



Zen and the Art of Consciousness

Susan Blackmore

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Susan Blackmore combines the latest scientific theories about mind, self, and consciousness with a lifetime's practice of Zen.

Framed by ten critical questions that are derived from Zen's teachings, *Zen and the Art of Consciousness* explores how intellectual enquiry and meditation can expand your understanding and experience of consciousness and tackle some of today's greatest scientific mysteries.

Zen and the Art of Consciousness Details

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From Reader Review **Zen and the Art of Consciousness** for online ebook

Rob Adey says

At first glance, this looks and sounds like it might be some awful 'spiritual quest' book. But Susan Blackmore is one of the most hardcore materialists on the planet, and this is an account of her using some of the tools discovered by Zen practitioners to - apparently - actually experience some of the way the brain really works i.e. without volition or a continuing, centralised self.

For a book that's mostly about someone sitting still and thinking/trying not to think, it's immensely compelling and readable. And such is the clarity with which Blackmore explains her experiences, it's even kind of frightening, the sheer extent of the difference between her eventual mental life and the norm.

One possible downside: there's not very much of the science that would seem to support Blackmore's introspection; it might have been stronger to refer more to people like Metzenger and Wegner (who are in the bibliography but not in the text) than Dennett, her clear favourite. If you read this book without familiarity with some of their research, it might not seem as convincing.

Still: this is a fantastically committed book on consciousness. And the bonus is Blackmore lives with Adam Hart-Davis, so you get to imagine her trying to meditate in their garden while he 'helps' by hammering together some half-timbered steam-powered Faraday cage in his shed.

Ellen Keener says

Interesting combination of a personal journey and an attempt to use zen to figure out what consciousness is and how it relates to what we know of how the brain works. Last chapter a nice summing up of what she learned.

Alexi Parizeau says

This is written in a brilliant stream of consciousness style which takes the reader along for the ride of deep meditative introspection. It's actually quite demanding on the reader, because introspection is tedious work, but Blackmore's final conclusions are worth it and I've come to many of them during my own years of introspections. Unfortunately, these conclusions cannot be explanations or truths in themselves; this is the unrealized insight of Blackmore's book: if we accept that consciousness is illusory then we can't trust introspective evidence that consciousness is illusory; it might very well be an illusion of an illusion. But it's a helpful paradox to find out more. Very Zen. :)

Martinxo says

Wonderful. Sue Blackmore's use of Zen koans to explore consciousness is inspiring, it's certainly got me back on the mat again.

Great for anyone interested in why and what we are and why and what we are doing, for atheists and Buddhists (and any other religious persuasion)

Antonia says

I liked it, but don't pretend to really understand the Zen questions or to have followed the thinking. I most enjoyed the early and late sections — on the nature or problem of consciousness and on being conscious. Also, the part about free will and responsibility.

Leonie Ferrer says

A must read for anyone who's interested in consciousness, what's next and the nature of 'self'.

Diana says

This book started out in a very interesting way, very cleverly written and to the point. However, as we move forward, the author seems to lose herself in her thoughts (which she transcribes brilliantly to the paper! I really was impressed by how one could do such a writing!), and since they are her thoughts on whatever subject, they get really annoying, boring and tedious... I think the response Susan Blackmore got from John sums up perfectly what this book made me feel! Also, when she mentions having smoked marijuana, I couldn't help but to think "Oh! That explains a lot!"

Bottom line, I was expecting so much more from this book, and all we get in the end are the ramblings of a seemingly crazy person with nothing else to do with her life.
But this might be unfair.

Oliver Ho says

For such a short book, it's surprisingly dense and took time to digest. I'm still thinking about it and will likely return to it. I loved the blending of traditionally eastern and western thinking and approaches to concepts related to consciousness. I particularly enjoyed how she seemed to capture the moment to moment feelings of meditation and her thought processes, her enthusiasm and frustration with insights and ongoing, unanswerable questions. Her bibliography added more books to my wish list.

Marsha says

if you ever wondered exactly who it is who is thinking your thoughts, or seeing the world through your eyes, do not miss this book. It's a fascinating, engaging, and thoroughly human read about consciousness and zen, filled with lovely illustrations drawn by the author herself.

Hope says

Not a fan, really. I just don't like it. Maybe I'm just not into Zen!

Raul says

"Vision seems so simple. We open our eyes and there is the world. Yet scientists have long appreciated how difficult this is to explain. For a start, we move our eyes about five or six times a second, fixating on something and then moving quickly on, but we don't notice this, and the world appears stable. Also we can see clearly only a tiny area around that fixation point, yet it feels as though we are seeing the whole visual scene at once. How does this work? Information goes in through the eyes, along the optic nerve, through way stations in the mid-brain, and on up to the visual cortex. And then what happens? It's so tempting to think that a picture appears 'in consciousness' so that 'I' can see it, but that wouldn't explain anything. 'I' would have to be another little person who looked at the picture and then there would need to be another little person inside me to look at that picture, and so on into an infinite regress. The idea of an inner observer has long been rejected, but the idea of an inner picture is more persistent. Yet this too is problematic. Suppose that right now, while you are reading this book, all the words changed into different words. Would you notice? Yes, of course you would. Suppose now that the words changed just as you moved your eyes. Would you notice then? Or suppose that they changed just as you blinked. Would you notice? Most people say they would, and are horrified to discover that they probably would not."

"And how is tranquillity maintained? By paying attention. But this is not the kind of focused attention that brings out details or applies concentration to one thing. In fact it is just the reverse. It is something like paying attention equally to everything. There's a problem here. What is everything? As soon as I think about everything then I think about particular things; and then there's thingness and division, and the sense of attending to everything is lost in the attempt."

Gerhard says

I seriously need to stop buying books every time I leave my house!

Rydh says

I would like to suggest that this book could serve as a manual for the exploration of one's self, but along the way the author explains how the self does not actually exist. This is orthodox Buddhist dogma but I myself - yes! - believe that whether the self can be said to exist or not depends purely on how one defines the self.

Socrates is reputed to have said that the unexamined life is not worth living, which I regard as an overly extreme, unharmonious, and therefore unGreeklike position, but I can certainly agree that an examined life is a richer, more complex life.

That said, this well-written and intriguing book presents the most basic questions as the tools by which one can examine one's life.

The one blemish of the book is, in the opinion of my humble self, the know-it-all, school-masterish, pseudo-guru-ish "Response of a Zen Master" which the author tacked on to the end of the book.

Jan-Maat says

[that was my Greek joke, sorry if you were expecting a better one (hide spoiler)]

Brian Baker says

Meme queen Sue Blackmore sits about a lot asking herself Zen inspired questions about consciousness reaching startling conclusions including her own non-existence.
