved ideas. I still loved teaching. I still loved writing. These loves had been obscured by the demands of political life, but they hadn't disappeared.

I started writing again—not policy papers but philosophical essays. I started teaching again—not briefing colleagues but engaging with students. I started practicing Zen again—not as a stress management technique but as a path.

I don't know where this wilderness will lead. I can't see how the dots will connect. But I trust that they will.

Jobs's story gives me hope. He emerged from his wilderness stronger, clearer, more capable of creating great things. Maybe I will too.

Story Three: Death

The third story is about mortality.

We've already explored Jobs's confrontation with death in the previous chapter. But in the Stanford speech, this story serves a specific function: it brings the teaching to a climax.

The first story taught trust. The second story taught acceptance of loss. The third story reveals why these teachings matter: because your time is limited.

"Your time is limited, so don't waste it living someone else's life. Don't be trapped by dogma—which is living with the results of other people's thinking. Don't let the noise of others' opinions drown out your own inner voice. And most important, have the courage to follow your heart and intuition."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

This is the culmination of the speech. Everything has been building to this moment.

Trust the dots to connect (Story One). Accept loss as transformation (Story Two). And remember that you're going to die—so live now, live fully, live authentically (Story Three).

The Stoic Connection

Jobs's death meditation has parallels in Western philosophy, particularly in Stoicism.

The Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius, writing in the 2nd century CE, practiced a similar discipline:
"You could leave life right now. Let that determine what you do and say and think."
— Marcus Aurelius, Meditations

The Stoics believed that meditating on death clarified the mind. If you might die today, what really matters? What trivial concerns can you release? What essential truths must you acknowledge?

But Jobs went further than the Stoics. He didn't just accept death—he celebrated it.

"Death is very likely the single best invention of Life. It is Life's change agent. It clears out the old to make way for the new."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

This is a profoundly Zen perspective. Death is not an enemy to be dreaded but a teacher to be honored. It's not the end of meaning but the source of meaning.

Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish

Jobs concluded his speech with a famous phrase:

"Stay hungry, stay foolish."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

These words came from the final issue of the Whole Earth Catalog, a publication that had influenced Jobs in his youth. Stewart Brand, the catalog's creator, had written them as a farewell message.

But Jobs gave them new meaning.

"Stay hungry" means never being satisfied. Keep seeking. Keep learning. Keep questioning. Don't rest on your achievements.

"Stay foolish" means maintaining beginner's mind. Don't become an expert who knows all the answers. Stay open. Stay curious. Be willing to look stupid.

Together, these phrases capture the essence of the Zen path: endless practice, endless discovery, endless transformation.

The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki said:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."
— Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

Stay foolish. Stay a beginner. Keep the possibilities open.

The Speech as a Whole

Step back and look at the Stanford speech as a complete teaching.

Story One: Trust the process. Follow your curiosity. The dots will connect.

Story Two: Accept loss. Let your attachments be killed. Rediscover beginner's mind.

Story Three: Remember death. Let mortality clarify your priorities. Live now.

Conclusion: Stay hungry, stay foolish. Never stop seeking. Never stop being a beginner.

This is a complete Zen curriculum, delivered in 15 minutes without a single reference to Buddhism.

Jobs didn't need to quote sutras or explain doctrines. He told three stories from his own life, and the teaching emerged naturally. This is the Zen way: direct pointing at reality, without elaborate explanations.

The speech has touched millions of people who have never practiced meditation, never read a Zen text, never set foot in a temple. And yet they have received a genuine teaching—a practical guide to living with clarity and authenticity.

This is Jobs's gift. He translated ancient wisdom into modern language, Buddhist practice into American idiom. He made Zen accessible to people who would never call it Zen.

And in doing so, he proved what the masters have always said: the teaching is everywhere, for those who have ears to hear.

CHAPTER 6: INNOVATION AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

The Myth of the Rational Innovator

We like to think of innovation as a rational process.

Business schools teach it that way. Identify a market opportunity. Analyze customer needs. Develop a solution. Test, iterate, launch. It's all very logical, very systematic, very measurable.

But the greatest innovations don't come from analysis. They come from somewhere else entirely.

When Jobs looked at the existing smartphones in 2006—the BlackBerries, the Treos, the Nokia communicators—he didn't conduct focus groups or commission market research. He simply said: "These are terrible."

When he envisioned the iPhone, he didn't extrapolate from existing trends. He imagined something that didn't exist—couldn't exist, according to the experts—and then made it real.

Where did this vision come from?

Not from his intellect. From somewhere deeper. From what Zen calls the "nomind."

Mushin: The NoMind State

There's a famous story about Jobs that perfectly illustrates the Zen concept of mushin (無心)—nomind.

In the early 2000s, Apple's design team presented Jobs with a prototype for the iPod navigation system. It used a scroll wheel that you turned to move through menus. The team was proud of their work. It was elegant, functional, and users in focus groups loved it.

Jobs looked at it. Turned it in his hands. Tested the interface.

Then he said: "No."

The team was confused. What was wrong with it?

"It needs fewer clicks," Jobs said.

The engineers were baffled. They had optimized the interface. They had reduced the number of clicks to what they considered the minimum possible. How could it need fewer clicks?

Jobs didn't explain. He just kept saying no.

Finally, one engineer had a breakthrough: what if you could reach any song on the device in three clicks or fewer? Not three clicks to navigate a menu, but three clicks to any of thousands of songs.

This constraint—three clicks to any song—became the foundation of the iPod's legendary usability. It forced the team to rethink everything, to create an entirely new navigation paradigm.

But here's the crucial question: where did Jobs's "no" come from?

