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**COMPLETE
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Zen Living

- ◆ **Idiot-proof ideas** for incorporating a Zen outlook into your life
- ◆ **Practical hints** for embracing Zen at home
- ◆ **Ideas and exercises** to achieve your own enlightenment

Gary McClain, Ph.D., and
Eve Adamson, MFA



THE
COMPLETE
IDIOT'S
GUIDE[®] TO

Zen Living

*by Gary R. McClain, Ph.D.,
and Eve Adamson*

**alpha
books**

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Indianapolis, IN 46290

To my father, Dale McClain.

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Foreword

As a busy physician, I experienced the irony in being asked to write the foreword to *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Zen Living*. After all, I spend my very un-Zen-like days going at double speed, my head crammed with facts and my body tight with the frustrations of dealing with insurance companies and full schedules. But every once in a while, I stop in the hallways of my office, listen to the sounds of my work life, inhale deeply, and enjoy, just for a few seconds, the great slice of life that it represents. These moments, I now know, are Zen moments.

Modern medicine is rapidly documenting just how healthy the regular practice of Zen and other meditative systems are. In one recent study, relaxation techniques lowered blood pressure, cholesterol, and stress hormone levels in a group of men. In another survey, meditation led to a lessening of chronic back pain in long-time sufferers. Relaxation exercises are associated with greater longevity in the elderly, with a better sense of well-being in cancer patients, and with improved exercise tolerance in athletes.

But certainly, Zen and other systems that teach relaxation are not merely for people with diseases. In fact, the greatest reason to pursue a Zen lifestyle is for preventive medicine purposes. My medical practice integrates family practice and acupuncture with nutritional and mind-body medicine. All day long in my office, patients tell me how little time they have to care for their health. Our modern lives are nonstop busy, and this means constant stress. Stress causes wear and tear on our bodies, and exhaustion of our minds. This is because hormones are secreted by the adrenal and other glands in response to stress. These hormones (cortisol, adrenaline, and others) raise blood pressure and blood sugar; weaken the immune system; irritate the blood vessels, leading to hardening of the arteries; and deplete serotonin, resulting in depression. Over the years, this unrelenting stress will lead to the loss of health and happiness. Zen relaxation counteracts this chronic situation. Relaxation lowers these hormone levels, preventing their ravaging effects. Even more, relaxation promotes the production of hormones that protect the body cells from breakdown, boosts well-being, encourages restful sleep, and aids in proper digestion.

Anyone who leads a busy life could use this book. In clear, simple terms, Gary McClain, Ph.D., and Eve Adamson describe the ideas behind Zen, the scope of its practice, and how to incorporate it into your life. As you will learn in the book, Zen is a centuries-old relaxation technique that is easy to learn and to practice. But it is much more than a meditation system. Practicing Zen at home, at work, and in between offers a way of counteracting the wear and tear of daily stress. Zen provides a way of living in the moment, in every moment. What makes Zen so unique is that it does not have to be a religion, but is more of a lifestyle. There are Zen ways of being with people and Zen ways of being by yourself. Zen does not require you to learn foreign languages, dress differently, or attend religious ceremonies. It requires you to

notice your life, to experience who you are and what you are doing in a full and conscious manner. The results will be a healthy body and a mind free to enjoy what life might offer.

Glenn S. Rothfeld, M.D., M.Ac.

Dr. Rothfeld is Senior Clinical Advisor for WholeHealthMD (www.WholeHeathMD.com) and Medical Director of WholeHealth New England, Inc., a group practice combining conventional and alternative approaches. He is also Clinical Assistant Professor of Family Medicine and Community Health at Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. Dr. Rothfeld has been at the forefront of integrative and alternative medicine for more than 20 years. In addition to his training in family medicine, Dr. Rothfeld is trained in acupuncture, nutritional medicine, and herbal medicine. He is the co-author of several popular books including *Natural Medicine for Heart Disease* (Rodale), *Ginkgo Biloba* (Dell), *Folic Acid and the Amazing B Vitamins* (Berkley), and is currently working on a book on acupuncture.

Introduction

Zen masters are always the first to point out that Zen cannot be taught through books, but rather must be passed from teacher to teacher and, ultimately, discovered within oneself. Also, as Natalie Goldberg says in her introduction to *Zen in America*, “It is a very tricky business to transform Zen from one culture to another.”

We believe, however, that the search for self-knowledge is a universal one. Therefore, rather than creating another Zen manual that details this ancient and venerable tradition, we have done our best to illuminate the ways in which Zen resonates for Western culture. Our goal is to assist those seeking greater self-knowledge, happiness, inner contentment, and peace in finding a valid contemporary Western way to embrace Zen living.

You’ll find this book is full of real-life examples mixed in with the most ancient Zen stories, and you might even notice that, Western or Eastern, American or Japanese or Chinese or Vietnamese or Korean, anecdotes about Gary or Eve or Bodhidharma or Dogen or Joshu or the Buddha himself, all our stories and all our suggestions are meant to be read lightly—not grasped, not held as sacred, not revered, but considered with a smile, a wink, or even a belly laugh. We won’t exactly tell you to kill the Buddha should you meet him on the road (as the saying goes), but you might want to give him a knowing nudge with your elbow. It’s what we like to do.

Zen and its many illuminations, contradictions, and enigmas can confuse, please, frustrate, amuse, and eventually enlighten any heart from any culture. We hope this book will guide you toward the enlightenment of yours.

What You Will Learn in This Book

This book is divided into six parts, each tackling a different angle of living Zen in your life.

Part 1, “The Future Is the Past Is Now,” will explain what Zen is, exactly, and who your authors are. We’ll give you a brief introduction to what Zen can do for you, and then we’ll tell you how Zen evolved, from its ancient Indian origins to twenty-first-century America.

Part 2, “Dharma 101,” is a section about truth. *Dharma* is the Sanskrit word for “truth,” as taught by the Buddha. But what is truth for you, and how can you get more of it into your life? In this section, we’ll talk about a Zen approach to everyday life, even when bad things happen. We’ll also introduce the concept of enlightenment.

Part 3, “1-2-3 Zazen: Zen Techniques for Zen Living,” will give you some right-now, get-started techniques for living a more Zen-like existence, such as meditation, breathing, mindfulness, and the practice of koans. We’ll also talk about some Zen-like lifestyle choices.

Part 4, “Personal Zen,” is all about you. Who are you? Who is the real you? Zen can help you to gain self-knowledge, and it can bolster your romantic, friendship, and family relationships, too. Plagued by desire, fear, worry? Zen’s got you covered.

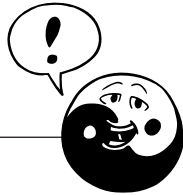
Part 5, “Zen in the Workplace,” is all about you and your job. Can Zen make you more successful? In a way—read and find out how! Zen can also improve your on-the-job relationships and the way you handle work-related stress.

Part 6, “Bringing It All Back Home,” helps you to integrate Zen techniques and attitudes (which are really just the attitudes of the real you) into your home environment, your creative expression, your appreciation for the arts, and your physical activity. We’ll end by discussing how Zen you want to be, and how Zen you already are.

Following these parts, you will find three appendixes that cover further Zen readings, a glossary of Zen terms, and the Ten Bulls illustrations explained.

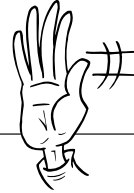
Zen Extras in a Box

Throughout each chapter in this book, we’ll add four types of extra information, neatly packaged in boxes, for your further enlightenment:



Zen-Speak

These boxes define words we use in the text that you might not know. Some are Japanese, Chinese, or Sanskrit words. Some are plain old English, but refer to technical or other areas that aren’t common knowledge.



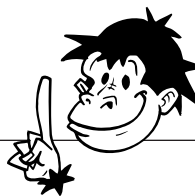
One Hand Clapping

These boxes contain ancient and modern Zen wisdom from around the world, and other information that adds to or expands upon each chapter.



Nirvana Notes

These boxes offer tips, techniques, and good old-fashioned Zen advice for more effective Zen living.



Monkey Mind!

These boxes supply you with things to watch out for, be careful of, or avoid. These are the “heads-up” boxes.

Acknowledgments

Thanks to my father and mother who, without the benefit of the teachings of Zen, did their best to teach me their own version of the Eightfold Path. I will always remember my father's lessons about choosing the right livelihood.

And thanks to my friends and co-workers who support me even when I am out of the flow and am temporarily thrashing around in the water.

—Gary R. McClain, Ph.D.

Thanks to my father—Zen master in a Presbyterian disguise—and to my mother, who never stands in the way of whatever I need to be or do, even if she thinks it's odd. Thanks to Lee Ann, for being a pillar and for being a friend. And thanks to my children, Angus and Emmett, who remind me every day to live in the moment, and who make life well worth mindfulness.

—Eve Adamson

Special Thanks to the Technical Editor

The Complete Idiot's Guide to Zen Living was reviewed by an expert who provided invaluable insight to help ensure that this book tells you everything you need to know about bringing Eastern Zen to your hectic, stressed-out Western lifestyle—that is, Zen living. In its pages, you'll learn how to live mindfully and enjoy life's vicissitudes with a Zen smile unseen in the West since Leonardo da Vinci painted the *Mona Lisa*. Our special thanks are extended to Gail Carr Feldman, Ph.D.

Gail Carr Feldman, Ph.D., is a clinical psychologist, author, and public speaker. She served for 22 years as clinical assistant professor in the Psychiatry Department at the University of New Mexico School of Medicine. She has appeared on radio and television programs across the country, including *Larry King Live*. Her current book, *From Crisis to Creativity*, teaches how adversity can be transformed into powerful expressions

of the self. She has a passion for travel and has spoken in Greece, Puerto Rico, and Australia on higher creativity and the transcendent life. She credits her two grown daughters with bringing her inspiration and some of the wisdom that has flowered from sitting zazen in the lotus position over the last 30 years of being a mom. She is learning the Zen of the “empty nest,” a.k.a. a clean and uncluttered living space, now that one daughter is married and teaching massage therapy, and the other daughter is working as a journalist in Guatemala. Gail lives on the high desert of Albuquerque and enjoys hiking and skiing (and being one with) the New Mexico mountains.

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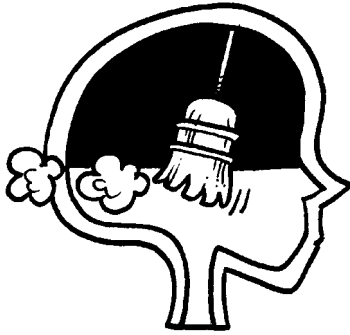
Part 1

The Future Is the Past Is Now

You've heard the word Zen and you've wondered what it's all about. In Part 1, we'll give you the lowdown: what Zen can do for your mind, your body, your spirit, and your life. Zen means living right here, right now. Simple? Deceptively so! We'll introduce you to the ideas and show you how a few simple adjustments in your attitude can make your life simpler, happier, and more real. We'll also introduce ourselves.

Next we'll trace Zen's origins and its evolution to twenty-first-century America, from the Buddha in India to China, Japan, Vietnam, Tibet, Korea, and finally, the United States. Zen has changed, evolved, and blossomed into a uniquely Western incarnation. American Zen makes a lot of sense for those of us struggling to find meaning in today's hectic world. Zen provides the answers—which have been right inside you all along!





Spring Cleaning for Your Life

In This Chapter

- Why do you need Zen?
- What is Zen, anyway?
- What Zen has to do with you, right here, right now
- Who are Gary and Eve, and what do they know?
- How Zen can make your life better

This book is about Zen living, but not the kind that takes place in a monastery or in a cave or even, necessarily, in Japan. This book is about Zen living for you.

“Who, me?” you might say, glancing behind you. “I’m no Zen master.” Don’t be so sure! Just because you don’t wear flowing robes and spend your days chanting or sitting in silent meditation doesn’t mean you can’t live a more Zen-like life. Anyone can do it. It’s easy. You just have to begin.

Begin what? Decluttering! Living Zen is like spring cleaning the life you already have, so you can get down to the business of living it.

Why Zen?

Life has become very complicated, hasn’t it? Everyone seems to be frantically busy. The fine art of multitasking is no longer reserved for computers. We all do it, every day. Cordless phones and cellular phones have replaced those cumbersome contraptions that stay stubbornly attached to a cord. A busy signal? Break through with call waiting, caller ID, or leave your very important message on voice mail. Forget what

has now been characteristically termed “snail mail.” Such cumbersome chores as folding paper and putting it into stamped envelopes are outmoded. The swifter, cheaper e-mail is the communication mode of today. Computer calendars, schedulers, and virtual secretaries keep us organized. Laptops let us take the whole thing on the road. Typewriters? Well, how passé!

What about free time? What about relationships? Scheduled to the max, full of activities, plans, even conversations we think we *should* have. Or maybe your free time is spent collapsed on the couch, staring blankly at the television. Let the screen fill your mind with a stream of images you can barely recall an hour after you’ve shut off the set. What else can you do after such an exhausting week?

Partners, children, friends, they fit in somewhere. Or not. Or we cling obsessively to our personal relationships, hoping our loved ones will provide the anchor, the sense of self that we can’t seem to find. Hoping they will love us, hoping that if they don’t, we can keep busy enough not to notice, or to feel too lonely.



Nirvana Notes

Zen may seem like a solitary practice, but it doesn’t exist in a vacuum. Zen relationships are just as much “Zen” as Zen meditation. A Zen approach to relationships means relishing each moment with people, really listening, accepting them for who they are, and telling the truth. For more on Zen relationships, see Chapter 14, “Zen and Your Relationships.”

