John Cage and Zen:
What Did He Know, When Did He Know It, and Why Should We Care?
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John Cage’s connections to Zen Buddhism are quite familiar from his published writings and interviews. The following summarizes his account: crises in his personal and professional life led him fortuitously to Indian spiritual traditions and then the mystical writings of Meister Eckhart and Taoism; finally, and most decisively, he attended lectures by Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki at Columbia University for a two- or three-year period that ranges—in his recollection—from 1945 to 1947 and 1949 to 1951. Most scholars agree that, at the very least, Zen offered Cage a useful insight into the articulation of his particular musical aesthetic, and, as he himself said on many occasions, helped him to cope with the psychological unease he felt and pointed toward a way in which other people could similarly change their minds and improve the world they lived in. Nevertheless, understanding the actual nature of his encounter with Zen Buddhism, the adoption of Zen principles into his life and creative work, and Zen’s overall significance has been a vexing issue in Cage studies.

One important way in which previous scholarship has addressed this question notes the profound turn toward Zen imagery to be found in a trio of lectures from the early 1950s, “Lecture on Nothing,” “Lecture on Something,” and “Juilliard Lecture,” and has drawn on various kinds of sources to refine the chronology for these writings. Kay Larson has recently proposed that “Lecture on Something” was the first of the lectures to be written and presented at the New York Artists Club, in contrast to the conventional view that it follows the earliest one, “Lecture on Nothing.” I will argue that Cage’s turn toward Zen can be documented fairly precisely between the spring of 1950 and the winter of 1951, the most likely period during which he made “Lecture on Nothing”; I will reconsider elements of previous chronologies and refine them by drawing on clues within the text, examining a heretofore unknown source for it, and making comparisons with the other two. My broader goal aims to offer support for the idea that understanding the significance of Cage’s Zen is one of both historical and musicological importance, and to suggest ways in which an understanding of Zen can lead to fruitful engagement with sounding music of Cage and others.