Not from analysis. He hadn't calculated the optimal number of clicks. Not from market research. No focus group had complained about click counts. His "no" came from somewhere deeper—from an instantaneous perception that the interface wasn't right, even though he couldn't articulate why.

This is mushin.

The Swordsman's Mind

Mushin literally means "nomind" or "without mind." It's the state where action flows without conscious deliberation.

Athletes call it "the zone." Musicians call it "flow." Martial artists call it mushin.

The concept was developed in feudal Japan, particularly in the context of swordsmanship. A samurai facing an opponent has no time to think. If he pauses to analyze—Should I strike high or low? Should I advance or retreat?—he's already dead. The sword must move on its own, faster than thought.

The Japanese swordsman Miyamoto Musashi, perhaps the greatest martial artist in history, wrote in The Book of Five Rings:

"Do not think of winning. Do not think of losing. Just act."
— Miyamoto Musashi, The Book of Five Rings (1645)

This sounds mystical, but it's actually practical. Musashi wasn't advocating mindlessness. He was describing a state that emerges from deep practice.

A novice swordsman must think about every movement. Where do I place my feet? How do I grip the sword? What technique should I use? This conscious thinking is necessary but slow.

A master swordsman has practiced so long that the movements are automatic. His body knows what to do. His conscious mind gets out of the way. He acts without thinking—but his actions are informed by thousands of hours of practice.

Jobs had practiced design judgment for decades. He had looked at thousands of products, analyzed what worked and what didn't, developed an intuitive sense of quality that operated below conscious awareness. When he said "no" to the iPod interface, he wasn't guessing. He was accessing knowledge too deep and complex to articulate.

Cultivating NoMind

How do you develop mushin?

The answer is paradoxical: through intense practice of something specific.

Musashi didn't achieve nomind by trying to empty his mind. He achieved it by practicing swordsmanship obsessively, for decades, until the movements became part of him.

Jobs didn't achieve design intuition by meditating on design principles. He achieved it by looking at products, critiquing products, designing products, refining products—over and over, for years.

The Zen master Takuan Soho, writing to the swordsman Yagyu Munenori in the 17th century, explained:

"When your mind is fixed on something, it loses its freedom. It becomes a captive. When the mind is fixed on winning, you cannot win. When the mind is fixed on technique, you cannot use technique. Only when the mind is fixed on nothing can it move freely."
— Takuan Soho, The Unfettered Mind

But how do you reach the state where the mind is "fixed on nothing"? By first fixing it intensely on something—until that something becomes so natural that fixation is no longer necessary.

Jobs's "no" was the fruit of this practice. He had fixed his mind on design for so long that design judgment had become effortless.

A Personal Example

I experienced something like mushin in my years as a politician.

Early in my career, I had to think about everything. What should I say to this constituent? How should I respond to this journalist's question? What position should I take on this policy?

Every decision required conscious deliberation. It was exhausting.

But after years of practice, something shifted. I began to know instinctively how to respond, what to say, which position to take. The knowledge was still there, but it had become automatic. I could walk into a meeting and sense the dynamics immediately, without analysis.

This isn't magic. It's pattern recognition operating below conscious awareness. Years of experience had trained my brain to see patterns that my conscious mind couldn't articulate.

Of course, this intuition wasn't always right. Sometimes my "gut feeling" was wrong. But more often than not, it was faster and more accurate than deliberate analysis.

I suspect Jobs's design intuition worked the same way. He had seen so many products, analyzed so many designs, that he had developed an unconscious sense of quality. His "no" wasn't arbitrary—it was the distillation of decades of practice.

Shoshin: Beginner's Mind in Business

If mushin is about accessing deep knowledge without thinking, shoshin (初心) is about approaching situations as if you have no knowledge at all.

These concepts seem contradictory, but they're actually complementary. Mushin lets you act on your experience. Shoshin lets you see beyond your experience.

When Jobs introduced the iPhone in January 2007, he began by showing pictures of existing smartphones.

The Motorola Q. The Palm Treo. The Nokia E62. The BlackBerry.

"They all have these keyboards that are there whether you need them or not," Jobs said. "And they all have these control buttons that are fixed in plastic and are the same for every application."

Then he showed the iPhone. No keyboard. No buttons. Just glass.

"We're going to reinvent the phone."

The audience gasped. The tech journalists typed furiously. The stock price spiked.

Everyone in the mobile industry "knew" that phones needed physical keyboards. Nokia knew it. BlackBerry knew it. Microsoft knew it. Palm knew it. Their expertise—developed over decades of building phones—told them so.

Jobs didn't know it. Or rather, he chose to forget it.

The Curse of Expertise

Shunryu Suzuki wrote:

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few."
— Shunryu Suzuki, Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind

This is the curse of expertise. The more you know about a field, the more constrained your thinking becomes.

Nokia's engineers knew everything about mobile phones. They knew the limitations of battery technology, the requirements of cellular networks, the preferences of carriers. They knew that physical keyboards were faster for typing. They knew that phones needed to survive being dropped.

All of this knowledge was accurate. And all of it blinded them.

Their expertise told them what was possible. It couldn't tell them what could become possible if you questioned the assumptions.

Jobs approached the problem with beginner's mind. He asked: What if we forgot everything we knew about phones? What if we started from scratch? What would a phone be if it were invented today, with today's technology, for today's users?

The answer was the iPhone—a device that experts "knew" couldn't work, but that consumers immediately loved.

Within five years, BlackBerry and Nokia—once dominant—had lost 90% of their market value. The experts were destroyed by a beginner.

The Expert's Trap in My Own Life

I fell into the expert's trap during my political career.

By my third term in parliament, I knew how the legislative process worked. I knew which proposals would pass and which wouldn't. I knew the political realities, the coalition dynamics, the limits of the possible.

