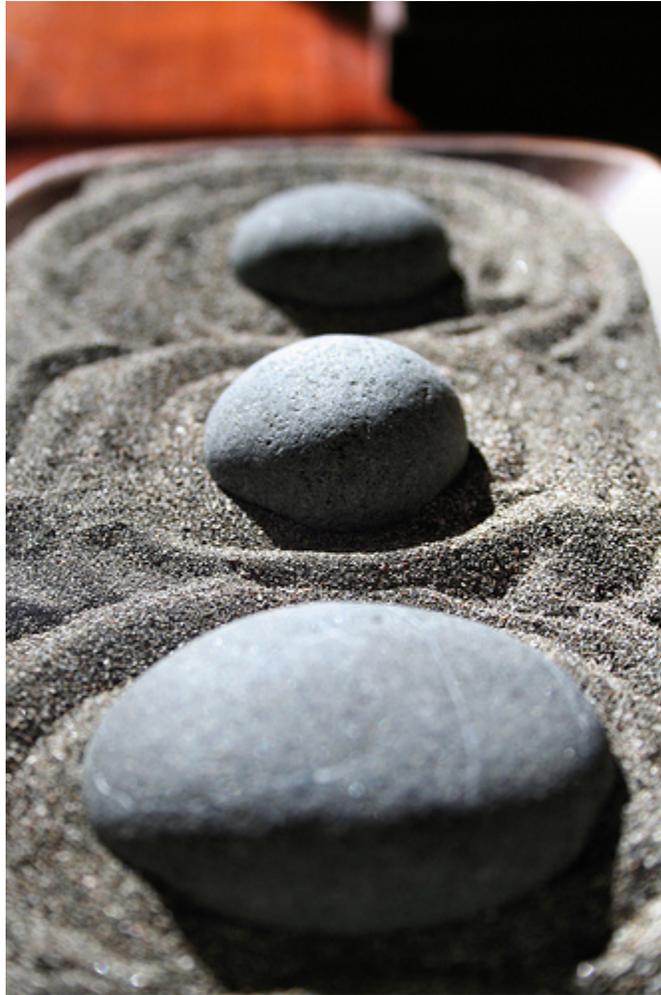


# The Zen of Blogging



**Hunter Nuttall**

## What is the Sound of One Hand Clapping?

If you're into Zen and you're into blogging, **read and share this ebook.**

If you're into Zen but you're *not into blogging*, **share this ebook.**

If you're *not into Zen* but you're into blogging, **read this ebook.**

If you're *not into Zen* and you're *not into blogging*, **read it twice.**



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## Up the Mountain

They say that when the student is ready, the master will appear. One day I felt ready, and I began the long climb to the top of Mount Blogmore. Was the legend true? Did the old man really exist? No one knew for sure, but we knew that every aspiring blogger had felt compelled to seek him out when their time had come. We also knew they were never seen again.

And so I climbed Mount Blogmore, with a strange force pulling me to the summit even though my knees quivered with fear. It wasn't my choice, it was my destiny. I had to know if I had it in me. I had to know if my inner blogger was ready to be awakened.

As I got closer, I was greeted with heavy snow and bitter cold winds. I was stopped in my tracks several times, unable to breath the freezing air. I pressed forward but didn't know if my body could take it. The old man, if he was real, sure didn't make it easy to be found.

But when I reached the top, everything changed. The snow melted away in a brilliant flash of sunlight. The clean mountain air was filled with the sounds of chirping birds and a babbling brook. My aching joints and muscles felt the pain slip away. But wait—was this real? While my mind was here, did my body lie motionless on the side of the mountain? Was I in heaven?

No, this was real. I still had my wits about me, and I knew I had not left the earthly plane. But this was a very special place. I felt a strange sense of euphoria spreading through my body. And somehow I was not surprised when I turned around to see the old man standing before me.

He pulled down the hood of his robe to reveal himself. He was easily a hundred years old, yet seemed to have astounding physical strength and mental clarity. He had a long white beard, and a solemn look on his face.

I tried my best to stammer out an introduction.

"I...I..."