We really don’t mean to make modern life seem completely bleak and empty. Modern life is very exciting. We, too, have our laptops, our cell phones, our e-mail accounts. We multitask. We feel pride in our accomplishments.

And sometimes we also feel overwhelmed, stressed, too busy, disorganized, lonely. We’re just like you.

So why Zen for you, for us, for any of us? Because Zen can teach us something exceptionally important for finding peace, contentment, and happiness in the twenty-first century, or any century. Zen teaches us to relinquish control.

Yikes! Relinquish control? Let go of the steering wheel? Set the great ocean liner that is your life adrift untended without a captain? Impossible! Or, is it? Certainly not. Zen can teach you to let go in a way that frees you, not from your duties as captain of the ship, but from the effort, the strain, and the burden of trying to manipulate that giant, seaweed-clogged rudder against the inevitable waves and tides. Your ship can run beautifully by itself. Just keep an eye out for icebergs and you’ll be fine.

What Is Zen?

Zen is not complicated. It doesn’t involve any special knowledge. It doesn’t involve equipment. In fact, in its way, Zen is antiequipment. Zen is like cleaning out your

attic and dropping off all the stuff you don't need—your worries, fears, opinions, preconceptions, attachments—at the recycling bin. Because you really don't need them!

Zen is for anyone, no matter his or her religious beliefs, country of origin, or lifestyle. Living Zen is simple. In fact, although many say Zen defies all definitions, we would define it with one simple, short word: *now*.

"Now? What about it?" you ask.

Exactly.

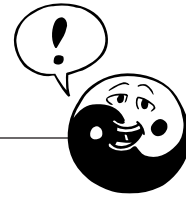
If you are thoroughly confused, don't worry. Zen is already beginning to work its magic. Zen is a practice full of surprises, enough to fill volumes. Yet despite the wealth of guidance, inspiration, and philosophical suppositions Zen has inspired throughout history, it still comes down to this: now.

The simplicity behind Zen is deceptive, however. It is one thing to tell someone, "Now is all that matters. Live in the now." It is quite another thing to actually do it, to step back from that captain's wheel and say, "Ship, go where you will."

Humans are programmed to think, interpret, analyze, examine, define, and think some more. We can't help it! It is one of the side effects of having such big, complex brains. Our lives are so busy and complicated that we have to think to keep everything in order. If we didn't think, we'd be in big trouble. And thinking makes us who we are.

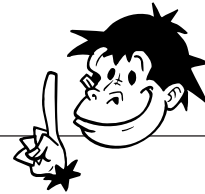
Before you start thinking that we're going to tell you to stop thinking, turn that mental chatter down to a dull roar and listen up: Zen is not about obliterating your thoughts, your feelings, your personality, or any other aspect of you. On the contrary. Zen helps you to unclutter you so you can think more easily, see more clearly, understand more readily, and know yourself more intimately.

That sounds pretty good, doesn't it? We think so.



Zen-Speak

Zen is the Japanese word for "meditation," not in the sense of the contemplation of something, but as a mode of existing (whether sitting, walking, or otherwise going about your day) without any goal or ulterior motive in what Alan Watts, in his *The Way of Zen*, calls "unified or one-pointed awareness." *Dhyana* in Sanskrit and *Ch'an* in Chinese, the term *Zen* originated in India (with Buddhism).



Monkey Mind!

What's so bad about thinking? Nothing at all. Yet becoming so engaged with our thoughts that we forget to live in the moment, or allowing our thoughts to cause us suffering, are surefire ways to miss the Truth Bus. How can you fully manifest each moment of your precious existence if you are letting thoughts or feelings torture you?

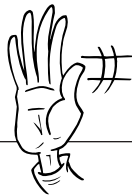
But first, something else to throw into the mix: Zen isn't about end results.

"Huh? Then what's the point?"

There is no point to Zen.

"What? No point? Then why am I wasting my time?"

We Westerners are very goal-oriented, aren't we? We go to school to get a job. We get a job to make money. We make money to buy stuff. We work harder to make more money to buy more stuff. It is easy to get seduced into thinking that everything should be goal-oriented. How else would you ever get anywhere? How would you get ahead? How would you succeed?



One Hand Clapping

One day, Baso, a Zen monk, was sitting in zazen (meditation). His teacher passed by and asked him what he was doing. Baso replied, "I want to become a Buddha." The teacher immediately picked up a tile and began to polish it vigorously. "What are you doing?" Baso asked. "I'm polishing this tile to make it a mirror," replied the teacher. "What? How can polishing a tile make it a mirror?" asked Baso. "How can zazen make you a Buddha?" the teacher answered. Just as Baso mistakenly believed the point or goal of zazen was to become a Buddha, so we may mistakenly believe Zen, or zazen, has a goal. Zen itself is the already-achieved goal. This moment is your life, so wake up and start living it.

In Zen, you don't get anywhere. You don't get ahead. And most importantly, you have already succeeded, because in Zen, the present moment is all that matters. Live, right now. That's all.

However, that doesn't mean that Zen living is without its peripheral benefits. While Zen isn't really Zen if you practice it specifically to achieve some benefit, there are undeniable benefits to living Zen. Let's look at some of them.

Mental Clutter Control

If your desk looks anything like Gary's or Eve's desk, you have a nice symbol right in front of you of a cluttered mind. You are pretty sure you are going to need most of those piles of paper and files. You know you're going to update your e-mail contact

files and get rid of that Rolodex, and that electronic organizer is just sitting there waiting for you to figure out how to use it so it can make your life easier ... today, tomorrow? Three coffee cups are better than one, right? And one of these days you really will sit down and read all those magazines

The stuff rattling around in your head is much the same. There is a lot you need to keep track of, a lot you have to remember, plenty of things you have to do. But sometimes the rattling gets so loud you can't concentrate on any one task (not to mention, find your to-do list!).

Consider *zazen* your professional organizer. Zazen is sitting. Zen sitting. It is the one technique used in Zen, and it isn't complicated. You sit. Simple, yet challenging. Simple, yet exceptionally useful. While it doesn't sign permission slips or finish reports or do the dishes for you, zazen helps to purge your brain of all the stuff that is keeping you from doing what you need to do.

Oh, and one more thing about that messy desk metaphor. Gary used to criticize himself for the messy desk at home, and also for the messy desk at the office. Eve has a home office but doesn't like to let people in there, for fear they will see how disorganized her work space appears. But you know what? True Zen is antimetaphorical. Does your messy desk signify your disordered mind? No. We've just imposed that comparison. A messy desk just means you have a messy desk. The thing means only the thing. That's Zen thinking. If you know where everything is (Gary calls the highest stack his "central file"), if a messy desk makes you comfortable, then let it be. For some people, immaculate desk space isn't a priority.



Zen-Speak

Zazen is the Japanese word for "sitting meditation." *Za* means "to sit" and *Zen* means "meditation." The Chinese word for zazen is *T'so-chuan*.

Finding Yourself

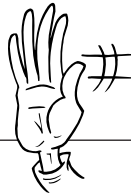
Another benefit of Zen is the chance to get to know yourself. Many people would love the luxury of self-examination but rarely get to indulge in it. When they do, they may feel just a little guilty. "How selfish, to spend this much time thinking about myself!" Some people pay therapists lots of money to be able to have one hour of self-consideration. Many of the Earth's people are just looking for a way to survive, much less reach self-awareness!

Zen is free to everyone, regardless of what country you live in or what your condition in life is. And although it doesn't provide a professional to help you interpret yourself, practicing Zen does provide you a space in which you can learn to see and know yourself more clearly, completely free from interpretation. Your zazen time is your

time to be with yourself, not actively thinking, “Who am I?” or, “What am I doing?” or, “Where have I gone wrong?” but to just be, just you, with no confusion or complicated issues.

Zen gives you that opportunity to find yourself—the real you, not the one you try to be at work or at home or in your relationships, not the one people tell you is you, not the one you tell yourself you can someday become, but the *you* of right now.

And that is really the only you there is, the only you there ever will be. Your external circumstances, appearance, reputation will probably change as the years go by, but as long as you exist, you will always exist only in the present moment. You, now. That’s all. Kind of a relief, isn’t it?



One Hand Clapping

What is Zen? Zen means doing anything perfectly, making mistakes perfectly, being defeated perfectly, hesitating perfectly, doing anything perfectly or imperfectly, *perfectly*. What is the meaning of this *perfectly*? How does it differ from perfectly? *Perfectly* is in the will; perfectly is in the activity. *Perfectly* means that at each moment of the activity there is no egoism in it Our pain is not only our own pain; it is the pain of the universe. The joy of the universe is also our joy. Our failure and misjudgment is that of nature, which never hopes or despairs, but keeps on trying.

—R. H. Blyth, *Zen and Zen Classics*

Paying Attention

One of Zen’s most dramatic benefits is the way it teaches you to pay attention. Living life on automatic pilot may seem more efficient at times, but it is certainly less beautiful. Learning to live in the moment, to be present in the now, means paying attention to everything you do as if you’ve never done it before. Everything is new and wonderful: doing laundry, talking to a friend, sweating through your exercise routine, filing, walking the dog, petting the cat, sitting through a staff meeting, tasting your morning toast and coffee, completing a project, and so on. Zen teaches you to pay attention to every detail, immersing yourself in your activity to such a degree that you become the activity. You may surprise yourself at what you are able to accomplish when you pay attention.

Meet the Authors

Who are we and why do we think we can tell you about Zen? Your authors for *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Zen Living* are Dr. Gary McClain and Eve Adamson. We aren't Zen masters. We aren't monks. We aren't from Japan or any other country in the lineage of Zen and, graduate degrees aside, few people ever call us "master." (We wish!) Yet Zen has touched both of our very Western lives in ways that we have found downright enlightening.

Gary McClain, Ph.D.

Gary's background includes experience in human services and business. He has worked as a psychologist in a substance abuse program, in private practice, and as a career counselor. He has also conducted values clarification and career planning workshops.

In the business world, Gary has worked as a trainer, and then in marketing management, for companies including Lockheed Martin (formerly Martin Marietta) and Computer Associates (formerly VM Software). He also worked as a strategic planner at OgilvyOne, a division of Ogilvy & Mather Worldwide, an international advertising agency. So when it comes to life in the corporate world, Gary knows just how stressful it can be.

He is currently director of research at Sachs Communications Group, Inc., a new media consulting and research firm based in New York City. He conducts focus groups and user experience testing internationally for companies ranging from Internet startups to Fortune 100 corporations.

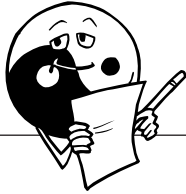
Additionally, he has written and edited numerous information technology-related books and two self-help books. He did graduate work in clinical psychology and education, with a focus on adult personality development and learning, and holds a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.

When Gary's life is full of the competing demands of e-mail, voice mail, cell phone, PDA, stressed-out clients, even more stressed-out friends, and delayed flights (and it is usually thus full), he takes deep breaths and visualizes a calm, soothing place. He reminds himself that he doesn't have control over any of it, so he may as well go with the flow. And somehow, he finds a balance. The Zen principles Gary uses every day make his life more than manageable—they make it wonderful.

Eve Adamson, M.F.A.

Eve has a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing and, when she isn't writing *Idiot's Guides* or other nonfiction, writes poetry (occasionally, someone even publishes it). She is also a single parent to her two-year-old and five-year-old sons.

Zen has become more than a coping mechanism for life with two small children. It has become an inspiration for living in the now, becoming immersed in every individual moment, and fully living through the creation of poetry to the washing of dishes to every single second in the hallowed presence of family. (She relishes some of those seconds more than others, but she's working hard on relishing them all!)



Nirvana Notes

Zazen is an excellent way to help parents not only manage, but relish the dual challenge of family and work. Zazen each morning and evening, even if only for five minutes, keeps parents centered, calm, and satisfied, no matter who smeared peanut butter on the computer monitor. See Chapter 15, "Zen and the Family," for more on Zen and parenting.

Eve thinks zazen should be standard procedure for all parents, not to mention all poets.

What Westerners Can Learn from an Ancient Eastern Religion

Zen may seem a little foreign to you—it sounds so otherworldly, or at least other-culture-ly. But just because Zen is an ancient Eastern religion that originated in India and traveled to China, Korea, and Japan doesn't mean it isn't fully real and organic to you. The British Zen scholar R. H. Blyth, in his *Zen and Zen Classics*, writes:

Zen arises spontaneously, naturally, out of the human heart. It is not a special revelation to any person, class, or nation. Thus, to say it came from India to China and from China to Japan is nonsense. One might as well say that the air we breathe in one country comes from another.

That's not to say there isn't a fascinating history attached to Zen's arrival in the Western world (see Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Zen Buddhism"). But Zen's antiquity simply doesn't affect its truth. We can learn a lot from living Zen, as much as anyone ever did in any country, in any century. We can learn to be, to relish life, to live each moment perfectly. We can learn a few other things helpful to our lives, too. They include the lessons in the following sections.

Moderation in All Things

The Buddha himself, Siddhartha Gautama (see Chapter 2), proclaimed the importance of the Middle Way. After living a privileged life of luxury, then spending years being an extremely deprived ascetic, the Buddha discovered that moderation is the only way to find true balance and the best way to live fully and with a complete and mindful awareness.



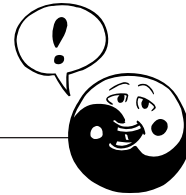
Buddha sits in meditation under the bodhi tree.

That means making a conscious effort not to overconsume, overindulge, live inconsiderately, or hurt others. It also means refraining from *asceticism* or subjecting oneself to other extremes of deprivation and self-denial. Moderation in all things, as they say. These are words true for Buddha, and words to live by today.