This expertise made me efficient. I stopped proposing legislation that couldn't pass. I stopped pursuing initiatives that were politically unrealistic. I became a pragmatic, effective legislator.

But I also stopped innovating. I stopped asking "what if?" My expertise had narrowed my vision.

Looking back, I realize that my most impactful work came early in my career, when I was still a beginner. I proposed ideas that veterans thought were naive. Some of those naive ideas became law.

As I became an expert, I stopped having naive ideas. I "knew" too much.

Now, having lost my seat, I'm trying to recover beginner's mind. I'm approaching my new work—writing, teaching, consulting—as a beginner. I'm trying to ask naive questions, to see with fresh eyes.

It's harder than it sounds. Expertise is sticky. But the effort is worth it.

Fudoshin: The Immovable Mind

The third Zen principle relevant to innovation is fudoshin (不動心)—the immovable mind.

Fudoshin means a state of complete composure that cannot be disturbed by external events. It's not rigidity—it's stability. The mind remains calm and clear regardless of circumstances.

When Jobs returned to Apple in 1997, the company was in chaos.

Apple had lost over $1 billion the previous year. Its market share had collapsed to under 4%. The product line was a confused mess. The best engineers had left. Analysts were predicting bankruptcy within months.

The situation would have panicked most executives. Fight or flight. Emergency measures. Desperate actions.

Jobs's response was calm, deliberate action.

He canceled 70% of products. He fired managers who couldn't execute. He simplified the organization. He focused resources on a few key initiatives.

And he made a shocking deal with Apple's archrival, Microsoft.

The Microsoft Deal

In August 1997, Jobs announced that Microsoft would invest $150 million in Apple. Microsoft would also continue developing Microsoft Office for the Mac—a crucial application that many users needed.

At Macworld, Jobs displayed Bill Gates's face on a giant screen to announce the partnership. The Apple faithful booed. They hated Microsoft. They saw Microsoft as the enemy, the company that had stolen Apple's ideas and dominated the industry with inferior products.

Jobs stood calmly on stage and explained why the deal made sense.

"We have to let go of the notion that for Apple to win, Microsoft has to lose," he said. "We have to embrace the notion that for Apple to win, Apple has to do a really good job."

This took fudoshin. The crowd was hostile. The decision was controversial. A lesser leader might have backed down, apologized, tried to appease the audience.

Jobs didn't waver. His mind was fixed on what Apple needed, not on what the audience wanted to hear.

Within two years, Apple was profitable again. The Microsoft deal had provided crucial breathing room. And Apple's focus on "doing a really good job" would eventually make it the most valuable company in the world.

The Samurai's Composure

Takuan Soho, advising the samurai Yagyu Munenori, wrote:

"The mind that does not stop at one thing is called mushin. Like water that flows unceasingly, it is free and unstoppable. When the mind stops at one thing, it loses its freedom."
— Takuan Soho, The Unfettered Mind

Notice how Takuan connects mushin (nomind) with fudoshin (immovable mind). They're different aspects of the same state.

Mushin is the mind that doesn't stop at thoughts, doesn't get caught up in analysis paralysis. Fudoshin is the mind that doesn't stop at emotions, doesn't get caught up in fear or anger or desperation.

Both are expressions of a mind that flows like water—encountering obstacles but not being stopped by them, adapting to circumstances but maintaining its essential nature.

Jobs's mind didn't stop at the Apple crisis. It didn't stop at the audience's boos. It flowed through these obstacles, always moving toward the goal.

This is what made him capable of making decisions that others couldn't. He wasn't attached to being liked. He wasn't attached to conventional wisdom. He wasn't attached to Apple's past.

He was free.

Cultivating Composure

How do you develop fudoshin?

The traditional answer is: through practice. Specifically, through practices that expose you to difficulty while training you to remain calm.

In martial arts, this means sparring—facing an opponent who is trying to hit you while you maintain composure. In Zen, this means sitting in meditation even when your legs ache and your mind rebels.

For Jobs, I suspect the practice was business itself. He had been through so many crises, so many failures, so many moments when everything seemed lost, that he had developed composure through experience.

The failure of the Apple III. The failure of the Lisa. The bitter departure from Apple. The nearbankruptcy of NeXT. Each crisis was a training session in composure.

By 1997, Jobs had faced so many disasters that one more disaster couldn't shake him. He had developed fudoshin through a lifetime of practice.

Innovation as Practice

Let me bring these three concepts together.

Mushin: the nomind that allows instant, intuitive judgment. Developed through deep practice of a specific skill.

Shoshin: the beginner's mind that sees beyond assumptions. Cultivated through deliberately forgetting what you "know."

Fudoshin: the immovable mind that remains calm in crisis. Developed through repeated exposure to difficulty.

Together, these three qualities define the Zen approach to innovation.

The innovator trusts their intuition (mushin) while questioning their assumptions (shoshin). They maintain composure in the face of uncertainty (fudoshin) while acting decisively when insight emerges (mushin again).

This is not a methodology. You can't put it in a PowerPoint or teach it in a weekend seminar. It's a way of being that emerges from years of practice.

But you can start developing these qualities today.

Practice your craft intensely, until skill becomes second nature. Question your assumptions regularly, especially the ones you're most certain about. Expose yourself to difficulty, and notice how you respond.

Over time, these practices will transform you—not into a copy of Steve Jobs, but into a more authentic version of yourself. An innovator, in your own way.

The Spiritual Dimension

I want to end this chapter with a reflection on why I call this "spiritual practice."

Innovation is usually framed in economic terms. Create value. Disrupt markets. Build wealth. These are legitimate goals, but they're not the whole story.

