A richly-toned gong of the Buddhist temple made me open my eyes slightly. I saw the fresh foliage of a maple tree through a wide-open window. The morning sunshine, which had been barely visible minutes before, now had the vividness of early summer. A small grey frog I had found before I started my Zen meditation was still sitting under the tree. With its eyes half open and not moving at all, it seemed to be imitating me. The first stick of incense had burnt, which showed half an hour of meditation had passed.

Six or seven years ago my son, Akira who was then a student of a Buddhist high school, leaned against a chair after dinner and began to talk.

‘Our director told us at the morning meeting what each of us owes entirely to our parents. Those parents were brought up with good care by our four grandparents. And those grandparents were brought up by our eight great grandparents. When you trace your lineage back in this way, you will find you are connected with all the people in the world.’

I watched Akira’s face without saying a word. In those days Akira was absorbed with practising football as a member of his club. At the school festival he strummed his guitar as part of a rock band, shaking his head on the stage in the gym. How often I tried to inspire him, referring to the fable ‘The Ant and the Grasshopper’. His talk about the morning meeting seemed to sparkle like a diamond. About that time I started to become interested in religious faith, although I had never thought of it except at marriages and funerals.

I chanced upon the Kei Temple while I was out for a walk one day in March.
The temple was so completely surrounded by a bamboo thicket that I could not see it properly from the road. It stands almost hidden in a plot of ground occupying about eighty thousand square yards. The Buddhist priest who guided me was kind enough to show me every tea-ceremony house dotted around the grounds. Those houses were not equipped with electricity, so the interiors were pitch-black unless the dormer windows were opened. At the end, the priest took me to the hall for Zen meditation, which stood deep in the recesses of the grounds. His small eyes were gentle behind black-rimmed spectacles.

‘About thirty people, including a few women of course, take part in the early Sunday morning meeting for Zen meditation. They clean the hall after meditation, and can get home before nine o’clock, so that it minimizes disruption with their schedules on Sundays.’

The priest fully understood that I might be anxious about participating in the activity. Religious meditation has been one of the most important training courses for Buddhism since it was introduced from China eight hundred years ago. I knew it opened the door only for the male society, especially for male priests. Would I be allowed to take part in it? The sign on a little board located at the entrance of the hall read: ‘Watch Your Step’.

I asked the priest the meaning of the words and was told that we should pursue our own minds and never ask others to give us spiritual awakening.

The dusk of early spring had already fallen when I left the temple. I expressed my thanks to the priest, but I hurried home in the dusk, thinking that I was about to start something very serious.

While I remembered those things in meditation, the first stick of incense burned out, and all the participants stood up at the sound of the gong. We walked around clockwise on the large floor of the hall covered with tatami mats. We moved quietly with both of our hands laid one upon the other on our breasts. We walked about ten minutes to let the blood circulate through our stiffened bodies.

Another rich tone of the temple gong was the sign to light the second stick of incense. We stopped walking, sat down cross-legged on our flat Japanese cushions, and started meditation again. This second