Cut the Chaos

Living in the moment, without attaching yourself to regrets about yesterday or worries about tomorrow, goes a long way toward cutting through the chaos of everyday life. Have you ever noticed that the more hectic your life becomes, the more you start to misplace things (your car keys, your planner, that crucial computer file), forget things (the new employee's name, that dentist appointment, picking your son up from soccer), even get clumsier (tripping over your own feet, dropping that water glass, accidentally tossing the salad all over the kitchen floor)?

Chaos breeds chaos. Zen stops the cycle. Suddenly you remember exactly where you need to be (and exactly where you put your car keys). Your mind is centered and clear, like an organized desk, so all that information is much easier to access.



Zen-Speak

Asceticism is the practice of self-deprivation or self-denial, which can include doing without possessions, fasting, going without sleep, begging, and even self-inflicted pain.

Ducks in a Row

Do you ever feel like you just can't keep track of all the different threads of your life? Are you full of plans about things you will organize, someday? Decisions you'll make,

someday? People you'll get back in touch with, someday? Another benefit to a calm, organized, undistracted psyche is the ability to pull it all together and do the simple things you need to do to keep your life in order.

Know Thyself

A person with self-knowledge is a wise person, and knowing the self is the first step toward knowing all humankind. Zen living means recognizing that all is one just as each living thing is an individual. Zen exists on the edge of this contradiction: Each thing is diverse, and all things are one.

Knowing the self is helpful, then, on two levels: Who are you, that person who is completely unique and different from anyone else before? And who are you, that person who is, in essence, the same as the whole world? Both types of wisdom can be helpful in all walks of life.



Zen-Speak

Nirvana is the Sanskrit word for "enlightenment," which is the state achieved by the Buddha (and many since) upon the true realization and recognition of the unity of all things. Some approaches to Zen stress nirvana as a kind of goal, although it is far from an end result. Rather, nirvana is thought to be a state that launches an enlightened life into continued spiritual growth.

Serenity Today

Whether or not you ever attain something akin to *nirvana* (enlightenment), living Zen can bring a level of serenity into your life that you might never have known. You can feel more calm, tranquil, relaxed, and peaceful today. Because Zen is today. It works right now. It will work better the more you do it, sure. But it starts working the moment you embrace it. So what are you waiting for?

Zen Living in the Twenty-First Century

People like to characterize different decades, different centuries, and eventually, probably even different millennia. How will they characterize the twenty-first century? Many have already entered their predictions.

Doomsday proselytizers aside, some people believe that as the twenty-first century progresses, humankind will move toward a more generally enlightened state, with more equality, more peace, more tolerance, more openness, and more demonstrated love for all sentient beings. We sure hope so! How much easier these changes would be if everyone practiced Zen living.

You Have No Future

Zen has nothing to do with the future. Living Zen means you have no future. That doesn't mean you should scrap all your investments, the college fund, and the 10-year career plan. You have to stay mindful of your life as a whole, as well as your life right now. Yet looking at it another way, right now is your only life. Ten years from now, when your career plan is in full fruition, you will still be living in the right now. That's why you have to make now count for everything. You have no future, you have power over this moment only; your future is happening now, and by recognizing this, you will have power over what you don't have. (Ponder that one for a while!)



Nirvana Notes

Ambition can be Zen-like or un-Zen-like. Ambition to live mindfully and succeed ultimately in the present moment is Zen-like. Ambition to get ahead of others, gain more material possessions, and achieve status at the expense of compassion is counter-productive to Zen living. Ironically, Zen living can be more effective in personal as well as career success than a less compassionate but more ambitious approach.

You Have Already Succeeded

Because you have no future and because your future is now, you have already succeeded. The 10-year plan is great, but it is like a map. A map has many roads, and you may encounter detours or country roads that weren't drawn on the map. You never know what will arise in the present moment.

Except that you do know what will arise: you. Here you are, in the now, living, being. You are the one and only consistent factor in the story of your life. A story is supposed to have a beginning, a middle, and an end. In Zen, you are the beginning, the middle, and the end. You live your entire life story every moment, so you have nowhere to go. You are already there. The story finishes each second, then starts again. Here you are, living. The end.

This Is Zen: Right Here, Right Now

There you have it, the essence of Zen: right here, right now. "If it's that simple, how are you going to write any more about it?" you might ask. Because like everything else about Zen, appearances are deceiving. Zen is simple, but living it can be monstrously complicated for human beings, who are so attached to their thoughts and emotions, who so readily engage them, allow them to control their lives, live at their mercy.

Learning how to live your Zen is like learning anything worthwhile. It takes practice to get into new habits, and eventually, new habits help you to break into a new awareness. And then Zen really will seem like a breeze.

The Least You Need to Know

- Modern life is complicated; Zen living is simple.
- Zen living means living fully in the present moment.
- Spring clean your brain, get to know yourself again, and learn how to pay attention by practicing Zen.
- Zen is as simple as sitting and experiencing without attachment, attitude, or opinion, and it has been so since ancient times.
- Zen living helps you to learn moderation, minimize chaos, get organized, cultivate self-knowledge, and feel serene.



A Brief History of Zen Buddhism

In This Chapter

- ▶ How a man became a Buddha
- ▶ Some basic principles of Buddhism
- ▶ How Buddhism in India turned to Ch’an in China
- ▶ How Ch’an in China evolved into Zen in Japan, Son in Korea, and Thien in Vietnam
- ▶ What a Zen teacher can (and can’t) do for you

Westerners first learning about Zen, or any other sect of Buddhism, have a disadvantage. In the East, every child grows up knowing all about the life of the Buddha, if not all the details of the evolution of Buddhism.

Knowing how Zen came about, how it evolved into its present incarnation, is more than interesting. What the Buddha, and others after him, learned through experience can help each of us in our daily practice to live in a more Zen-like way.

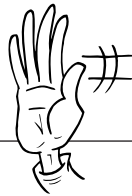
If you really hate history, don’t worry—we won’t pile a bunch of dates and dry facts on you. We’ll try to make this as relevant as possible for your life right now. (And a little historical knowledge never hurts.)

A Man Named Siddhartha

So who was this Buddha guy, anyway? Was he some kind of god, like Krishna? Some kind of incarnation of god, like Jesus? Some kind of prophet, like Moses? No, the

Buddha was just a guy. A rich guy, in the beginning. A poor guy, later on. And, more important, a guy with a lot of drive toward the spiritual. But still, he was just a guy.

A lot of mythology surrounds the Buddha, and, of course, there is much we don't know for sure. The details of the Buddha's life were transmitted orally for centuries before they were ever written down, so historical accuracy is less of a sure thing than getting the basic idea. But let's look at the story, as it is generally told.



One Hand Clapping

Like any story that is thousands of years old, the story of the life of the Buddha has certain mythological elements. One story says the Buddha's mother conceived him after being pierced in the side by an elephant's tusk. Another relates how, immediately after being born, the Buddha stood up and took seven steps. A lotus blossom appeared in each footprint. The baby then raised his hand and announced his intention to become enlightened.

Who Was Buddha?

Approximately five centuries before the birth of Jesus Christ, there was born a prince of India's warrior class. His parents named him Siddhartha Gautama (sometimes spelled Siddhattha Gotama). Siddhartha's well-intentioned father desired a military career for his son. He decided to isolate his son from any and all contact with the outside world. If Siddhartha never suffered, his father may have reasoned, he would never have reason to pursue spiritual matters and endure the hardships of a spiritual life. He would stay the course set out for him and become a great leader.

The pampered and privileged prince grew up, married, and had a child, but was naturally curious about the world outside the royal enclave. It is even said that Siddhartha's father commanded the servants to remove all withered flowers from the garden before Siddhartha walked in it, so he would never see that flowers died. You can imagine how limited his view of life must have been!

The story goes that Siddhartha ventured out in disguise, in an attempt to learn about life. What was it like out there, where not everyone was privileged, where people weren't princes? He walked among the common people on four separate nights, and on each night, he learned something startling.

On his first journey, he saw someone who was very old. Siddhartha asked his servant, "What is wrong with that man? Why is he so stooped and wrinkled?" The servant answered, "The man is old, master. All humans must grow old." Surprised, Siddhartha returned to his palace. Old? He hadn't known of such a thing.

On the second journey, Siddhartha encountered a sick man lying on the side of the road. Again, he asked his servant, "Why is that man lying on the side of the road that way?" The servant replied, "That man has a disease. All men are susceptible to such disease, pain, and suffering." "You mean, I could fall prey to a disease?" Siddhartha asked. "Yes, master," replied the servant. Amazed, Siddhartha returned home.

On the third night, during his wanderings, Siddhartha saw a dead body. "Why doesn't that man move?" asked Siddhartha. "What is wrong with him?" "He is dead, master," said the servant. "Eventually, all men must die." "I will die?" inquired Siddhartha of his servant. One can only wonder if the servant was terrified to reveal such answers to his privileged but ignorant master, or if the servant took some pleasure in being the one to give Siddhartha his dose of reality. "Yes, master. Even you will die, someday."

On the last night, Siddhartha ventured out yet again, and saw a wandering ascetic searching for spiritual truth, traveling with his begging bowl in poverty, a look of serenity on his face. "What is that man doing?" asked Siddhartha. His servant informed him, "That man is seeking the meaning of life and the answer to suffering. He wanders, fasts, begs for his food, has no possessions, meditates, and inquires into the nature of truth."

The father's plan had backfired. By sheltering Siddhartha from suffering, he made his son's eventual encounter with the human condition all the more shocking. Siddhartha vowed that he would find the answers. He left his wife, his son, and his privileged life within the castle walls and set out on his own spiritual quest.

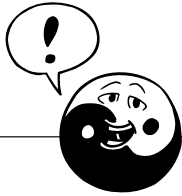


Nirvana Notes

A more detailed but fictionalized account of how Siddhartha became a Buddha can be found in the classic novel *Siddhartha*, by Hermann Hesse. Hesse based the book on historical knowledge and legend, adding his own ideas about how it might have happened. If you didn't read it in high school (or even if you did), we suggest picking it up.

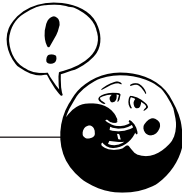
Man Becomes Buddha

Siddhartha searched for six years. He tried being a wandering ascetic, and nearly starved himself to death in a desperate attempt to apprehend truth. He followed several different religions, mastered them, and moved on. Eventually he decided asceticism wasn't the answer, and he embraced the path of moderation. Still, he was dissatisfied.



Zen-Speak

Karma (also called *kamma*) is a Sanskrit term for the universal law of cause and effect. Everything you do will be balanced by an effect, either in this life or the next. Karma isn't punishment for bad behavior or reward for good behavior. In Buddhism, there is no one to punish or reward you. Instead, karma gives you the power to create and determine your own destiny through your actions.



Zen-Speak

Dharma means the teachings of the Buddha. It has also come to be known as a word for the truth about all existence, as realized by those who attain enlightenment. This is, of course, what the Buddha was pointing to, through his teachings.

Then one day, Siddhartha sat under a bodhi tree (a fig tree), meditating. He vowed that he would not arise until he had apprehended the truth of existence and the nature of the unborn mind. All night he sat. According to the story, during the first half of the night, Siddhartha realized how *karma*, or the universal law of cause and effect, functions. During the second half of the night, he recognized the great unity of all things, the nature of suffering, and how to end suffering. By dawn, he had achieved nirvana. He was enlightened. He was a Buddha.

Transmission of Dharma

Of course, life doesn't end after enlightenment. Siddhartha was only in his 30s when he attained nirvana. For about 40 more years, he traveled around, teaching the truth he had discovered, something Buddhists refer to as *dharma*. This truth was organized into certain principles, which we will explain later in this chapter (see the following sections on the Three Treasures, the Four Noble Truths, and the Eightfold Path). One of the effects of the Buddha's enlightenment was a deep compassion for all living things and the wish for all to recognize their own Buddha nature. These feelings compelled him to spend his life helping others to achieve enlightenment.

When the Buddha died (supposedly from eating poisoned food), he told his followers that they should consider the dharma their teacher. From that point on, the principles of Buddhism have been passed from teacher to student throughout history and all over the world. Let's look at them.

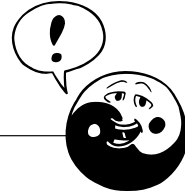
Counting Coup

The principles of Buddhism are conveniently grouped into various categories, each named in part according to the number of principles it includes. Don't worry. This isn't like math. It's more like good advice in little parcels.

Three Treasures

In Buddhism, the three treasures are the three things in which every Buddhist can take refuge and find relief. They are ...

- The Buddha himself and the notion that everyone has Buddha nature.
- The Buddha's teachings, or dharma, and the recognition that the teachings reflect ultimate truth.
- The Buddhist community, or *sangha*, which can mean, on a small scale, the people with whom you practice meditation and share like-mindedness, and on a larger scale, all sentient beings, which are all unique yet all one, as waves in an ocean are all part of the ocean.



Zen-Speak

Sangha is the community, either of Buddhists or other like-minded individuals, who practice meditating together, or on a wider scale, of all sentient beings, who are essentially one.

Four Noble Truths

The four noble truths are the heart of the dharma. They cover the primary problem humans encounter, why they encounter it, and how to overcome it. We'll talk about them in more detail later, as they are relevant. Here, we'll just sketch them out for you.