At its deepest level, innovation is an expression of human creativity—of our ability to imagine things that don't exist and bring them into being. This capacity is not merely economic. It's spiritual.

When Jobs stood on stage and showed the iPhone, he was doing more than introducing a product. He was demonstrating what human beings are capable of. He was showing that reality can be transformed through vision and will.

The Zen masters would recognize this. They too were in the business of transformation—not of markets, but of minds. They too believed that ordinary consciousness could be transcended, that new possibilities could be realized.

Jobs's innovation was a form of spiritual practice. And spiritual practice, at its best, is a form of innovation—the transformation of the self.

The two paths meet at the same point: the discovery that we are not limited by what we know, what we feel, or what we fear. We can create something new. We can become something new.

This is the ultimate teaching of Zen and the ultimate lesson of Jobs's life.

Stay hungry. Stay foolish. Keep practicing.

The innovation will come.

CHAPTER 7: LESSONS FOR YOUR LIFE

From Understanding to Practice

You have now explored the Zen principles that shaped Steve Jobs's life and work. You've learned about beginner's mind and the power of emptiness, about death meditation and the freedom that comes from accepting mortality.

But understanding is not enough.

The Zen masters are unanimous on this point: enlightenment is not a concept to be grasped but a reality to be lived. You can read every book about Zen, memorize every koan, quote every master—and still be no closer to the truth than when you started.

The truth is in the practice.

This chapter offers seven practices you can begin today. They are not theoretical. They are specific, concrete actions you can take to bring the wisdom of this book into your daily life.

I practice all of these myself. Some I learned from teachers. Some I developed through trial and error. All of them have changed me.

They can change you too—but only if you do them.

Practice #1: The Morning Death Meditation

Jobs looked in the mirror every morning for 33 years and asked: "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?"

This is the most powerful practice in this book. If you do nothing else, do this.

Here's how I practice it:

1. When I wake up, before reaching for my phone, before checking email, before doing anything else, I sit still for one minute.

2. I acknowledge the truth: "I will die. I don't know when. It could be today."

3. I ask myself: "Is what I'm about to do today worthy of my limited time?"

4. I notice my answer. If it's "no," I ask: "What would make it worth doing?"

5. I hold that answer as I begin my day.

6. This practice is not morbid. It's clarifying.

When you truly acknowledge that you could die today, the trivial falls away. The meeting you were dreading becomes either important (so face it fully) or unimportant (so cancel it). The conflict you've been avoiding becomes either necessary (so engage) or petty (so release it).

The samurai practiced death meditation not to become obsessed with death but to live without fear. They found that accepting death freed them to act with total commitment.

You can experience the same freedom.

My Experience with This Practice

I have practiced the morning death meditation for over fifteen years. Let me tell you what it has taught me.

When I first started, I was a busy politician. My days were filled with meetings, votes, constituent events, media appearances. Every morning, I would wake up with a long todo list already forming in my mind.

The death meditation interrupted this automatic process. Instead of jumping into my schedule, I paused to ask: Is this how I want to spend what might be my last day?

The answer was often uncomfortable.

I realized that many of my activities were driven by obligation, not meaning. I attended events because I was expected to, not because they mattered. I maintained relationships that drained me. I pursued goals that weren't really mine.

Slowly, I began to change.

I started saying no more often. I delegated more. I carved out time for the things that actually mattered—family, writing, deep thinking.

My staff thought I was becoming less productive. In some ways, I was. But I was also becoming more focused. The work I did do was better, more meaningful, more aligned with my actual values.

After I lost my election in 2022, the death meditation became even more important. Suddenly, I had no external structure. No schedule. No obligations. I could do anything—or nothing.

Every morning, I asked myself: If I die today, how do I want to spend this day?

The answer led me to write books, to teach with more care, to spend more time with my family. It led me to this book you're reading now.

Practice #2: The ThreeBreath Reset

You don't need a monastery to practice Zen. You don't need a meditation cushion or a quiet room or hours of free time.

You can practice anywhere, anytime, in about ten seconds.

I call this the ThreeBreath Reset. It's a micromeditation that brings you back to the present moment when your mind has wandered into anxiety, regret, or confusion.

Here's how:

1. Stop whatever you're doing. Just stop. Midsentence if necessary. Midthought.

2. Take one breath. As you breathe, feel your feet on the ground. Notice the pressure of the floor or earth beneath you. You are here. You are grounded.

3. Take a second breath. As you breathe, feel your body—the position of your arms, the weight of your shoulders, the state of your muscles. Are you tense? Relaxed? Simply notice.

4. Take a third breath. As you breathe, ask yourself: "What is actually happening right now?"

Not what you fear might happen. Not what you regret from the past. What is actually happening, right now, in this moment, in this place?

Usually, the answer is something simple. I'm sitting in a chair. The sun is coming through the window. Someone is talking to me. There's a problem to be solved.

This is beginner's mind in action—seeing freshly, without the filter of anxiety or assumption.

When to Use This Practice

I use the ThreeBreath Reset dozens of times a day. Here are some situations where it's particularly powerful:

Before difficult conversations. When I'm about to have a conversation I'm dreading—giving bad news, addressing a conflict, making a request—I take three breaths first. This clears the anxiety and lets me enter the conversation present and grounded.

When overwhelmed. When my todo list feels impossible, when everything seems urgent, when I don't know where to start—three breaths. The overwhelm usually comes from thinking about everything at once. Three breaths bring me back to this moment, this one task.

After bad news. When something goes wrong—a rejected proposal, a failed project, an unexpected crisis—my mind immediately starts spinning. What does this mean? What should I do? How bad is this? Three breaths interrupt the spin and let me assess the actual situation.

