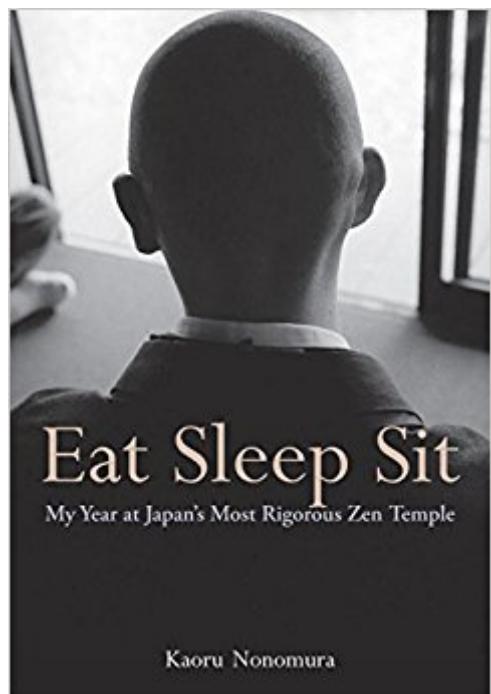


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Eat Sleep Sit: My Year At Japan's Most Rigorous Zen Temple



Synopsis

At the age of thirty, Kaoru Nonomura left his family, his girlfriend, and his job as a designer in Tokyo to undertake a year of ascetic training at Eiheiji, one of the most rigorous Zen training temples in Japan. This book is Nonomura's recollection of his experiences. He skillfully describes every aspect of training, including how to meditate, how to eat, how to wash, even how to use the toilet, in a way that is easy to understand no matter how familiar a reader is with Zen Buddhism. This first-person account also describes Nonomura's struggles in the face of beatings, hunger, exhaustion, fear, and loneliness, the comfort he draws from his friendships with the other trainees, and his quiet determination to give his life spiritual meaning. After writing *Eat Sleep Sit*, Kaoru Nonomura returned to his normal life as a designer, but his book has maintained its popularity in Japan, selling more than 100,000 copies since its first printing in 1996. Beautifully written, and offering fascinating insight into a culture of hardships that few people could endure, this is a deeply personal story that will appeal to all those with an interest in Zen Buddhism, as well as to anyone seeking spiritual growth.

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Customer Reviews

Discussion Guide for *Eat Sleep Sit: My Year at Japan's Most Rigorous Zen Temple* 1. Kaoru entered training at Eiheiji seemingly without a realistic idea of what he was getting into. He says, "Nothing here, including meditation, bore the least resemblance to the fanciful pictures my mind had painted before coming." [p. 64] Prior to reading *Eat Sleep Sit*, did you have any

thoughts about or impressions of Zen Buddhism? If so, were Kaoru’s experiences different from what you would have expected? 2. As Kaoru approached Eiheiji for the first time, he writes, “Roads come into being as people begin to travel with new purpose in places previously unmarked, each minuscule step helping to wear a path in the ground.” [p. 12] Do you think he’s talking about something more than just the physical road to the temple? What do you think he means? 3. Kaoru explains that his decision to enter Eiheiji was based on the feeling that he had grown weary of his life and “had come to feel the entanglements of society so burdensome and disagreeable” that he had to flee them. “Yet, now that society’s hold on me was slipping, I felt increasingly sad and sentimental.” [p. 13] He continues, “On the one hand, the prospect of starting my life over filled me with hope. On the other hand, I felt somehow like weeping out loud, as if it were indeed a tragedy.” [p. 14] Why do you think he feels this way? Is it just because he’ll miss his family and friends, or is it about something deeper and more fundamental? 4. One of the first painful lessons Kaoru and his fellow trainees learned was that absolute submission is a must. He says, “All of us had received a modern education, had been taught to believe in the principle of equality as a human right. We had also learned that the basis of proper communication lies in looking straight at the other person and couching one’s opinion carefully in appropriate language. These beliefs were stripped from us that first night. Each man’s conception of his own existence, built up over the course of his lifetime, was casually and completely ignored.” [p. 24] Why do you think this is necessary to the training process? Would you be able to put aside a lifetime of lessons learned and accept a completely opposite way of looking at yourself and the world? 5. Many of Kaoru’s fellow trainees were sons of priests and were expected to become priests themselves and continue their family’s tradition. Others, like Kaoru, made a personal decision to come to Eiheiji. Do you think one group found it easier than the other to withstand the rigors of training? Why would that be? 6. At Eiheiji, each trainee was given a new name when he entered. Kaoru writes, “Names are funny things. They’re just a handy convention for distinguishing oneself from other people, yet once I was assigned a new name, I felt as if I were no longer the same person.” [p. 37] Why do you think something as simple as being called a different name had such a big impact on Kaoru’s sense of himself? 7. Most people, like Kaoru before he came to Eiheiji, spend their lives exerting mental and physical strength in a desperate attempt to fill the emptiness of passing time. [p. 46] One of the most basic activities at Eiheiji was just sitting and not thinking. At the beginning,