- The first noble truth is that living means experiencing *dukkha*. Dukkha is the Sanskrit word for discontent, dissatisfaction, suffering, and fear, whether from something tangible or something we can't quite put a finger on. It is the condition of human existence, the feeling that something just isn't right. Sometimes the *something* is obvious. We get hurt, physically or emotionally. We lose something we love, a person or a possession, a job or a house. Other times, we simply feel a deep dissatisfaction. Why aren't I happy? Why aren't I ever satisfied with what I have? Why aren't I like other people? What is missing in my life? What's wrong with me? That's dukkha. If you're human, you know what we mean.
- The second noble truth tells us why we have dukkha. Suffering is caused by desire. Desire is wanting something you don't have, wishing

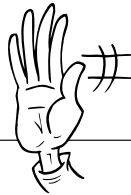


Zen-Speak

Dukkha is the word for suffering or, more generally, that deep feeling of discomfort, dissatisfaction, restlessness, unfulfilled desire, and want that so often characterizes human existence.

something were some way it isn't, or being otherwise generally dissatisfied with the way things are, in the belief that things would be better, you would be happier, life would be sweeter if only this were the case, if only that would happen, if only something were different than the way it is now.

- The third noble truth says we can eliminate suffering. How? By eliminating desire. If you remove the cause, the effect will stop. That doesn't mean you give up living, working, having relationships, feeling compassion and joy, appreciating life. It just means you give up that futile grasping, painful longing, that feeling that you have to have something you don't have. You already have everything you need.
- Easier said than done, you might say! Just give up desire? The fourth noble truth tells you how: The way to eliminating desire is by adhering to the Eightfold Path. These eight steps (see the following section, "The Eightfold Path") to living the Middle Way, as the Buddha suggested, help to put you on the path to living that will ease your desires and thereby ease your suffering, bringing more joy into your life. In Buddhism, enlightenment is the culmination of practice, but we'll talk about that later.



One Hand Clapping

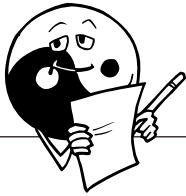
Another set of Buddhist precepts are the 16 Bodhisattva Precepts. These are precepts the long-practicing Zen practitioner formally commits to in an official ceremony. They embody the spirit and values of Buddhism. The precepts are: 1) be one with the Buddha; 2) be one with the dharma; 3) be one with the sangha; 4) don't do evil; 5) do good; 6) do good for others; 7) don't kill; 8) don't steal; 9) don't misuse sex; 10) don't lie; 11) don't become intoxicated; 12) don't put other people down; 13) don't consider yourself above anyone or blame anyone; 14) don't be stingy; 15) don't become angry; 16) don't put down the Buddha, the dharma, or the sangha.

The Eightfold Path

The Eightfold Path is the substance of the fourth noble truth, and it consists of guidelines for purposeful living that will help pave the way to the release from suffering.

These are not exactly rules or commandments, but a framework for living that will make life easier and more conducive to the elimination of suffering.

- **Right understanding** means recognizing that life is impermanent, suffering is linked to desire, and desire is linked to the false notion that we are lacking something. Right understanding has also been described as recognizing the truth of karma and the unity of all beings.
- **Right thought** means thinking kindly and refusing to engage in cruel, mean, covetous, or otherwise nasty thoughts. What you think is what you are.
- **Right speech** means refusing to lie, talk meanly, gossip, command everyone's attention, or inflame people. According to Buddhism, right speech should be wise, kind, and minimal. Talk when necessary, but don't be a chatterbox. (Those of us who can't help being chatterboxes are working on cultivating the power of silence!)
- **Right action** generally means following the Five Precepts, or Buddhist morals. These are nonviolence or refusal to kill purposefully; refusal to steal, which covers shoplifting, plagiarizing, even stealing attention away from someone; control of the senses and appetites (from overeating to lust); talking sincerely and honestly; and refusal to alter the mind with intoxicants. That last precept doesn't mean you can't enjoy a nice glass of wine with your meal. It just means stopping short of getting schnockered.
- **Right livelihood** is an interesting one. It means choosing an occupation that is not harmful or unjust, but instead is honest, upright, and furthering of love and compassion in the world. The professions traditionally frowned upon by Buddhists as not being those of right livelihood include trade in weapons, people, sex, drugs, alcohol, or poison, and professions that involve killing, such as soldier, hunter, or even fisherman (you may have guessed by now that Buddhists are, traditionally, vegetarians in many countries, though not in all).
- **Right effort** means making a conscious attempt to cultivate positive qualities, thoughts, and actions in yourself, while also working to prevent or eliminate negative qualities, thoughts, and tendencies. You could call this self-discipline.
- **Right mindfulness** means working on being mindful all the time. Being mindful means being constantly aware of your feelings, your surroundings, what your own body is doing, what thoughts and ideas you are experiencing, and what is happening around you. According to Buddhism, everybody has a sixth sense (and it isn't an ability to see dead people). It is mind, or awareness. Zen mind is waking up and living rather than going through the motions as if you were asleep.
- **Right concentration** means working on achieving a one-pointed mind. If you are doing something, concentrate wholly on what you are doing. This isn't easy,



Nirvana Notes

Some people find it degrading, not in the spirit of Zen, or even idolatry to bow to images of the Buddha or other Buddhist figures. Actually, such supplication is meant to remind the practitioner that the self isn't important. It is like a litmus test for the ego. If your ego gets inflamed about bowing, it probably needs taming. Many Zen Buddhists go without bowing, however, and it certainly isn't a requirement.

but can be achieved through the discipline that comes from lots of meditation practice. The better your mind gets at totally immersing itself in what you are doing (no matter how mundane), the less you will be plagued by distractions, desires, and fragmentation, and the more fulfilling your daily existence will become.

There are more numbered lists, enumerated differently here and there, and variously emphasized by different Buddhist traditions. You can always read more about them elsewhere (check out the resource list in Appendix A, "Further Reading"). We think that's enough morality for now.

From India to China to Japan

With some idea of the substance of Buddhist philosophy, let's look at how Buddhism spread around the world. The Buddha lived in India, where the dominant religion is now Hinduism. How did Buddhism get to Asia? Through the effort of one man named Bodhidharma.

Bodhidharma Goes to China

How did Buddhism jump from India to China? Bodhidharma is a much-legendized figure who traveled to China to spread the word of Buddhism. He is usually represented as a scowling figure with a long, hooked nose and was known as the blue-eyed demon because his Aryan appearance and blue eyes were an oddity in China.

Soon after arriving in China, Bodhidharma met with Emperor Wu of Liang, whom he didn't impress. The emperor wanted to know what spiritual benefit he would gain from all the Buddhist temples he had built.

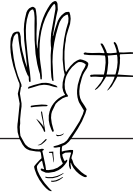
"None," answered the strange-looking man.

"None? Then what have I done it all for?" asked the emperor. "What is the point?"

"To lose yourself," said Bodhidharma. The emperor didn't like this answer. (Emperors generally aren't good at letting go of their egos.) He sent Bodhidharma away.

Undeterred, Bodhidharma traveled to a monastery where, the story goes, he sat facing the wall of a cave and meditated for nine years. Another detail that we imagine is probably the stuff of legend rather than reality is that Bodhidharma cut off his

eyelids so he would stay awake during meditation. In Soto Zen, meditators still face a wall, as such a view provides minimal distraction.



One Hand Clapping

One Zen story, or koan, tells of a man hanging from a tree branch by his teeth, dangling over the edge of a cliff. Someone comes to him and says, "Why did Bodhidharma travel from India to China?" If the man refuses to answer, he will fall. If he answers, he will fall to his death. What should he do? The answer to this koan (and all koans) lies beyond logic and must be perceived on a deeper level. In Jack Kerouac's novel *Dharma Bums*, the main character, Ray Smith, asks this question of a cook in a restaurant, who replies, "I don't care." The characters agreed that this was the "perfect answer." (That's Zen!)

Bodhidharma was what is known as the first patriarch of Buddhism. He chose a successor, who chose a successor, and so on, to transmit the dharma. Buddhism had only six patriarchs.

The Sixth Patriarch

The sixth patriarch, Hui-neng (called E'no in Japan), was the most influential individual on Buddhism's manifestation in China. He was an uneducated woodcutter who demonstrated a profound propensity for enlightenment. The story goes that the other, more educated, priests didn't appreciate his being chosen as sixth patriarch over them, even though he clearly demonstrated superior understanding, according to the fifth patriarch. Hui-neng's life in danger, he fled, and didn't choose a successor. (Politics are everywhere, aren't they?)

Buddhism didn't stay just as it was in India after becoming transplanted in China. Through the centuries, Buddhism mingled with China's *Taoism*,



Zen-Speak

Taoism is a Chinese philosophy and religious system emphasizing effortless action, simplicity, mindfulness, and following the Tao (sometimes translated as the Way). Taoism's beginnings are attributed to historical figures Lao tzu, who wrote the *Tao Te Ching*, and Chuang tzu, who wrote the *Chuang tzu*. Both texts explore and explain Taoism, and were written around the third or fourth century B.C.E.

which brought a relatively complex and esoteric discipline (Buddhism) into ordinary life. Taoism emphasizes escaping desire through effortless action, simplicity, and

mindfulness in daily life, all qualities important to Zen. As in any religion, however, many disagreed about the details, and Buddhism began to split into a number of different sects.



Zen-Speak

Soto (Ts'ao-tung in Chinese, brought to Japan by Zen master Dogen) and **Rinzai** (Lin-chi in Chinese, brought to Japan by Zen master Eisai) are the two prominent sects of Zen Buddhism. Soto emphasizes silent sitting meditation, while Rinzai emphasizes the practice of koans. Koan meditation isn't unheard of in Soto Zen, however, and in Rinzai, silent sitting meditation is also part of practice.

One of these sects was called Ch'an (the Chinese word for Zen). When communism and other political forces began to dissipate the strength of Buddhism in China, Ch'an had already spread to Japan (where it is called Zen), Vietnam (where it is called Thien), and Korea (where it is called Son). In all these places and in all its various cultural manifestations, Zen has become firmly entrenched and still flourishes today.

Soto and Rinzai

In the West, two different schools of Zen Buddhism have a wide following: *Soto* and *Rinzai*. These two schools had their beginnings in ninth-century China, where they were known as Lin-chi (Rinzai is the Japanese term) and Ts'ao-tung (Soto is the Japanese term). Lin-chi was brought to Japan by Eisai and Ts'ao-tung by Dogen during the twelfth or thirteenth century.

Soto Zen emphasizes silent sitting, while Rinzai is more likely to emphasize the meditation on *koans*, illogical scenarios and questions meant to push the mind closer to enlightenment. Some describe Soto as quieter, softer, and more solitary, and Rinzai as louder, more aggressive, and more interactive. However, exceptions exist to every rule and these distinctions don't always apply.



Zen-Speak

Koans are illogical scenarios or questions meant to be considered until the mind makes a leap past logic to understand the koan at a higher level. The most famous koan in the West is the *one hand clapping* koan: You can hear the sound of two hands when they clap together. What is the sound of one hand clapping?

From China to the World

Ch'an's spread to Japan changed it further, adding a formal element characteristic of the Japanese people. Rituals, observances, and refinement became part of the Zen tradition, and so did (paradoxically) the total break from ritual and observance.

Japan also contributed to the Zen approach to art, which involves a more direct, pure expression of

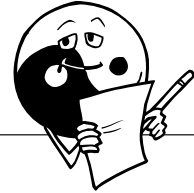
experience free from metaphor, figurative language, technique, and artifice. Zen calligraphy, poetry, the tea ceremony, and other artistic endeavors reached their fruition in Japan, and many artists still embrace Zen as integral to the practice of their art (see Chapter 23, “The Zen Athlete”).

Today, Buddhism is hardly practiced in the land of its origin, where Hinduism is the religion of choice. Luckily, it not only enjoys a strong and healthy following in south-east Asia, but also has become a popular and important practice for many Westerners.

From Master to Master

In the Zen tradition, Zen can't be learned from a book, and the dharma, or Buddha's teachings, weren't even written down for centuries after the Buddha was dead. Dharma was transmitted from master to master, and taught by master to student. While Zen is essentially something each student must discover internally, many believe that without the guidance of a teacher, such efforts will be fruitless. Of course, the Buddha didn't have a teacher. Or, one might say life was his teacher.

Today, many embrace the Zen teacher/Zen student relationship, and others prefer to forge ahead without it. While a Zen teacher cannot hand you enlightenment, he or she can help direct your path.



Nirvana Notes

Finding a Zen teacher can be difficult if you don't live in a big city. You can still organize a group to practice sitting meditation together. Put an ad in the paper or get a group of friends together and meet once a week (or more or less often) for meditation. A teacher may find you.

Finger Pointing at the Moon

Imagine truth is the moon, and you are watching the moon's reflection in a stream. The water is moving, bubbling, flowing over rocks, murky in some places, and the moon's reflection is confused, distorted, and nothing like the actual moon in appearance.

This is like a mind desperately following every thought, emotion, and feeling. When the water becomes perfectly still, when thoughts and emotions are no longer roiling the river of your mind, the moon's reflection looks just like the moon. The truth might be so clear, you might even think to look up at the actual moon. Oh! There it is! Why was I looking down into the water, anyway?

A teacher cannot make a stream stop flowing, but a teacher can help you find the techniques to still the water. When the water is still, you can better understand that ultimately, the teacher is pointing to the moon. The teacher's pointing finger isn't the moon, so don't look at the pointing figure (in other words, don't look to your teacher to hand you the answers). Look where the finger is pointing.