In transitions. Between meetings, between tasks, between activities—three breaths. This creates a small space of presence between the fragments of a busy day.

The practice is so simple it seems almost trivial. But simplicity is the point. The power is not in complexity but in consistency. Three breaths, repeated hundreds of times, gradually train the mind to stay present.

Practice #3: Radical Simplification

Jobs cut 70% of Apple's products. It was a brutal act of subtraction, and it saved the company.

What can you cut from your life?

The Zen principle of kanso teaches that clarity comes from subtraction, not addition. We tend to think that more is better—more options, more possessions, more commitments. But more is often just more: more clutter, more confusion, more exhaustion.

Your attention is finite. Your time is finite. Your energy is finite. Everything you add to your life takes from these limited resources.

Here is an exercise in radical simplification:

1. Make a list of everything you're currently doing. Include projects, commitments, subscriptions, memberships, recurring meetings, ongoing responsibilities. Include possessions that require maintenance or attention. Be comprehensive.

2. For each item, ask three questions:

   - Does this truly matter? Not "might this matter someday" or "could this be useful." Does it matter now, to you, in your actual life?
   - Does this bring joy or meaning? Not "should this bring meaning" or "this used to bring joy." Does it actually, currently, bring joy or meaning when you engage with it?
   - What would happen if I eliminated this? Not the worst case scenario. What would realistically happen? Would anyone notice? Would you miss it?

3. Eliminate ruthlessly. Anything that doesn't pass all three questions should be seriously considered for removal.

My Simplification Journey

After losing my election, I conducted a radical simplification of my own life.

I had accumulated so much during my years in politics: memberships in dozens of organizations, subscriptions to countless publications, commitments to boards and committees, relationships maintained out of obligation rather than genuine connection.

I made the list. It was terrifying. I had over 200 items.

Then I started asking the questions.

Does this truly matter? For most items, the honest answer was no. These were legacy commitments, things I had taken on years ago and never examined since.

Does this bring joy or meaning? For many items, the honest answer was negative—they actually drained joy and meaning from my life.

What would happen if I eliminated this? For most items, the answer was: nothing. No one would notice. The world would continue.

I eliminated over 150 items. I resigned from boards. I canceled subscriptions. I let relationships that weren't serving either party quietly fade.

The result was space. Space in my calendar. Space in my mind. Space for new things to emerge.

This book is one of those new things. I couldn't have written it if I hadn't created the space first.

Practice #4: Trust Your Dots

Jobs couldn't see how calligraphy would matter when he was studying it. The class had no practical application. It was a "useless" indulgence.

Ten years later, it became the foundation of modern computer typography.

What are you curious about that seems "useless"?

Maybe it's a hobby that has no career application. Maybe it's a subject that seems unrelated to your work. Maybe it's a skill that nobody around you values.

Follow it anyway.

Take the class. Read the book. Have the conversation. Explore the tangent. Trust that the dots will connect.
Here is how I practice this:

1. I keep a list of things I'm curious about. Whenever something catches my attention—a topic in a book, a reference in a conversation, a question that pops into my mind—I write it down.

2. I dedicate time each week to exploring one item on the list. No goal. No expectation of practical value. Just curiosity.

3. I don't force connections. If a connection between my curiosity and my "real" work appears, wonderful. If not, I trust that the connection may appear later—or may serve a purpose I can't yet see.

4. I protect this time fiercely. It's easy to let "useful" activities crowd out curiosity. I treat my exploration time as sacred.

"Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."
— Zen proverb

The activities look the same. But something has shifted. Your "useless" pursuits may be the most important thing you do.

Practice #5: The Mu Practice

We explored the koan "Mu" in Chapter 1. Now let's turn it into a practice.

When you face a decision and your mind is swirling with options, analysis, and anxiety, try saying "Mu."

This is not a decision. It's a reset. It's a way of stepping back from the binary thinking that traps us.

Here's how:

1. Notice when you're trapped in yes/no, either/or, this/that thinking. These are signs that you may be asking the wrong question.

2. Instead of answering the question, negate it. Say "Mu"—neither yes nor no. The question itself may be flawed.

3. Ask a different question. What assumptions is the original question making? Are those assumptions valid? Is there a third option that transcends the apparent choice?

4. Act from the new understanding. Once you've questioned the question, a new path often becomes clear.

Jobs used this constantly. Should the computer be beige or gray? Mu—it should be blue. Should the phone have a keyboard or a better keyboard? Mu—it should have no keyboard at all.

The greatest innovations often come not from answering the existing questions but from questioning the existing questions.

Practice #6: Weekly Beginner's Mind

Shoshin—beginner's mind—is easy to understand and hard to practice. We naturally accumulate expertise, assumptions, and habits that make us efficient but blind.

Here is a practice to counteract this:

Once a week, approach something familiar as if you'd never seen it before.

It could be your commute. Take a different route, or if you must take the same route, look at it as if you were a tourist visiting for the first time. What do you notice that you usually ignore?

It could be your work. Ask yourself: If I knew nothing about how we do things, how might I approach this problem? What assumptions are we making that we never question?

It could be a relationship. Imagine you were meeting this person for the first time. What would you notice? What would you be curious about? What questions would you ask?

This practice is uncomfortable. Expertise is comforting. It feels good to know things. Deliberately notknowing is disorienting.

But in that disorientation, fresh insights emerge. You see what you couldn't see before. You discover possibilities that expertise had hidden.

I practice this by teaching. Students ask naive questions that experts would never ask. By taking those questions seriously—by temporarily forgetting that I "know" the answer—I often discover that my knowledge was incomplete.

Practice #7: Evening Reflection

The morning death meditation asks: Is what I'm about to do worthy of my limited time?