"Yes, I know who you are, fool," said the old man. "You came here because you want to be a great blogger. I can help you. I can reveal all the secrets of blogging. I can teach you to write posts that pierce the souls of the toughest warriors, or make angels drown in tears. Yours can be the blog that launched a thousand ships, all full of people dying to subscribe."

The old man paced back and forth, touching his bearded chin.

"And yet," he said, "I sense great doubt within you. You're not sure if you can really do it. You're not even sure if you really want to. This will not do. Doubt leads to conflict. Conflict leads to indecision. Indecision leads to bad blogging."

He reached to his belt and drew a sword that gleamed with a faint yellow glow. Walking up to a pile of boulders, he paused for a second. Then with a quick, smooth stroke, he sliced clean through solid rock! He then turned to me.

I slowly backed away, but tripped over my own feet and fell to the ground. He continued moving towards me, and slowly raised his sword above his head.

"I'll make this very simple for you," he said. "If you start a blog, I will cut off your head, and if you do not start a blog, I will also cut off your head. So, will you start a blog?"

I sat there completely silent and motionless for what seemed like an eternity.

He then lowered his sword to tap me gently on the shoulder.

"The student is ready," he said.

## Day 1: Getting Started

"What time is it?" the old man asked.

"It is now."

"Where are you?"

"I am here."

"Why are you here?"

"To understand."

"Who are you?"

"I am a student of blogging."

"Who am I?"

"You are the master."

"Good," the old man said. "Now you begin your journey. There is no need to reinvent the wheel. We will study those who have walked the path before you."

The old man then booted up a laptop that was running Windows Vista. He opened Internet Explorer 7, and then opened many blogs in different tabs without it crashing. What a magical place this was!

I took a closer look, and saw that we were looking at some of the greatest blogs in history. There were blogs about gadgets, fashion, politics, sports, productivity, finance, travel, the Internet...just about anything you could think of.

"There are only two places you will find answers," the old man said. "One is within yourself. The other is in these blogs. For now, you have no answers within yourself, so we must start by observing these blogs. For the rest of the day, you will read them, but not think about them. Keep your mind perfectly clear. Begin now."

I read those blogs until I fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

## Day 2: Choosing a Niche

"Today you will learn about choosing a niche," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one is about a topic that so many other people are writing about. There must be a lot of competition for this topic. Is this a bad niche?"

"No, it's a wonderful niche," the old man said. "It may be crowded, but a voice that's worth hearing will always be heard over ones that aren't."

"I see. And what about this one? This blogger is not concentrating on a narrowly-focused topic, but writes about many different things. Is this a bad niche?"

"No, it's a wonderful niche," the old man said. "While the content may be diverse, it's all related when you see the big picture. This blogger is focused on a particular audience, and serves their needs well."

"I see. And what about this one? This blogger is writing about their personal life, which I thought was a big no-no, an exercise in vanity. Is this a bad niche?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 3: Domain Names

"Today you will learn about domain names," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one is very long. Is this a bad domain name?"

"No, it's a wonderful domain name," the old man said. "While it may be a lot of characters, it's only two words. It's simple and memorable."

"I see. And what about this one? This one is made up of nonsense words. Is this a bad domain name?"

"No, it's a wonderful domain name," the old man said. "While the words don't make sense, they have a nice ring to them. They roll off the tongue and flow with the blog."

"I see. And what about this one? This one is long, has five words, and they're even misspelled. Is this a bad domain name?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 4: Blogging Platforms

"Today you will learn about blogging platforms," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, it seems that almost everyone uses WordPress.org because it's free, easy to install, and offers a lot of features and plugins. But this one uses WordPress.com. Is this a bad platform?"

"No, it's a wonderful platform," the old man said. "WordPress.com provides the hosting, so it's extremely quick, easy, and cheap to set up. It's faster to get a blog going with a hosted platform, and that was the most important thing for the blogger at the time, although they might move to self-hosting later in order to have their own domain name and more control over their blog."

"I see. And what about this one? I can't even figure out what platform this one uses. Is this a bad platform?"