Kaoru finds "just sitting" to be far from simple. The more he tries not to think, the more his mind wanders. Have you ever meditated? What was the experience like? Were you able to clear your mind and accept the act of sitting for itself? 8. On the day before he leaves for Eiheiji, Kaoru shaved his head for the first time. He did it very unceremoniously, but was quite affected by the sight of himself in the mirror. "I still remember the sensation of that moment. A chill came over me. It felt as if every drop of my blood were being sucked out of my veins, as if second by second my body was turning to ice. ..Shaving the head is the outward sign of a fierce determination to distance oneself from longings of the heart and eradicate delusion." [p. 163] Have you ever had a similar experience? Have you ever made a change to your physical appearance as a way of acknowledging an emotional, behavioral, or spiritual change in your life? 9. On the subject of manual labor, which Kaoru describes as integral to the Zen way, he writes, "Life in a Christian monastery is also based on prayer and work, as in a Zen monastery, but the two religions have a fundamentally different approach to work. In the Christian monastic tradition, work is a means of supporting the life of prayer. Continued prayer is the goal, work the means. But for Zen practitioners, work has inherent spiritual value and is integral to the life of discipline." [p. 195] What do you think of this distinction? Do you agree with the author? 10. One day, toward the end of Kaoru's time at Eiheiji, he makes the following observation: "The asphalt road in front of the monastery seemed like a mountain watershed, separating the current of time into two completely different streams. I felt a sudden urge to jump up and dart across to the other side. Ten strides would do it. If I ran straight over, the moment I passed through the invisible membrane separating here from there I would return instantly to reality, awakening from a long dream. This world where I was now could not by any stretch of the imagination be considered reality. Now was the time to wake myself up. And yet I did not run off. Yes, it would be good to wake all at once from the dream of life at Eiheiji, I thought, and yet I was also inclined to stay and dream a little longer. . . In that moment, the boundary between the sacred and the profane disappeared." [p. 200] What does this passage say to you about Kaoru's commitment to his training? Do you think the fact that he was still tempted to run away is significant? Or is his choice not to, a true turning point? 11. After a trainee has been at Eiheiji for a while, he is allowed more freedom. Kaoru writes, "Who knows? perhaps real Zen discipline begins only when all restrictions have been taken away. Then the trainee faces a clear choice, whether to stretch out comfortably in his newfound freedom and idle around, or brace his spirits and stay committed to his initial purpose." [p. 298] Do you agree that the real test of commitment is staying true to it without externally-imposed discipline to keep you on course? 12. Did Kaoru ultimately find what he

was looking for at Eiheiji?

"Here is an unusually fine translation of a most unusual best-seller. . . We sometimes have the odd idea that Zen means simply sitting around until satori happens. . . . It is much more, as novice Nonomura discovered when he joined the beginners at Eiheiji, one of the most rigorous temples in Japan. . . . a boot camp of a place that would make even brave marines quail. . . . Nonomura stood the strain. He stayed a year. . . . This painful route, then, is the true Zen path. . . . Almost as painful must have been the translation of this book with its extraordinary width of styles — from the arcane Zen tracts of Dogen and others, to the diary-like grumbles of the clueless young Nonomura. Here, translator Juliet Carpenter not only stays the course, she defines it. here is a particularly felicitous translation, especially in the handling of the colloquial within the religious context." —DONALD RICHIE, in *The Japan Times*"It is difficult to adequately praise this book. To begin with, Kaoru Nonomura is a great writer. The description of his experiences is precise, detailed and unsparingly honest, yet giving sudden glimpses of the heart and soul of a poet and mystic. The translation is superb. The story is riveting. . . . a treasure for anyone on any spiritual path." — Light of Consciousness

Born in 1959, Kaoru Nonomura traveled widely in Asia as a university student, and upon graduation began to work as a designer in Tokyo. At the age of thirty, he decided to put his career on hold to spend a year as a trainee monk at Eiheiji, a monastery famed for its rigid discipline. Twelve months later, he returned to his design job, and it was during his daily commute on a crowded train that he began to jot down his recollections of his Eiheiji experience. These notes eventually became *Eat Sleep Sit*, the author's only book.

After reading this excellent book, you will probably not want to become a Zen Buddhist monk at Eiheiji in Japan. It is eye-opening to read all the difficult situations that the monks are put in. The monks have no time to think about their selves at all. It made me wonder if Dougen, the founder of Eiheiji really would be happy with the way the monastery is run today. Dougen brought Zen Buddhism from China to Japan in the year 1227. If you have a good idea of what Zen Buddhism is, this great book will give you pause. I highly recommend this book.

Think of the minute details of the tea ceremony...now apply that level of precision detail to the simplest stuff of daily life like brushing your teeth... gave a whole new insight into the meaning of

mindfulness... it is remembering thesequences, the precise hand position... even when going to the toilet!None before took the reader inside the novices learning experience.And the emotionally rigorous demands ... Basic training on steroidscomes to mind.

A fascinating description of the rigors of life in a Zen temple. No meditation. No koans. Just total focus on perfection of every action.

Wonderfully insightful and honest. Truly a glimpse of the spirituality and depth and vigor of the zen tradition which is too often overlooked or oversimplified in the West.

The book expressed as a lay mind all the experience to enter gradually in the Zen universe.

I love this book thank you

I expected to like this book, but I did not expect to gain any enlightenment from it. But I was surprised.As I was reading it, I started to grok the purpose of the precise rituals: to FORCE one to be in the present moment.Furthermore, the book is very well written.

a beautifully written look inside one of Japan's two premier Soto Zen training monasteries

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