The evening reflection asks: Was what I did today worthy of my limited time?

Here is how I practice it:

1. Each evening, before sleep, I sit quietly for five minutes.

2. I review the day. Not in detail—just the overall shape. What did I do? How did I spend my hours?

3. I ask three questions:

    - What did I do today that I'm proud of? This anchors the positive. Even on bad days, there's usually something.
    - What did I do today that I regret? Not to punish myself, but to notice. Where did I fall short of my own values?
    - If I could live this day again, what would I do differently? This is the key question. It takes the regret and turns it into intention for tomorrow.

4. I release the day. Whatever happened, it's done. I let it go and prepare for sleep.

This practice creates a feedback loop. The morning meditation sets intention. The evening reflection evaluates the result. Over time, the gap between intention and action narrows.

The Integration of Practice

These seven practices are not separate disciplines. They are facets of a single way of living.

The morning death meditation creates urgency and clarity. The threebreath reset maintains presence throughout the day. Radical simplification removes obstacles. Trusting your dots opens possibilities. The Mu practice transcends false choices. Weekly beginner's mind prevents blindness. Evening reflection closes the loop.

Together, they create a life that looks, from the outside, like any other life. You still work. You still have relationships. You still face problems and challenges.

But something has shifted. You are more present, more clear, more aligned with what actually matters.

This is what Jobs achieved. Not perfection—he remained difficult, demanding, sometimes cruel. But clarity. An ability to see what others couldn't see and act on what he saw.

You don't have to be Steve Jobs. You don't have to build a worldchanging company or create revolutionary products.

But you can live with the same clarity. You can approach your life with beginner's mind, with acceptance of death, with radical focus on what actually matters.

Start today. Pick one practice. Do it tomorrow morning. Then do it the next day, and the next.

The transformation won't be dramatic. It will be gradual, almost invisible. But one day, you'll look back and realize that everything has changed.

That's how Zen works. That's how life works.

One breath at a time.

EPILOGUE: OH WOW. OH WOW. OH WOW.

The Last Day

Steve Jobs died on October 5, 2011, at the age of 56.

He had been fighting pancreatic cancer for eight years—longer than most people with that diagnosis survive. He had undergone surgery, received a liver transplant, tried experimental treatments. He had kept working until weeks before the end, still attending meetings, still reviewing designs, still pushing for perfection.

In his final days, he was surrounded by family at his home in Palo Alto. His wife Laurene was there. His children were there. His sister Mona Simpson was there.

According to Simpson, Jobs spent his final hours looking at his family, then looking beyond them, at something they couldn't see.

His final words were: "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

What did he see?

Looking Directly

We will never know what Jobs saw in those final moments. The dead keep their secrets.

But I like to think it was something like what the Zen masters describe—a direct perception of reality, unmediated by concepts, unobscured by fear.

The 14th century Zen master Bassui Tokusho, as he was dying, told his students:

"Look directly! What is this? Look in this manner and you won't be fooled!"
— Bassui Tokusho

Look directly. Don't turn away. Don't interpret. Don't conceptualize. Just look.

Jobs spent his life looking directly—at technology, at design, at business, at life, at death. He refused to be fooled by convention, by expertise, by the way things had always been done. He saw what was actually there, not what people told him was there.

Perhaps, in those final moments, he looked directly at death itself. And perhaps what he saw amazed him.

Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.

A Sister's Eulogy

At Jobs's memorial service, Mona Simpson delivered a eulogy that has become almost as famous as Jobs's own Stanford speech. She described her brother's final moments:

"Steve's final words were: Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow. Before embarking, he'd looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life's partner, Laurene, and then over their shoulders past them. Steve's final words, hours earlier, were monosyllables, repeated three times. Before embarking, he'd looked at his sister Patty, then for a long time at his children, then at his life's partner, Laurene, and then over their shoulders past them."
— Mona Simpson, Eulogy for Steve Jobs

He looked past them. At what?

The Zen tradition has many accounts of masters who, at the moment of death, saw something extraordinary. Some wrote death poems. Some laughed. Some simply smiled and closed their eyes.

The 18th century master Hakuin, when asked what happens after death, replied: "I don't know." When pressed—"But you're a Zen master!"—he said: "Yes, but not a dead one."

Even the greatest masters don't claim to know what lies beyond. But many report that, at the threshold, the fear falls away. What remains is wonder.

Oh wow.

My Own Encounter with Death

I have never had a neardeath experience. I have never, like Jobs, received a diagnosis that seemed terminal.

But I have sat with the dying.

When my father was in his final days, I spent hours at his bedside. I watched him move between sleep and waking, between presence and absence, between this world and whatever comes next.

In his last conscious hours, something changed in his face. The tension that had been there—the holding on, the fighting—dissolved. He seemed to relax into something I couldn't see.

His final words were not "Oh wow." They were simpler: "It's okay."

I don't know what he meant. I don't know if he was reassuring us or reassuring himself or simply describing what he was experiencing. But there was a peace in his voice that I had never heard before.

The Zen tradition says that how we live determines how we die. A life of presence and acceptance prepares us for the final letting go. A life of clinging and resistance makes death a struggle.

Jobs lived with intensity. He clung to his vision, fought for his ideas, never accepted compromise. And yet, at the end, he seemed to let go. He looked past his family at something that filled him with wonder.

Perhaps the practice of death meditation, all those years of asking "If today were my last day," had prepared him. Perhaps he had rehearsed this moment so many times that when it finally came, he was ready.

Perhaps he had already died a thousand times, and this was just the last.

The Legacy of Complete Engagement

Jobs's legacy is not just in the products he created. The iPhone will eventually be obsolete. The Mac will be surpassed. Apple itself will one day fade.