Triggering Enlightenment

Throughout Zen history are many stories about teachers triggering enlightenment in their students. This only happens when the student is ready, of course. The story goes that Hui-neng, the sixth patriarch, attained enlightenment upon hearing his teacher (the fifth patriarch) recite the *Diamond Sutra*.

The following Zen story is an example from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, transcribed by Nyogen Zensaki and Paul Reps, Boston: (Tuttle Publishing, 1957):



Zen-Speak

The **Diamond Sutra** is one of the teachings of the Buddha (written down many years after the words were actually spoken), and expounds upon the diamond-hard edge of emptiness that can finally cut through delusion, leading to enlightenment. In many Zen communities, the *Diamond Sutra* and other sutras such as the *Heart Sutra* and the *Platform Sutra*, are recited, chanted, and/or studied and contemplated.

Daiju visited the master Baso in China. Baso asked: "What do you seek?"

"Enlightenment," replied Daiju.

"You have your own treasure house. Why do you search outside?" Baso asked.

Daiju inquired: "Where is my treasure house?"

Baso answered: "What you are asking is your treasure house."

Daiju was enlightened! Ever after he urged his friends: "Open your own treasure house and use those treasures."

Just as often, however, enlightenment comes of its own accord, as in this second Zen story (from the same source as above). Remember our moon analogy? It is relevant here:

When the nun Chiyono studied Zen under Bukko of Engaku, she was unable to attain the fruits of meditation for a long time.

At last one moonlit night she was carrying water in an old pail bound with bamboo. The bamboo broke and the bottom fell out of the pail, and at that moment, Chiyono was set free!

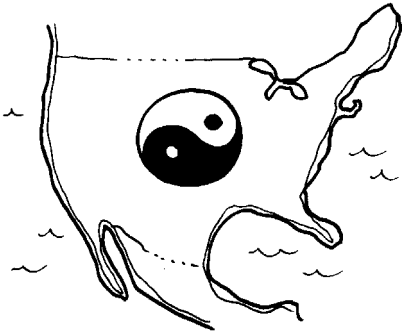
In commemoration, she wrote a poem:

In this way and that I tried to save the old pail
Since the bamboo strip was weakening and about to break
Until at last the bottom fell out.
No more water in the pail!
No more moon in the water!

Whether you choose to study Zen with a teacher, the real work of Zen is an internal process of “breaking and entering” the Zen mind within. Everyone has it, but it can be difficult to find. After you can access your Zen mind, you’ll be amazed at how obvious that great big moon really is.

The Least You Need to Know

- The Buddha was a man named Siddhartha Gautama, born of the warrior class in India in about 500 B.C.E.
- Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment after abandoning his privileged life and searching for truth for six years.
- Buddhism’s Four Noble Truths are that life is full of suffering, suffering is due to desires and attachments, suffering can be eliminated by eliminating desires and attachments, and the way to do it is by following the Eightfold Path.
- The Eightfold Path includes right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.
- Buddhism spread from India to China, where it developed into many sects, eventually spreading to Japan, Korea, Vietnam, and the United States.
- A Zen teacher can’t hand you enlightenment, but can point the way.



Zen in America

In This Chapter

- ▶ Why is Zen so “cool”?
- ▶ The evolution of Zen in America
- ▶ Who’s who in American Zen
- ▶ Zen in pop culture: feminism, psychology, and the entertainment industry
- ▶ What about the Buddhism part?

Zen is hot. It’s hip. It’s cutting edge. It’s the wave of the future. And it’s totally cool. It is a term so frequently used in popular culture that it has become part of the vocabulary of the masses: “That movie was so Zen.” “You’re looking very Zen-ish today.” “What a Zen thing to say!” “Last night at the pool table, I was in the Zen zone. I couldn’t miss a shot!”

When did an ancient Eastern religion become so fashionable, and why are Americans so enthralled with the Zen concept? In 1893, Soyen Shaku appeared at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and introduced Zen to America, but it wasn’t until the late 1940s, with the publication of the writings of D. T. Suzuki (whom Shaku helped bring to America), that Americans caught the Zen fever.

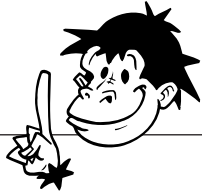
Since that time, Zen has enjoyed a unique and utterly Western evolution in America, making American Zen its very own brand of Zen, just as Zen has enjoyed unique manifestations in Japan, Korea, and Vietnam.

Why do Americans love Zen so much? Lots of reasons. Zen is particularly suited to the temperaments, lifestyles, philosophies, and inclinations of Americans. Only in

America would Zen become cool, where being different, enigmatic, rebellious, and just a little bit off the beaten track has long been considered cool.

Why We Love Zen

Americans have an interesting relationship with religion. Some of us embrace it, some of us reject it, and some of us ignore it. Church and state are supposed to be separate, but religion creeps into politics all the time. In this country, people are free to practice any religion they like and free to be criticized for it, too.



Monkey Mind!

It is easy to mistake popular culture Zen for real Zen. Zen isn't about wearing black and saying enigmatic things, spouting spiritual wisdom, or suddenly having a run of luck on the basketball court. Zen isn't slick or dramatic or showy. It is ordinary, going through your everyday life without fanfare, fully awake, aware, and absorbed in whatever you do. Don't miss the essence.

In a climate that can be a little like a religious free-for-all, people are looking for something different, something unique and personal that makes sense. Zen isn't bound by rules, punishments, "shoulds," or any external parental figure, making it the perfect "religion" for people who aren't interested in religion in the classic Western sense.

On the other hand, Zen techniques work well in conjunction with any other religion. Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Unitarians, Muslims, Wiccans, anyone can practice sitting and listening for the true nature of the self. Anyone can practice Zen living for a more effective and meaningful life.

Furthermore, Americans love anything with a foreign flavor. A face cream from France, a kimono-inspired evening dress, Italian leather shoes, German beer, tae kwon do lessons for the kids? We love 'em! Zen seems practically tailor-made for America, but that is partially because America has tailor-made Zen to suit itself.

Zen Is Do-It-Yourself

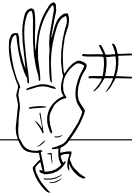
We are a pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps kind of country. Traditional American values include self-reliance, independence, gumption, overachievement, being a self-starter. We love self-help books, do-it-yourself projects, build-it-from-nothing businesses. Maybe it's that pioneer spirit.

Zen is the original self-starting spiritual practice because you don't pray to anyone, you don't need anyone to bless you or forgive you, you don't follow any particular text, and you don't even need any equipment. You have everything you need right there in your own head, and you start by sitting.

Sitting is easy. You can do that yourself. It isn't a technique. It's just sitting.

Then you start letting go. It's a lot more work to hold on to a heavy load than to put it down. Zen helps you put down the load, by clearing your mind out, making it a better place through which to perceive truth. You do it yourself, even if you have a teacher to help guide you. The work is up to you. (Zen is full of paradoxes, and here's another one: The work of Zen is in understanding how to stop working so hard.)

Zen also values the simple life: Do your daily work without making a big deal of it, dreading it, or disliking it. Let your daily work bring you joy. Don't overconsume, but use only what you need. Overconsumption fuels desires, which (as we've mentioned) cause suffering. Live close to the earth and marvel in its beauty. The simplicity movement and the environmental movement in this country are nicely compatible with these values.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of the Chinese Zen master Hyakujo, who worked every day in the gardens and on the grounds. When he was in his 80s, his students couldn't bear to watch him laboring so they hid his tools. When he was unable to find them, Hyakujo ceased eating that day, and the next and the next. Finally, the students returned the tools, and Hyakujo went back to work ... and to his food. That evening, he said to his students only this: "No work, no food."

Cowboy-Style Religion

There is something a little bit rebellious about Zen that Americans also seem to respond to. We like the idea of the wandering Zen master, living each day as it comes, sleeping under the stars, absorbed in silent contemplation, of few words but enigmatically wise and suddenly quite unexpectedly humorous.

The romanticized cowboy, with little attachment to worldly possessions and a silent, stoic self-possession and wry wit holds a similar fascination for Americans. Zen offers the secret to many of these same qualities.

In some ways, cowboys are also the American version of the "everyman" ("every-person"). While in Asia Zen is primarily the business of monks and nuns, in America Zen is for the average guy or gal on the street. Zen communities of regular people



Monkey Mind!

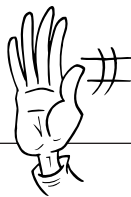
Some books on Zen can make you feel like Zen is only for people who understand it. Forget that! Trying to understand is not Zen. Shunryu Suzuki may have said it best (in *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*): "There is no need to remember what I say; there is no need to understand what I say. You understand; you have full understanding within yourself. There is no problem."

getting together to meditate outside the confines of a monastery or other rigorously organized system are a common manifestation in America. Zen is for anyone. We like that.

Illogical Logic

Those among us who fancy ourselves intellectuals are particularly challenged by Zen's illogical brand of logic. Its cryptic koans and baffling stories can be sometimes nothing short of hilarious, sometimes irresistibly engaging, sometimes both. Unpuzzling Zen is a challenge and a joy, an approach to life that says, "Hey, don't take yourself so seriously—after all, what is 'self'?"

Although some people find Zen anti-intellectual, it is actually a system meant to move through the intellect and past it, into a sort of post-intellectual understanding of truth, free from ego, pretension, and one-upmanship. Approaching Zen intellectually is one way to approach it (although not the only way). Zen challenges and ultimately defies the intellect in a surprising and deeply satisfactory way.



One Hand Clapping

Zuigan called out to himself every day: "Master."
Then he answered himself: "Yes, sir."
And after that he added: "Become sober."
Again he answered: "Yes, sir."
"And after that," he continued, "do not be deceived by others."
"Yes sir; yes, sir," he answered.

This koan from the collection of koans called *The Gateless Gate* plays with the idea of the ego and the self. Consider in meditation whether the monk, in having such conversations with himself, was deluded, or really on to something.

This Is Living!

Another attraction of Zen is its approach to life: Live it! Our culture is full of sayings and epigrams to express this notion: Seize the day, live in the moment, wake up and smell the coffee, don't forget to smell the flowers, just do it! If we can live in a way that helps us to live more vibrantly, to be more present in each present moment, we want to know all about it.

Another koan from *The Gateless Gate* expresses this concept:

A monk told Joshu: "I have just entered the monastery. Please teach me."

Joshu asked: "Have you eaten your rice porridge?"

The monk replied: "I have eaten."

Joshu said: "Then you had better wash your bowl."

At that moment, the monk was enlightened.

Finding beauty in the ordinary, and the ordinary in beauty, is Zen living in action. Experience each moment mindfully (fully and with your full mind), without attachment, striving, grasping, or involvement, but with fully involved appreciation for the essence of the moment. How lovely, to wash the dishes. How spectacular, to drive down the highway. How exquisite, simply to sit and be yourself.

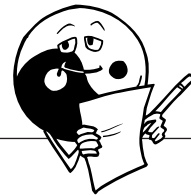
Desperately Seeking Enlightenment

Zen has come to America in waves, through the work of several notable people whose various approaches to Zen have caught on and significantly influenced our culture's notions about and practice of Zen. Although the last 50 years have seen many, many influential and fascinating Zen masters, teachers, and students, we'll mention just a few of the most well-known.

D. T. Suzuki

Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki lived from 1870 to 1966 and is usually credited with enlightening America to the existence of Zen. In his many writings, he emphasized and expounded upon the meaning of and path to enlightenment.

Living in America and married to an American woman, D. T. Suzuki had a unique perspective



Nirvana Notes

Zen meditation isn't difficult, but posture is important. You can't do zazen lying down or slumping over. Holding the body with spine straight, head squarely above the shoulders, and legs crossed puts you in control of your body, rather than the other way around. You are already like the Buddha if you just sit in this position. For more on how to meditate, see Chapter 9, "Learning to Meditate."

from which he could integrate two cultures and find a way to live a Zen-like life in a country with little perception of the ways of Zen. He made it his life's work to bring modes of Eastern thought to the West, as well as suggest ways Western thought might be beneficial to the East, and eventually, to transcend all distinctions and divisions between the two.



Nirvana Notes

A familiar but very Zen-like concept is to walk a mile in another person's shoes. Whenever you catch yourself making "us and them" distinctions (kids today are so ..., my parents always ..., my boss can never ...), spend a moment "being" the other person. Find yourself in him or her. It may change your perspective and help you to find tolerance, even compassion, toward someone you thought you didn't understand.

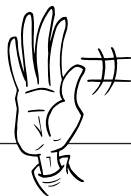
Suzuki was concerned with becoming a world citizen. He made Zen accessible to everyone, no matter their country, beliefs, or perceptions.

Shunryu Suzuki

People interested in Zen who have only read one book on the subject often read *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki, a practitioner of Soto Zen who lived from 1905 to 1971 and who emphasized living life with a "beginner's mind," as if everything was new and for the first time.

Suzuki's little book, which expounds upon right practice, right attitude, and right understanding, has become a guiding light for many American practitioners of Zen. It explains how to do zazen, and it also talks you through what it means to have a "Zen mind."

Though only in this country for the last 12 years of his life, Shunryu Suzuki made a profound impact on the American practice of Soto Zen.



One Hand Clapping

"So to be a human is to be a Buddha. Buddha nature is just another name for human nature, our true human nature. Thus even though you do not do anything, you are actually doing something. You are expressing yourself. You are expressing your true nature. Your eyes will express; your voice will express; your demeanor will express. The most important thing is to express your true nature in the simplest, most adequate way and to appreciate it in the smallest existence."