"No, it's a wonderful platform," the old man said. "The blogger is a programmer, and he actually created his own blogging platform to have the highest degree of flexibility. Most people can't do that, but it's an option for those with the inclination."

"I see. And what about this one? It uses Squarespace. That's not even free. Is this a bad platform?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 5: Themes

"Today you will learn about themes," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one uses a free theme. You probably get what you pay for, and there are probably many other blogs that look just like it. Is this a bad theme?"

"No, it's a wonderful theme," the old man said. "Today there are many free themes out there that are very high-quality. And as the number of themes grows, it becomes less likely that another blogger is using the same theme. This one has also had some simple customizations made."

"I see. And what about this one? This is a paid theme. What you just said makes it sound like paid themes aren't needed. Is this a bad theme?"

"No, it's a wonderful theme," the old man said. "This person found someone who made them a completely customized theme for a low price. It's truly unique, because it was made just for them. And it's designed to perfectly accommodate the advertising they have."

"I see. And what about this one? This one looks awfully complex. It has so many different sections that I get a little bit lost. Is this a bad theme?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 6: Plugins

"Today you will learn about plugins," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one only uses Akismet to filter out comment spam, and no other plugins at all. That doesn't seem very sophisticated. Is this a bad use of plugins?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of plugins," the old man said. "The blogger doesn't need any fancy features, and wanted to keep it as simple as possible. It makes it very easy to maintain the blog, because the plugins never have to be upgraded and there are no compatibility issues."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has a number of plugins. Maybe that's too complicated. Is this a bad use of plugins?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of plugins," the old man said. "There aren't too many plugins here, so it's not too much maintenance overhead. But they have some useful plugins to do things such as improving their SEO, making database backups, and letting people subscribe to comments. This is an easy way to provide some additional features on their blog."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has every single plugin under the sun. Is this a bad use of plugins?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 7: Blogging Voices

"Today you will learn about blogging voices," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one is written very formally. It almost seems like I'm reading a textbook. Is this a bad blogging voice?"

"No, it's a wonderful blogging voice," the old man said. "Because of the nature of the blog, the readers are expecting a more formal tone. The blogger understands the target audience and writes the way that best speaks to them."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog is written in a very friendly tone. It seems a bit casual. Is this a bad blogging voice?"

"No, it's a wonderful blogging voice," the old man said. "Because this blog attracts readers who are interested in hearing about personal experiences, the blog is written in such a way as to make them feel at home."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog sounds very sarcastic and even condescending. Is this a bad blogging voice?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 8: Posting Frequency

"Today you will learn about posting frequency," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one posts only once or twice a week. That doesn't seem like enough. Is this a bad posting frequency?"

"No, it's a wonderful posting frequency," the old man said. "Because there aren't enough posts to overwhelm anyone, someone who subscribes is likely to remain subscribed. Also, when a post stays on top for a longer period of time, it gets more comments. And of course, it takes less effort to post less often."

"I see. And what about this one? This blogger posts multiple times per day. That seems like way too much. Is this a bad posting frequency?"

"No, it's a wonderful posting frequency," the old man said. "Because this blogger is one who breaks the news in his industry, he has to make a post to announce every relevant event. His readers trust him to provide all the available news on this topic."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog is very unpredictable. Sometimes there will be a few posts in one day, and then there won't be any more for a couple of weeks. It's hard to know what to expect. Is this a bad posting frequency?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 9: Post Length

"Today you will learn about post length," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one has very short posts, about 250 words each. That doesn't seem long enough to be useful. Is this a bad post length?"

"No, it's a wonderful post length," the old man said. "This blogger is mainly reporting the news in her industry. She's gotten good at quickly saying what needs to be said, and pointing her readers to where they can get more information."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has longer posts, about a thousand words each. That seems a bit much for busy people to read. Is this a bad post length?"