His true legacy is in the way he lived—with intensity, with presence, with what Zen calls "complete engagement."

Complete engagement means bringing your whole self to whatever you're doing. Not holding back. Not saving something for later. Not protecting yourself from disappointment.

Jobs brought this quality to everything. He engaged completely with design decisions that others would have delegated. He engaged completely with employees, for better or worse. He engaged completely with his illness, researching treatments, trying experiments, refusing to give up.

And he engaged completely with death when it came. He looked at it directly. He didn't turn away. And in that looking, he found something that made him say wow.

Stay Hungry, Stay Foolish

Jobs ended his Stanford speech with words borrowed from the final issue of the Whole Earth Catalog:

"Stay hungry, stay foolish."
— Steve Jobs, Stanford Commencement Address, 2005

These words are not just advice. They are a way of being.

Hungry—for experience, for learning, for life. Never satisfied. Never resting. Always seeking what's next.

Foolish—enough to question experts, to fail publicly, to begin again. Enough to maintain beginner's mind when everyone else has become an expert. Enough to say "Oh wow" at the end, like a child seeing something wondrous.

This is the Zen of Steve Jobs. Not a religion or a philosophy, but a way of engaging with life. Direct. Intense. Complete.

And it can be yours.

Not by imitating Jobs—he was a unique individual, shaped by circumstances that can never be repeated. But by finding your own way to these same qualities. Your own intensity. Your own presence. Your own complete engagement.

An Invitation

I began this book with an invitation: to read slowly, to let the ideas settle, to practice what you learn.

I end with the same invitation.

The book is finished, but the practice is just beginning. The concepts you've encountered—beginner's mind, death meditation, radical simplification, trusting the dots—these are not things to understand once and forget. They are things to practice daily, for the rest of your life.

Tomorrow morning, stand in front of your mirror and ask: If today were my last day, would I want to do what I'm about to do today?

When you feel overwhelmed, take three breaths. When you face a false choice, say Mu. When curiosity pulls you somewhere "useless," follow it.

The dots will connect. You won't see how until they do.

And one day—I hope many years from now—you too will face the threshold that Jobs faced. You too will look past the people you love at something they cannot see.

I hope, when that moment comes, you will have lived so fully that you have nothing left to regret. I hope you will have loved so completely that you can let go without clinging. I hope you will have practiced so consistently that the final letting go is just one more breath.

And I hope that what you see, in that final moment, fills you with wonder.

Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow.

Stay hungry, stay foolish.

Kenzo Fujisue (Genkō 源行)
Tokyo, 2026

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

KENZO FUJISUE is the President of Mindful AI Foundation headquartered in Tokyo. He writes writes philosophical works under the pen name Genkō (源行), combining Eastern wisdom with contemporary challenges. The pen name, which can be translated as "source journey" or "going to the source," reflects his lifelong pursuit of fundamental truths beneath surface phenomena.

Fujisue is a Professor at Keio University and Visiting Associate Director of the Cybersecurity program at MIT Sloan School of Management. He also serves as a Visiting Researcher at the Munich Technical University's Institute for AI Ethics. His academic work focuses on the intersection of technology, security, and human values—questions he believes require both technical expertise and philosophical depth.

Before entering academia, Fujisue spent 18 years in Japan's House of Councillors (the upper house of parliament), where he worked on telecommunications policy, cybersecurity legislation, and international trade agreements. Prior to his political career, he served 13 years as a bureaucrat at the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry (METI), where he developed Japan's first digital signature regulations.

His political career ended with a loss in the 2022 election—an experience he describes as "a small death that became a rebirth." The defeat stripped away his identity as a politician and forced him to confront questions he had been avoiding: Who am I without my position? What matters when status is gone? These questions led him back to intensive Zen practice and to the writing of this book.

A dedicated Zen practitioner for over three decades, Fujisue has trained at temples in Kyoto under masters in the Rinzai tradition. He maintains a daily meditation practice and attends annual New Year zazen sessions, including the famous allnight sitting at Tokyo Tower. His study of Zen began during his student days at Tokyo Institute of Technology, where he discovered that the mental discipline of meditation complemented the intellectual rigor of engineering.

Fujisue's approach to Zen is practical rather than mystical. He believes that the ancient teachings are most valuable when applied to contemporary challenges—to business decisions, political dilemmas, and the daily struggles of modern life. This book represents his attempt to make that application accessible to readers who may never sit in a temple.

His other works include commentaries on classical Zen texts such as the Mumonkan (The Gateless Gate), Rinzairoku (Record of Linji), and Shobogenzo (Treasury of the True Dharma Eye). He has also written philosophical explorations of Schopenhauer's theory of happiness, the existential dimensions of artificial intelligence, and the writings of Dogen Zenji on time and being.

Fujisue holds degrees from Tokyo Institute of Technology (engineering), MIT (technology policy), and Harvard (public administration), with additional philosophical studies at Oxford University. He speaks Japanese and English fluently and reads classical Chinese—a skill essential for studying Zen texts in their original form.

He lives in Tokyo with his wife of thirty years. His son works as a researcher at Taiwan's Academia Sinica, continuing the family's connection to the island where Fujisue's father was born in 1932.

When not writing or teaching, Fujisue practices calligraphy, tends a small garden, and takes long walks through Tokyo's temples and shrines. He considers these activities not separate from his intellectual work but continuous with it—different expressions of the same attention to the present moment.

He can be reached through his publisher or through his faculty pages at Keio University and MIT.

APPENDIX: KEY ZEN TERMS

This glossary provides definitions of the Japanese terms used throughout this book. Understanding these terms will deepen your appreciation of the concepts, though the concepts themselves are ultimately beyond words.