—From *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, by Shunryu Suzuki

R. H. Blyth

While many Japanese, Tibetan, Korean, and Vietnamese Zen masters have come to the West, R. H. Blyth was an Englishman who went to the East. While remaining staunchly Christian and Western, Blyth lived in Japan and studied Zen and Japanese literature. He wrote many works on Japanese literature and on haiku, and his writings influenced many Americans, particularly writers and poets, to study and live Zen.

Because Blyth was not a Buddhist and because he was a Westerner, many Westerners can easily relate to the way he approaches and interprets Zen thought, Zen living, and Zen literature.

Dharma Bums

In the 1960s, the Beat Generation had no more vocal nor representative leader than writer Jack Kerouac. Kerouac insisted the Beat Generation was a religious generation, and he and many of his wandering artistic fellows embraced Buddhism as the path to living a fully realized life. While Kerouac described himself to the media as a “strange solitary crazy Catholic mystic,” many of his novels (which are all autobiographical with names changed) describe his relationship with Buddhist philosophy and his wrestling with Zen.

One of his novels, *Dharma Bums*, tells the story of wandering man named Ray Smith, in search of truth, in the company of other wanderers, including the “Zen Lunatic” and scholar of Asian literature and philosophy, Japhy Ryder (who, it is said, is actually the poet Gary Snyder). In a typical Zen conversation, Japhy and the narrator, Ray, have it out:

“And whom am I?”

“I dunno, maybe you’re a Goat.”

“Goat?”

“Maybe you’re Mudface.”

“Who’s Mudface?”

“Mudface is the mud in your goatface. What would you say if someone was asked the question, ‘Does a dog have the Buddha nature?’ and said ‘Woof!’”

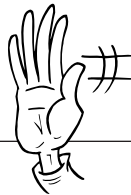
“I’d say that was a lot of silly Zen Buddhism It’s mean,” I complained. “All those Zen Masters throwing young kids in the mud because they can’t answer their silly word questions.”

“That’s because they want them to realize mud is better than words, boy.”

Perhaps more than his books, Jack Kerouac’s life, and the lives of the other members of the Beat Generation, brought the concept of Buddhism in general and Zen in particular into the public consciousness. People wanted to be wandering dharma bums.

They wanted to be like Kerouac, or at least like the characters in his books. So they wanted to know about Zen.

Of course, Zen as practiced by the Beat Generation was a lot different than Zen as practiced in Japan (or anywhere else), and much different than Zen as it is currently practiced in America. In the Beat Generation version of Zen, women existed on the fringes, and art, poetry, intense philosophical discussions, and alcoholic binges accompanied equally intense periods of solitude, meditation, and internal searching. The Beats had a handle on male ecstasy, but hardly practiced the Middle Way. Zen was redefined yet again for the 1960s, in an irreverent and particularly American style that has since evolved significantly. (Today in America, for example, women are regarded as equal to men in the practice of Zen and many women are Zen teachers and Zen masters.)



One Hand Clapping

“Everything is possible. I am God, I am Buddha, I am imperfect Ray Smith, all at the same time, I am empty space, I am all things. I have all the time in the world from life to life to do what is to do, to do what is done, to do the timeless doing, infinitely perfect within, why cry, why worry, perfect like mind essence and the minds of banana peels’ I added, laughing”

—From *Dharma Bums*, by Jack Kerouac

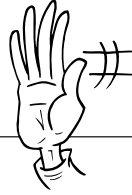
Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance

Mention the word *Zen* in a crowded room, and someone inevitably will chime in about having read (or wanting to read) Robert Pirsig’s book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. Even though this book begins with a disclaimer that “it should in no way be associated with that great body of factual information relating to orthodox Zen Buddhist practice,” it was for many the single most significant exposure to anything with the word *Zen* in it.

Pirsig intertwines Zen concepts with psychology as he relates his autobiographical journey on motorcycle with his young son, from Minnesota to San Francisco. The journey becomes a metaphor for a spiritual journey, and Pirsig explores dualism, unity, fear, desire, attachment, and insanity along the way. Pirsig’s brand of Zen (like

Kerouac's) may not sound much like anything coming out of Japan. It is uniquely American, and many would argue, not Zen at all.

What may be the most significant and influential aspect of Pirsig's book is his incorporation of psychology into Zen. Today in America, many practicing Zen teachers are also psychologists, and some have students as patients and patients as students. Many people in America approach Zen in an attempt to address their own personal psychological state, rather than their spiritual state or religious needs. (We would argue these are all intertwined.)



One Hand Clapping

"The craftsman isn't ever following a single line of instruction. He's making decisions as he goes along. For that reason, he'll be absorbed and attentive to what he's doing even though he doesn't deliberately contrive this. His motions and the machine are in a kind of harmony. He isn't following any set of written instructions because the nature of the material at hand determines his thoughts and motions, which simultaneously change the nature of the material at hand. The material and his thoughts are changing together in a progression of changes until his mind's at rest at the same time the material's right."

—From *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig

Zen in Pop Culture

Zen is everywhere, or at least its echoes are everywhere, from blockbuster movies such as *The Matrix* and *Fight Club* that include references to Zen ideas, to Zen-inspired cookbooks to Zen gardening kits and "Zen fountains" available at the local mall. Put the word *Zen* on it, and it sells. Talk about losing the self, becoming one with the universe, subverting the dominant paradigm, waking up from the sleep of the masses, or perceiving the ultimate unity and diversity of all things, and our ears prick up.

Zen's marriage with psychology in America has also contributed to the awareness of Zen in pop culture. Self-help and pop psychology books abound, ranging from those that borrow relevant Zen concepts here and there to those that blatantly and purposefully embrace traditional Zen as key to psychological wellness. In his introduction to his book *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart, A Buddhist Perspective on Wholeness: Lessons from Meditation and Psychotherapy* (Broadway Books, 1998), Mark Epstein, M.D., a practicing psychiatrist, writes:



Nirvana Notes

The more you learn about and contemplate Zen, the more you will see its seeds everywhere around you, not only in popular culture but in the comments and conversations of people around you. Awakening to Zen as it rises and grows in your life and in Western culture is a wonderful way to cultivate mindfulness. You may find yourself continually marveling: "There it is again! That is so Zen!"

"While psychotherapy has a long tradition of encouraging the development of a strong sense of self, Buddhism has an even longer tradition of teaching the value of collapsing that self Many of us come to therapy—and to psychological self-improvement in general—feeling that we are having trouble letting ourselves go: We are blocked creatively or emotionally, we have trouble falling asleep or having satisfying sex, or we suffer from feelings of isolation and alienation. Often we are afraid of falling apart, but the problem is that we have not learned how to give up control of ourselves Within psychotherapy lies the potential for an approach that is compatible with Buddhist understanding, one in which the therapist, like the Zen master, can aid in making space in the mind."

Zen makes sense to Americans in many ways, and what Americans like inevitably becomes a part of our popular culture.

A Woman's Place in the Zendo

Zen began to gain momentum in America just as the feminist movement was finding its voice. The timing was perfect for women to embrace Zen and remake it yet again. Today many women serve as heads of prominent Zen centers all over the United States. While women have studied Zen in Asia for centuries, they usually came either as students or as Buddhist nuns.

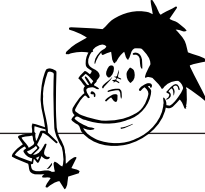
In America today, women are spiritual leaders of the highest magnitude in the American Zen scene. In her book *The Beginner's Guide to Zen Buddhism*, Jean Smith lists Jiyu Kennett Roshi (who died in 1996) as the first woman to found and become abbot of a Zen monastery, and also mentions many female senior heads of Zen centers, such as Blanche Hartman (Zen Center of San Francisco), Karen Sunna (Minnesota Zen Meditation Center); Katherine Thanas (Santa Cruz Zen Center); Yvonne Rand (Redwood Creek Zen Center in California); Charlotte Joko Beck (Zen Center of San Diego); Jisho Warner (Stone Creek Zendo in California); Pat Enkyo O'Hara (Village Zendo in New York); and Bonnie Myotai Treace (Zen Center of New York City). There are surely others, as well as many women authors of Zen books we love, such as *Stumbling Towards Enlightenment* by Geri Larkin, whose popular dharma talks at the Chicago Zen Buddhist Temple were put into a book after much demand.

Millennium Zen

Is Zen a fad? Will we tap the trend and move on? Or does Zen have a place in America in the twenty-first century?

We think the world is changing in an exciting way. We are becoming more global, more unified, more aware. Cultural, political, geographical, and economic differences, although still glaringly apparent, are also blurring here and there in interesting ways. People are embracing simplicity, environmental responsibility, stress management, and the quest for serenity as modes of living. People seem to be waking up.

In this climate, it is easy to understand D. T. Suzuki's idea about becoming world citizens. It is also easy to imagine Zen as an accepted way of living, even a way of living we might take for granted as obviously more worthwhile, more immediate, more productive, more real.



Monkey Mind!

Practicing Zen without practicing any religion is not only possible but common. While many American Zen teachers prefer their students to know the basics of Buddhism, they don't require adherence to Buddhist beliefs. Don't feel guilty if you are a "Zennist" rather than a "Buddhist." Your spiritual path may or may not lead you to more religious involvement later, but forcing yourself to change your beliefs isn't congruent with Zen thinking.

Has American Zen Lost Its Buddhism?

In her book *The Beginner's Guide to Zen Buddhism*, Jean Smith writes:

"Today many people start out as 'Zennists' rather than as Buddhists. They embrace some of the wonderful aspects of Zen—the aesthetic, especially the Japanese style, as well as the freedom, swashbuckling wit, and great spirit of humor and rebellion. They meditate and feel that their practice is complete without ever realizing that it rests on the larger foundation of the old teachings of Buddhism."

Yet Smith argues that the longer one practices Zen, the more he or she begins to perceive the meaning of the underlying tradition, based in the Four Noble Truths: life is suffering, suffering is caused by desire, suffering can be stopped by eliminating desire, and desire can be eliminated by practicing the Eightfold Path (see Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Zen Buddhism," for more information). Smith writes, "Today, the life and teachings of the Buddha—through the ecumenism that marks American Buddhism—have become integral to practice."

So the answer to whether American Zen has lost its Buddhism is a definite maybe. Plenty of people practice Zen in concert with other religions, or for its own sake, without embracing Buddhism per se. Many others have adopted Buddhism in any number of ways. Americans like to be unique, after all. We do it our way.

Zen Master: You?

We would guess you probably don't consider yourself a dharma bum, you don't have time to ride a motorcycle across the country, and you aren't even a member of your local Zen center. You may just be curious about Zen, or you may be looking with some seriousness for a way to improve your life. Can you really practice Zen? Is it too weird? Is it too far off the beaten track? It's one thing to tell someone he is looking Zen-like. It's quite another to embrace the lifestyle, isn't it?

It isn't. In Zen, there is no lifestyle to embrace except your own. You don't need to do anything. You don't need to change in any way. You don't need to become an expert on Japanese culture or even in zendo etiquette (although we'll tell you about that, in case you are interested). All you need to do is be, as if for the first time. Be, do, breathe, and live, right here, right now, as if each moment is a gift. Because it is, but not a gift from anyone else but you. Your life is your gift to yourself. Accept it graciously.

The Least You Need to Know

- Zen has been popular in America since the late 1940s, when D. T. Suzuki came to America and began to write about Zen for Westerners.
- Other Zen masters and aficionados have made Zen concepts popular and accessible to Westerners through the last five decades, including Shunryu Suzuki, R. H. Blyth, Jack Kerouac, and Robert Pirsig, the author of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*.
- Although every purported manifestation of Zen isn't necessarily true to the concepts of Zen, Zen ideas crop up everywhere in contemporary American culture, from comments and concepts in blockbuster movies and best-selling books to conversations at cocktail parties, church socials, and between friends.
- Feminism, psychology, and Zennism (the practice of Zen minus the practice of Buddhism) have all influenced American conceptions of Zen.
- While you don't need to be Buddhist or any particular religion to practice Zen, Zen can inform and enlighten any spiritual path.

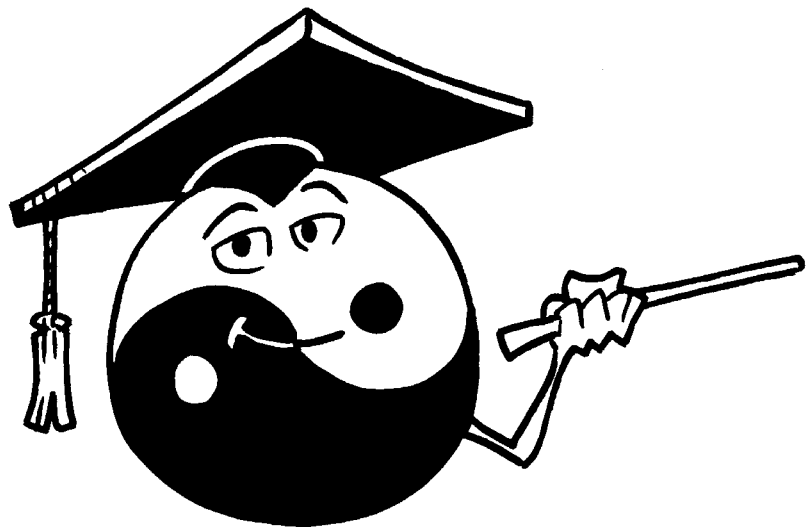
Part 2

Dharma 101

What is truth? According to Zen, truth is explained through dharma, or the teachings of the Buddha. But how does that help you, knowing stuff some guy in India may or may not have said thousands of years ago? In this section, we'll explain. The concepts the Buddha taught are simple, and relevant for anyone, in ancient India or contemporary America. We'll give it to you plain and simple: the Four Noble Truths, why you are sometimes unhappy, why life is difficult, and how you can wake up and start living in contentment.