"No, it's a wonderful post length," the old man said. "This blogger has a reputation for adding original thoughts to the topic. The posts are a little longer because they're deeper. While fewer people will read them, those who do will get more out of them."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has very long posts, several thousand words each. That seems to be a lot more than people want to read. Is this a bad post length?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 10: Images

"Today you will learn about images," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one doesn't have any images at all. It's just text, without a single picture in sight. Is this a bad use of images?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of images," the old man said. "This blogger writes about a topic for which it's hard to find relevant images. The time it would take to try to find good images can be better spent on writing new posts."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has an image for every single post. That must be a waste of time. Is this a bad use of images?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of images," the old man said. "Great images on this topic are easily found, and putting one in each post is a great way to bring the posts to life."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has several images on each post, and they don't appear to be relevant to the topic of the blog. Is this a bad use of images?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 11: Monetization

"Today you will learn about monetization," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one has no monetization at all. The blogger is basically working for free. Is this bad monetization?"

"No, it's wonderful monetization," the old man said. "By having no monetization on this blog, the blogger gains more readers and builds a reputation. He then turns around and sells services by leveraging that reputation."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has some AdSense ads, text link ads, affiliate links, and private advertising. People might think this makes the blogger look greedy. Is this bad monetization?"

"No, it's wonderful monetization," the old man said. "Maintaining a blog is a lot of work, and the blogger has the right to earn some income. The ads aren't too distracting, and they actually complement the blog by providing offers relevant to the blog topic."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog is completely plastered with ads. I can't even find where the content is on this page. Oh, here it is. Is this bad monetization?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 12: Comment Management

"Today you will learn about comment management," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this blogger responds to every comment with a thoughtful reply. It seems like that would take too long. Is this bad comment management?"

"No, it's wonderful comment management," the old man said. "Although it takes some time to reply to every comment, it makes the commenters feel appreciated. They become more likely to subscribe, leave more comments in the future, and link to the blog."

"I see. And what about this one? This blogger barely responds to any comments. The commenters must feel neglected. Is this bad comment management?"

"No, it's wonderful comment management," the old man said. "Although some readers may wish that their comments received a response, the reality is that there are too many comments for the blogger to keep up with. Her time is better spent by responding to only a handful of comments, and concentrating on writing new posts."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog doesn't even allow comments. What's the point of a blog that doesn't allow comments? Is this bad comment management?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 13: Guest Posting

"Today you will learn about guest posting," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this blogger doesn't have any guest posts on their blog, and they don't seem to write guest posts for others. That seems awfully isolated. Is this a bad use of guest posting?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of guest posting," the old man said. "This blogger has such a unique voice that it would be extremely difficult for someone else to write a complementary post. Any guest post would be distracting. And it would be hard to find another blogger who would want posts like this on their blog."

"I see. And what about this one? This blogger frequently has guest posts on their blog, and often writes guest posts for others. Wouldn't it be better to focus more on their own blog? Is this a bad use of guest posting?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of guest posting," the old man said. "This blogger is developing a reputation by writing guest posts on key blogs in his niche. It's a good way for him to grab the attention of people who are interested in the niche but don't necessarily know him. And as his reputation grows, he's able to attract guest posts from bigger bloggers, which lightens his load and builds relationships with those bloggers."

"I see. And what about this one? It seems that practically every post on this blog is a guest post. I'm not even sure who actually owns the blog. Is this a bad use of guest posting?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

## Day 14: Social Media

"Today you will learn about social media," the old man said. "Look at these blogs, and tell me what you see."

"Well, this one just has links to Digg and StumbleUpon at the bottom of each post. But there are many more social media options than those. Is this a bad use of social media?"

"No, it's a wonderful use of social media," the old man said. "The blogger is making it simple for readers. The more options you overwhelm someone with, the less likely they are to use any one of them. By restricting the readers' choices to just the two that are most important to the blogger, he increases his chances of doing well with them."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog has buttons for every social media site on the face of the earth. I didn't even know there were so many. It seems a bit much. Is this a bad use of social media?"

"No it's a wonderful use of social media," the old man said. "This blogger is known as a social media expert and has derived much of her traffic from various social media channels. Because she teaches her readers how to effectively use all of them, it only makes sense that she provides buttons for all of them."

"I see. And what about this one? This blog doesn't have any social media links or buttons at all. How can a blogger completely remove himself from that world? Is this a bad use of social media?"