無 (Mu)
No / Nothing / Without
The most fundamental term in Zen vocabulary. Mu appears in the most famous koan of all: A monk asked Master Zhaozhou, 'Does a dog have Buddhanature?' Zhaozhou answered, 'Mu.' This is not simply 'no'—it is a negation that transcends yes and no, a pointing beyond conceptual categories. When Jobs rejected conventional assumptions about what computers or phones should be, he was practicing Mu.

無心 (Mushin)
Nomind / Without mind
The state of acting without conscious deliberation, where response flows naturally from deep practice rather than analytical thought. In martial arts, mushin allows the swordsman to respond instantly, faster than conscious thought permits. In design, mushin allowed Jobs to make instant aesthetic judgments that would take others hours of analysis. Athletes call it 'the zone'; musicians call it 'flow.' It is not mindlessness but rather mind so fully engaged that the sense of a separate 'thinker' disappears.

初心 (Shoshin)
Beginner's mind
The open, eager, unprejudiced attitude of someone encountering something for the first time. Shunryu Suzuki's famous statement captures its essence: 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's mind there are few.' Experts know what's possible; beginners don't know what's impossible. Jobs approached mature industries—personal computing, mobile phones, music distribution—with beginner's mind, and saw possibilities that experts missed.

不動心 (Fudoshin)
Immovable mind
Complete composure that cannot be disturbed by external events. Not rigidity but stability—the mind that remains calm and clear regardless of circumstances. The samurai cultivated fudoshin to remain effective in battle; Jobs demonstrated it when facing Apple's nearbankruptcy, hostile audiences, and his own mortality. Fudoshin doesn't mean not feeling emotions; it means not being controlled by them.

間 (Ma)
Space between / Interval / Pause
One of the most subtle concepts in Japanese aesthetics. Ma is the space between things—the pause between notes in music, the empty space in a painting, the silence in a conversation. But it is not mere emptiness; it is pregnant space, potential space, space that gives meaning to what surrounds it. Apple's design philosophy embodied ma: the white space around icons, the minimal interfaces, the pauses in product presentations. Ma is not nothing; it is the nothing that makes everything visible.

侘寂 (Wabisabi)
Beauty in imperfection
An aesthetic that finds beauty in imperfection, impermanence, and incompleteness. Wabi originally meant the loneliness of living in nature; sabi meant 'lean' or 'withered.' Together they describe an appreciation for the marks of time and use—a cracked tea bowl repaired with gold, a weathered wooden beam, a garden designed to look untamed. While Apple products appear perfect, their deeper wabisabi lies in authenticity: the interior designed as carefully as the exterior, the integrity that runs all the way through.

簡素 (Kanso)
Simplicity / Elimination of clutter
One of the seven aesthetic principles of Zen. Kanso is not minimalism for its own sake but the elimination of everything nonessential to reveal essence. It is the twobytwo grid that replaced Apple's 350 products with four. It is the iPhone without a keyboard. It is the packaging with more empty space than contents. Kanso asks: What can be removed while still serving the purpose? Everything else must go.

公案 (Kōan)
Paradoxical riddle
A paradoxical story, statement, or question used in Zen training to provoke enlightenment by transcending logical thought. Famous koans include 'What is the sound of one hand clapping?' and 'What was your original face before your parents were born?' Koans cannot be solved by analysis; they require a direct insight that breaks through conventional thinking. Jobs's design challenges often functioned as koans: 'Make it smaller' when smaller seemed impossible, 'Three clicks to any song' when engineers said it couldn't be done.

座禅 (Zazen)
Seated meditation
The central practice of Zen Buddhism. The practitioner sits in a specific posture, follows the breath, and allows thoughts to come and go without grasping. Zazen is not about achieving a special state; it is about being fully present in this moment, in this body, in this breath. Jobs practiced zazen for decades with his teacher Kobun Chino Otogawa. The clarity he brought to design decisions emerged from this practice of sustained attention.

悟り (Satori)
Awakening / Enlightenment
Sudden insight that transcends intellectual understanding—a direct perception of reality as it is. Satori is not a permanent state but a moment of clarity that may deepen through continued practice. Jobs's greatest innovations had the quality of satori: sudden insights that seemed obvious in retrospect but that no one had seen before. The iPhone was satori made physical—a direct perception of what a phone could be, freed from accumulated assumptions.

信心 (Shinjin)
Faithmind / Trust
Not faith in a god or doctrine, but trust in the process of practice and life itself. Shinjin is what allowed Jobs to follow 'useless' curiosity, confident that the dots would connect. It is trust that integrity will be rewarded, that the path will become clear, that what needs to happen will happen if we engage fully with each moment.

無所得 (Mushotoku)
No gaining mind
Acting without expectation of reward or benefit. The purest form of practice is practice for its own sake—not for enlightenment, not for health benefits, not for competitive advantage. Jobs's calligraphy study exemplified mushotoku: he learned for the sake of learning, with no thought of future application.

只管打坐 (Shikantaza)
Just sitting
A form of Zen meditation associated with the Soto school. In shikantaza, there is no object of meditation—no breath counting, no koan. The practitioner 'just sits,' without seeking anything, without rejecting anything. It is practice without goal, action without agenda. Jobs's approach to following curiosity had this quality: just following, without calculating the return.

A Note on Practice

These terms are useful for understanding, but Zen is ultimately about practice, not terminology. The masters consistently warn against mistaking the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.

If you want to understand Zen, sit. If you want to understand Jobs's relationship to Zen, practice the principles in your own life. The words will only take you so far.

As Linji said: 'If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.' Even the concept of Buddha—even the concept of Zen—must eventually be released. What remains is direct experience, unmediated by words.

Start there. The rest will follow.