Next we'll talk about what constitutes a Zen attitude and how it can transform your daily life, even in the wake of tragedy, into something that makes sense.

Is enlightenment the point of it all? We'll wind up this part by discussing the idea of enlightenment: what it is, and whether such a concept is relevant today, and/or relevant for you.





What Is Truth, and How Can I Get Some?

In This Chapter

- ▶ The truth, the whole truth, and nothing but
- ▶ Ousting your dukkha
- ▶ Techniques for escaping everyday suffering
- ▶ How to know if you are awake
- ▶ Is it in you?

Zen books and dharma talks often mention the word *truth*. Buddhism is all about apprehending truth rather than being seduced by illusion. In Zen we try to discover and embrace our true nature. We look for truth within. But what is truth? Will we know it when we see it?

The poet John Keats once wrote, in an overly quoted line, “Beauty is truth, truth beauty.” Is that it? How helpful is that when you can’t make your mortgage payment? One dictionary defines truth as “reality; actuality.” But what is reality? What we perceive with our senses? What we remember? What we read about in the newspaper?

We all know that sense impressions can be false, as can memory, and that something in print certainly isn’t necessarily true. So what is truth, and how can you get some in your life? According to Zen, truth can be found through living the dharma.

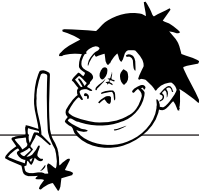
Dharma Is as Dharma Does ... or Doesn’t

In Chapter 2, “A Brief History of Zen Buddhism,” we defined dharma as the teachings of the Buddha, or the realizations of the Buddha upon his enlightenment. Why

should you take the word of some ancient guy thousands of years ago about what is true?

You don't need to take anybody's word for anything.

Here's the thing about truth: You already have it. We don't have it to give to you. Neither do your parents, your children, your teachers, your mentors, your best friends. Only you can find your truth. Truth isn't something inaccessible or unattainable, and it certainly doesn't exist "out there." It is inside you. All you have to do is find it.



Monkey Mind!

Sitting in meditation can get downright irritating, not to mention boring. It's easy to say, "Well then, if truth is within me, I don't need to meditate." But without control over your posture and regular, concentrated practice, you may never get to apprehend your inner self. You won't get the same results lying on your bed, lazily daydreaming (although that is nice to do sometimes, too).

Dharma, rather than telling you what is true, helps you to discover your own inner truth. So dharma isn't exactly a synonym for truth. It is more like that finger pointing to the moon that we mentioned in Chapter 2. It can guide you toward truth.

So, to begin your inner search for truth, you can use the dharma as a sort of guidebook, your Baedeker to truth. And what does the dharma tell you to do? Okay, pay attention, because this is deceptively simple:

Do.

Do? Do what? Do anything. But do it. Whatever you do, do it whole-heartedly, with full awareness. Even if you aren't doing something (although technically, you're always doing something, even if it is just *breathing* and *being*), do that wholeheartedly. This *doing* "nothing" is sometimes called not-doing by practitioners of Zen. It is doing by way of actively not doing.

We can give you all kinds of lists of rules, morals, or sensible attitudes to try to adopt, but that won't work. Zen doesn't demand that you do anything different than you are already doing (although meditation in zazen will be very helpful in living your Zen—more on that in Chapter 9, "Learning to Meditate"). It simply means that you do what you do, really do it, without dreading it, resenting it, or even getting a particular wild thrill from it. Do your duty. Do your job. Do your housework. Eat your meals. Play with your kids. Walk your dog. Make your bed. Love your partner. Do all those things with mindful awareness, and you will be living Zen.

I Can't Get No Satisfaction

So why is that so hard? Why is it so difficult to just do things? Because we, as humans, are full of dukkha. Remember dukkha, from Chapter 2, that very human feeling of dissatisfaction, discontent, restlessness, unhappiness, suffering? We've got it

and it makes simple, unadulterated *doing* exceptionally difficult. Dukkha isn't easy to ignore. It keeps hounding us, following us around like a stray dog or an old debt. You can't get rid of it by ignoring it, and you can't get rid of it by letting it get to you. So what can you do?

Dukkha It Out

Dukkha makes us misperceive reality. We get so caught up in our own heads that we have no idea what is really going on. For example, just imagine that you are in the grocery store picking up milk, bread, and a few other basics. As you stand in the cereal aisle trying to decide whether you'd rather feast on fruit rings or oat squares this week, someone behind you says, "Hey, get out of the way! You're blocking the aisle, you idiot!"

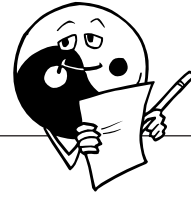
You turn to see an irate fellow grocery store customer bump your grocery cart roughly and storm past. "Oh!" you say to the person's back. "Sorry."

Suddenly, cereal is the last thing on your mind. The nerve of that person. So your cart was in the way. You didn't do it on purpose. He could have just said, "Excuse me." He didn't have to be so rude. And he certainly didn't have to call you an idiot.

Depending on who you are and how you tend to react to such things, you might start to get really, really angry, or really, really insecure. Or both. How dare someone treat you that way. Is there something wrong with you? Do you look like a victim? Do you look obnoxious? Do you look like the kind of person who blocks grocery aisles on purpose, just to get a chuckle out of inconveniencing people? Do you look like an idiot?

Or maybe there is something wrong with that person who called you an idiot. Why would someone talk to you that way? Obviously that guy is deeply disturbed, right? Obviously he has major personal problems. Anger issues. Communication issues. A severe lack of people skills. Probably a sociopath. Obviously that guy needs to be taught a lesson.

Maybe you live the scenario over and over, re-creating it and imagining the responses you could have made, different ways it could have happened, how you might have taught the person that lesson, reasserted your rights, made the person feel as bad as you feel now. It might spoil your whole day. It might even keep you up at night. What is wrong with that rude person? What is wrong with you? You are letting



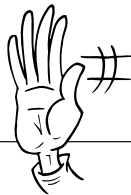
Nirvana Notes

Sometimes dukkha, or dissatisfaction and suffering, is easier to recognize if you name it. Whenever you recognize dukkha in your life—an unfulfilled desire that plagues you, an adamant opinion you hold but aren't sure why, anything that causes you pain or bad feelings—write it down. Keep a list. When you start seeing the same few items reappearing, you'll know where your dukkha is hiding.

dukkha get to you, that's what is wrong with you. If you fight with dukkha, or follow it, or engage it, or show it any sign at all that it bothers, disturbs, or upsets you, it will get worse. And as for the other guy, whatever is wrong with him isn't within your control.

But let's imagine the situation played out a different way. There you are, browsing for cereal, when you hear that same voice: "Hey, get out of the way! You're blocking the aisle, you idiot." Crash! goes the grocery cart against yours.

You turn. You see what has happened. You move your cart out of the way, then turn your full attention back to the cereal. The end.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of a man whose wife, on her deathbed, begged him never to go to another woman. A few months after her death, the man fell in love and became engaged. Immediately, he was haunted by his first wife's ghost. Every evening she chided him for disloyalty, describing gifts the man had given his fiancée, and repeating details from their conversations. She must be real! At last the man visited an old Zen master, who suggested, "Take a handful of soybeans and demand this ghost tell you how many beans you hold." That night, when confronted with the question, the ghost disappeared without answering, and never returned. The ghost didn't know the answer because the man didn't know the answer. She was an illusion! We, too, can become similarly convinced of the reality of things we have created in our minds, when they are only ghosts of our attachments, guilt, and desires.

What? Who could do that? Who could let such a rude person get by with behavior like that?

Someone practicing Zen living, that's who.

Here's the thing: In the first scenario, the rude person got away with it anyway. And you spent the next who-knows-how-many hours suffering because you couldn't let go of the incident. You imagined all sorts of things to explain the behavior of somebody else, something over which you have absolutely no control.

Let's say that again:

You have absolutely no control over the behavior of others.

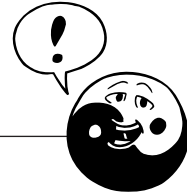
If you can't control it, let it go. Go back to your cereal. We suggest the oat squares.

Douse Your Dukkha with Dharma

Once again, we can see where Zen's difficulty lies. It is much easier to let something go than to let it hound you. On the other hand, it is perhaps ultimately difficult to let something go rather than let it hound you. What a paradox, and how very Zen.

Of course, many of our reactions, thoughts, feelings, and emotions are simply a matter of habit. Part of Zen is learning to break those old habits that aren't doing us any good. According to Buddhism, the dharma holds an important key to the elimination of suffering. If you have right understanding, dukkha won't bother you. You'll perceive it, but you won't let it drive you up the wall or make you miserable. "There it is," you'll say. "There is that human suffering thing."

You may even start to try to help others be free of it. Then you'll understand what it is to be a *bodhisattva*, someone who works to end the suffering and encourage the enlightenment of all sentient beings.



Zen-Speak

A **bodhisattva** devotes his or her life to ending the suffering and aiding the enlightenment of all sentient beings. In classical Buddhism, bodhisattvas such as Kuan Yin (Kannon in Japanese) are similar to gods and goddesses, appearing occasionally to humans in need. A Buddhist who makes a formal commitment to the life of a bodhisattva will vow to follow certain bodhisattva precepts in a formal ceremony.

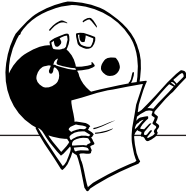
True or False: The Four Noble Truths

Remember the four noble truths we discussed briefly in Chapter 2? They really can help you to break the cycle of attaching yourself unproductively to things you can't control. They are called noble truths because they really do help point the way to a mode of existence that puts a lot more life in our living and a lot more truth in our perception. What more noble cause exists than helping others to be free from suffering? That's exactly what these principles do. Let's remember them:

To live means to experience suffering, discontent, disquiet, restlessness, and so on, and so on. Everything can't be perfect all the time. Bad things happen to everyone and nobody likes them, whether you are talking about a serious illness or a poorly cooked dinner. So you have to clean the house today instead of lying in the hammock reading a book. So you have to be alone because your marriage didn't work. So you hate going to work every morning. So you have to exchange information with

the person whose car you just hit. Nobody likes these things, and they make most people feel pretty bad. Being human means experiencing unpleasantness.

How you handle those “bad” things (*bad* being a relative term) is what causes your suffering, not the bad thing itself. Even pain can be handled in a way that will keep



Nirvana Notes

If you are in pain, think about what causes your suffering. Pain hurts, sure, but suffering comes from the associations we attach to pain: “Oh, this really hurts. How will I ever get through the day? Will my work suffer? I hope no one (or someone) notices. Does this mean I’ll die soon? Will I feel this way forever? How terrifying!” Such thoughts, rather than the pain itself, cause dukkha.

you from suffering. It isn’t easy, but it can be done. Attaching to “bad things,” trying to control them, or letting them control you—these are the attitudes that cause suffering.

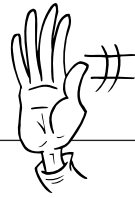
If you don’t attach to your feelings, they won’t hang around. Pain management techniques often advise people to enter and experience their pain, rather than try to distract themselves from it. Meeting the pain, entering the pain, experiencing the pain, and moving through it, that is the Zen way to handle pain. During meditation, if you concentrate on an itch without scratching it, you can feel the itch increase in intensity, peak, then fade away. So it is with all pain, physical, emotional, or spiritual. Don’t follow it, hate it, fight it, or try to pretend it isn’t there. Let it be, then let it go.

How do you let it go? By learning exactly and precisely how you, personally, can let any experience happen to you. It is different for everyone, and the Eightfold Path suggested by Buddhism contains only suggestions. The best way to learn who you are, deep down, and how you handle things is to get to know yourself better through meditation, or zazen.

Look inside yourself and just be with yourself. Spend time with yourself—the most interesting person in the room, and the only one you can know completely. Letting go of attachments to feelings, sensations, events, and people isn’t easy (and isn’t the same as denying the feelings themselves). With practice, consistency, perseverance, and the right techniques, you can do it. It isn’t easy to stop making life so hard, but you can do it.

When things get intense, when you feel stressed or sad or angry, you have ahead of you a challenge: Can you let this go? There are several ways. Let’s look at some specific techniques for keeping dukkha from getting in the way of your own personal apprehension of truth, and who you are.

None of these techniques are as easy as they sound, but this is a starting place. If you are unhappy, restless, and discontent right now, these are things you can do right now to stop suffering and start living.



One Hand Clapping

“When you need to slow down and come back to yourself, you do not need to rush home to your meditation cushion or to a meditation center in order to practice conscious breathing. You can breathe anywhere, just sitting on your chair at the office or sitting in your automobile. Even if you are at a shopping center filled with people or waiting in line at a bank, if you begin to feel depleted and need to return to yourself, you can practice conscious breathing and smiling just standing there.”

—From *Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life*, by Thich Nhat Hanh (Bantam Books, 1991)

Sit It Out

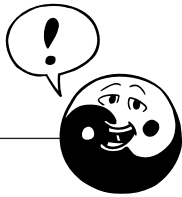
One great technique for diffusing your attachment to a particularly disturbing or distracting feeling or thought is to sit. Just sit. Don't sit to fume, sit to plot revenge, sit to wallow, or sit to run through your various to-do lists to see if you forgot anything. Just sit. Sit out the intense feeling. Sit quietly and watch it.