"Ponder that question," the old man said, "and tell me the answer on the last day."

"But master," I said, "the last day is tomorrow."

"Yes," the old man said, "so you'd best get a good night's sleep."

## The Last Day

"What time is it?" the old man asked.

"It is now."

"Where are you?"

"I am here."

"Why are you here?"

"To understand."

"Who are you?"

"I am a student of blogging."

"Who am I?"

"You are the master."

"Good," the old man said. "Now you will face your destiny. Every day, you have asked a question that I did not answer. I told you to ponder the question, and tell me the answer on the last day. The time is now. Are you going to tell me the answers, or am I going to cut off your head?"

While I had searched long and hard for the answers, they had not come to me. My efforts had been in vain. I sat there in silence, for I could think of nothing to say. I stared deep into the old man's eyes as I awaited certain death.

And then I found that the events of the previous days were flashing before my eyes, as in a dream. A vivid, intense dream full of sights and sounds. It felt like a mighty river raging through my mind, clearing out my thoughts and replacing them with a peaceful void. And then I smiled.

"I am not afraid, master. I have the answer."

"Only one answer? But there were many questions!" He scowled and put his hand on the hilt of his sword. "Do not try my patience, fool, for I will not have you make a mockery of blogging!" And then, the corners of his mouth betrayed him, as for the first time they curled into a faint smile. For you see, he knew that I had solved my own riddle.

"All this time I had cluttered my mind by filling it with so many questions, until just now, when I see that they were all the same question. And that question is: why do great bloggers sometimes break the rules? It's because every great blogger is unique. I wouldn't ask why that leopard has so few spots, or why that bird has so many feathers. So why should I ask why a great blogger isn't like everyone else? They break the rules because they're good enough to understand the reasoning behind them, and they know what makes sense for them."

"Very good!" the old man said. "And what else?"

"Well, I've been so busy trying to figure out how to make a great blog, but that's impossible. Instead, I only need to realize the truth."

"What truth?" asked the old man, now smiling more than before.

"There is no blog! A blog has no inherent value; it's just a medium for conveying value from one person to others. There are no great blogs, only great bloggers. For a person who has nothing worth saying, trying to create a great blog is an exercise in futility, like trying to teach a duck to sing like Pavarotti. I need to start by looking within myself to find my inner blogger. The rest is just details."

"Excellent!" the old man exclaimed. "You've figured out all the secrets, and I have nothing more to teach you."

Finally, my journey was complete. I now knew what I had to do, and the path was clear. I breathed a sigh of utter contentment, and the old man and I started walking together.

Then he smiled again and said, "Actually, there's one more thing. Have you figured out the last secret yet?"

"What secret?"

And then I woke up.

## Down the Mountain

I awoke lying face down on the side of the mountain, shivering in the snow. I slowly stood up, freezing and disoriented. I had no idea how much time had passed. I looked around and didn't see anything...no old man, no chirping birds and babbling brook, nothing.

For now, I had to get out of there before I froze to death. I started stumbling my way down Mount Blogmore, and before too long I reached the bottom, where it was much warmer.

What had happened? Was the whole thing a dream? Impossible. For two weeks I had studied under the old man. It was real, I know it was! Wasn't it?

I was disenchanted to think that perhaps I had somehow imagined it all. But in a way, it didn't matter. Regardless of how it happened, I had found my answers.

I didn't want to stay in town anymore. I felt like I needed to go someplace else, where I could be alone with my thoughts. I knew I awaited many great adventures in blogging, and I wanted to be where nothing would distract me from that purpose, where nothing would remind me of reality.

I started walking in no particular direction, thinking of what Havelock Ellis had said: "Dreams are real while they last. Can we say more of life?"

## Acknowledgements

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Zen garden photo by [Clearly Ambiguous](#). Water photo by [darkpatator](#). Enso image by [Zenwhat](#).

## About the Author

Hunter Nuttall shares his unique life lessons on his blog [Personal Development for Polymaths](#). Click and visit today, and see how deep the rabbit hole goes.