Imagine your distraction is enclosed in a bubble. Give the feeling a name: anger at _____, stress about _____, sadness because of _____, pain in my _____ (you fill in the blanks), or just plain anger, stress, sadness, loneliness, frustration, irritation, confusion. Watch it float around, imagine the feelings banging around inside it. Concentrate on your breath, and when the feeling seems to have played itself out, take a deep breath and poof! Imagine blowing it away.

Other thoughts and feelings will surely come up. Imagine them in bubbles, too. Watch them and name them. See them for what they are: just thoughts, just feelings, not necessarily reality or anything that defines who you are. Humans think and feel. It doesn't have to control you. Just sit and watch, and blow those bubbles away when you are done observing them.

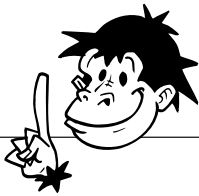
Walk It Off

If your feelings or thoughts are too overwhelming when you sit, walk them off. Walking meditation (called *kinhin* in Buddhist circles) is very similar to sitting



Zen-Speak

Kinhin is walking meditation. It can be practiced individually or, in the context of a zendo, in a group with everyone walking in a circle. Kinhin is often used in alternation with zazen during long periods of meditation. In kinhin, the mind does just what it does in zazen. It is only the body that does something different.



Monkey Mind!

When you feel stressed or disturbed, rather than trying to find the root of the problem, you might just decide to give it up. Let it go. Don't analyze it or figure it out. You don't even need to understand it. Imagine wrapping up the disturbance (even if you don't know what it is), and mailing it, stamped "return to sender." Then forget about it.

meditation, except you are in motion. Walking can help to dispel the power of a strong feeling by increasing circulation in the body so you notice your body more, and by changing the scenery so you are more likely to focus on your surroundings. When you become absorbed in the passing scenery and on the way your body is moving, your overwhelming stress or pain or anxiety can seem less crucial, immediate, and engaging.

Find Your Center

If you watch the television show *Ally McBeal* (Eve admits it; it is her favorite show), you might remember how eccentric attorney John Cage, upon hearing something disturbing, likes to "take a moment." Stopping mid-activity to find your center, regroup, remind yourself what is important, who you are, where you are, what you are doing, what you can and can't control, and what is really happening in the here and now can do wonders for a mind that is bubbling over like an overfilled pot of boiling soup.

At the center of your being is a quiet place where you exist as you, the true you, the real you unencumbered by distractions and suffering, you fulfilling your true nature. It helps to peek in there every once in a while to remind yourself. When life gets to be too much and you find yourself losing your sense of self, just take a moment and find your center. (If you can't find that center, spend some more time just sitting in zazen. You'll get to know exactly where it is.)

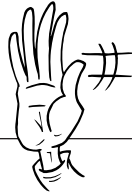
Be Insufferable

By insufferable, we don't mean make yourself such that others can't tolerate you. We mean make yourself such that you can tolerate anything. In other words, let yourself be impervious to suffering.

If you can recognize the unfulfilled desire in your suffering, if you can pinpoint it exactly, then you can refuse to acknowledge it. Here's the key: Don't refuse to acknowledge the situation. Refuse to acknowledge the suffering part.

For example: Your back hurts, and you wish it didn't. You bounced a check, and you wish you had more money. You haven't had a date in a long time, and you wish you could find someone you like. You don't like your job, and you wish you could be doing something more in line with your talents. What do you do with these feelings?

Acknowledge your pain. Face your financial situation. Cultivate a fulfilling relationship with yourself. Commit to your job, or commit to getting a different one. Don't let suffering get in the way of your true nature or any of the precious moments of your life. Be insufferable! You don't have time to be any other way.



One Hand Clapping

When humans experience stress, they also experience a chain reaction of reactive physical responses. Breath and pulse rates go up, the organ systems react by releasing stress hormones, the muscles tense, and the heart sends blood to the extremities in preparation for action. When stress is chronic, these symptoms—meant to be temporary—can result in insomnia, chronic pain, anxiety attacks, hyperactivity, the abuse of alcohol, drugs, or food, and eventually, disease states such as heart disease and high blood pressure, depression, even physical or psychological collapse. Is it really worth worrying about all those things you can't control?

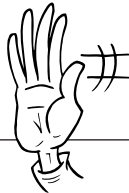
Start Where You Are

In Jon Kabat-Zinn's excellent book *Wherever You Go, There You Are* (Hyperion, 1994), Kabat-Zinn emphasizes mindfulness in the here and now. Where are you now? Not "where were you yesterday and what does that mean for today?" and not "where will you be tomorrow and how can you start getting there today?" but "where are you right now?" Kabat-Zinn writes:

"Like it or not, this moment is all we really have to work with. Yet we all too easily conduct our lives as if forgetting momentarily that we are here, where we already are, and that we are in what we are already in. In every moment, we find ourselves at the crossroad of here and now."

When you begin to feel overwhelmed, stop and look around you. Quite literally looking at where you are can help to jolt your mind back to the present moment. Where

am I? What is happening in my life at this moment? What am I going to do about it? Only by starting where you are can you ever get anywhere. Forget yesterday and forget tomorrow. You can't have yesterday back, and tomorrow never really comes. You only have now, and it is all you will ever have. Make it count.



One Hand Clapping

In his book *Full Catastrophe Living* (Delta, 1990), Jon Kabat-Zinn proposes an experiment. The next time you accidentally incur some pain, such as by hitting your thumb with a hammer or bumping your shin, immediately bring mindfulness to the sensations. He writes, "See if you can observe the explosion of sensations and the expanding shell of screamed epithets, groans, and violent body movements that ensue." In the second or two that follow, notice how mindfulness dramatically decreases the symptoms of suffering. You don't have time or awareness for suffering if you are busy noticing, and you may even detect a calm center from which you observe the pain, which becomes not your pain, necessarily, but just pain.

Waking Up Again ... and Again

If you know someone who is fully mindful all the time, we'd like to meet him or her. Most people catch glimpses of mindfulness here and there, little glimmers of enlightenment. Then we forget. We get caught up again, distracted, engaged, attached, and then we start suffering again, and then we remember: Oh yes! Be here, right now. Let the rest go.

That means waking up to your life and your true nature again and again and again, as many times as it takes. The better you become at foiling dukkha and living by the dharma, or the truth of your own nature, the more glimmers you'll get.

But, being human, chances are that waking up and paying attention without unproductive and futile attachment and desire will be a lifelong process of beginning again. The ocean throws its waves on the shore again and again. The tide comes in again and again. The sun rises and sets again and again. You sit down to meditate again and again. And you keep waking up each morning, each moment.

Let Zen be a process and a pattern for your life. Forgetting to pay attention doesn't mean you have failed. It just means you forgot to pay attention. It doesn't mean

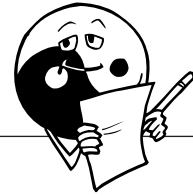
anything beyond exactly what it is. Wake up again and begin anew. It's what we all do, and it is all we do. It is the nature of being human.

How Loud Is Your Alarm Clock?

Of course, without the right alarm clock, you may not ever wake up. Only you can know how loud you need your "alarm clock" to be. By alarm clock, we mean your personal techniques for achieving mindfulness.

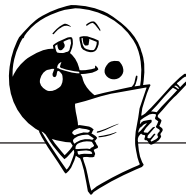
You can be caught in mindlessness all the time and not even know you are asleep. Mindlessness is an acceptable way to live in our culture. In the book *Mindfulness*, by Ellen J. Langer, Ph.D. (Merloyd Lawrence, 1989), Dr. Langer identifies various ways through which we learn to act mindlessly: "Early in life, we learn to categorize things, perform behaviors automatically, and see things from a single perspective."

Breaking out of these patterns isn't something that will occur without some effort. It isn't that breaking the cycle of mindlessness is particularly difficult. We just don't think to do it, unless we consciously decide to think to do it. We can help to wake ourselves up by setting our alarm clocks to break out of old categorized distinctions we take for granted, by performing behaviors differently, by seeing things from a different point of view.



Nirvana Notes

Even if you don't have time for a block of meditation, you can squeeze mindfulness into your day on a regular basis. For one morning or afternoon, make a point to pause and really notice the world around you and inside you for one minute on the hour, every hour.



Nirvana Notes

Looking for more ways to wake yourself up? Work your five senses in new ways. Eat something with a strong, sour, pungent, or spicy taste. Smell all the spices in your cupboard, one at a time. Visit a toy store and look through a kaleidoscope. Change your radio station to a new one and really listen to the next three songs. Touch the underside of every piece of furniture in your house.

Maybe mindfulness comes easily to you. Maybe all you need to do is remind yourself now and then throughout the day, “Okay, now pay attention.” If mindfulness isn’t so easy, if you find yourself knowing you should wake up but persisting in your attachments and automatic behaviors, your assumptions and desires, you might need a louder alarm clock.

Like what? Like learning to foil your own expectations. Turn things on their heads. Take a cold shower or a walk in the rain. Stand on your head and look at your living room upside down. Eat pizza for breakfast and cereal for dinner. Shake yourself up and open your eyes. You don’t have to live like a robot. Everything you do, no matter how ordinary, is worth doing with total attention. Determine what it takes to wake yourself up, and do it every day.

Mindless or Mindful?

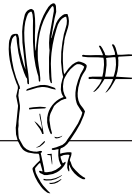
“This all sounds great,” you might be thinking, “but how do I know if I’m being mindless or mindful? What the heck do I know about it? Am I being mindful or mindless right now? Which is it?”

Good question, and one only you can answer for yourself. But here are some clues:

- When you are doing more than one thing at the same time (talking on the phone while washing the dishes, watching television while eating dinner, reading the newspaper while talking to your kids, listening to your Walkman while jogging), you aren’t doing either task mindfully. You can’t focus fully on two things at once. Much of what you are doing is automatic. So as you read this, are you doing anything else? Is the television on? Are you eating a snack? Are you on the treadmill, exercising? Are you petting the cat? If so, then you are not being fully mindful. (Automatic physical behaviors such as breathing and your beating heart don’t count. Your body takes care of those for you so you don’t have to think about them.)
- How well do you remember what you were doing in the moments before you started reading this book? Are those moments vivid? Could you describe the room or area around you without looking around right now? If you were recently with someone else, what did he or she say? How were you standing or sitting? How did you feel? What color was the sky, or the ceiling, or the walls? If you don’t really remember, you weren’t in a mindful state then and you probably aren’t right now.
- If you were to stop reading right now and decide to simply pay attention to everything inside and outside of you at this moment, would it feel a lot different than you feel at this moment as you read this? If so, you are reading without being fully mindful.

- Do you remember the first item on this list, or have you already forgotten? Between the first item and this last item, did your mind wander to anything besides what you are reading on this page? If you've forgotten the first item already, and have to look back up the list, and if your mind has wandered as you've been reading this, you aren't reading mindfully.

Now don't start putting yourself down if you discovered you aren't being mindful right this moment. As we said before, mindfulness is something that comes and goes for each of us. Nobody we know does it all the time, during every moment of existence. Not being mindful isn't "bad." It's just "not being mindful." Mindfulness is simply something positive to work on because it gives you the most life for your moment. And don't we all want a bargain like that?



One Hand Clapping

"To go beyond ordinary thought is to truly understand. If you just stay with your usual understanding of things, you will be like the frog that only swims in his small pond. Staying just within your little territory, you will never know anything about the larger world in which you live. You have to jump into the ocean. Then you can understand your small world for what it is."

—From *You Have to Say Something: Manifesting Zen Insight*, by Dainin Katagiri (Shambhala, 2000)

Desperately Seeking Stillness

Many Zen masters say that desire for enlightenment is still desire, and therefore coming out of dukkha. Desire for release from stress, desire for stillness, desire for inner peace, these are still desires. We can't help wanting these things, of course. But to embrace a true Zen state, we need to stop desiring these things and simply step into them.

The release from stress, not to mention stillness, inner peace, even nirvana, are already inside us. We don't need to search for them anywhere. We already have them. We just need to sit and look.

Sure, there are a lot of things in the way. Sometimes you may feel like you are in the very back row at a rock concert or a Broadway show and although you can hear what's going on and see some blurry figures moving around way up front under some spotlights, there are too many rows of people in your way, and those people are all the feelings, emotions, thoughts, and suffering you experience and hold on to.

The concert or the show, they are still going on down there. You have what you need. It may even be in view. You are in the room with what you want. You don't need to desire what you already have. You just need to get to the front row.

In *You Have to Say Something: Manifesting Zen Insight*, Dainin Katagiri writes:

“This moment is not the idea of this moment. If you see it as a concept, it becomes frozen. But the real moment is not frozen. Whatever we may think about this moment, our practice is just to return to it. This moment is where all beings exist. Even though we have doubts and fears, even though we ask, “Why do I have to die?” no answer appears. Only this moment is real. There's no escaping this moment. All beings—including doubt and fear—drop off in this moment.”

We know exactly what it is like to want, to need, to almost frantically desire a few moments of peace. How do you get to the front row of the concert or the Broadway show if you've got a family to support, a job to go to, needy co-workers to tend, a house to maintain? How do you have time for peace?

Once again, the serenity of Zen is in the doing of these very things. You don't need to lock yourself in a quiet room to live your Zen or find your peace. Peace is in the doing. Peace may be easier to find in a quiet room, but it is just as present and available (with practice), and perhaps even more essential, in a noisy room. Be with the family, do the job, give to the co-workers, maintain the house. Let peace pervade these activities. You aren't moving the activities out of your way, you are moving the anxiety you attach to them out of the way. Don't make life wait for when the activity of life stops, because it never stops. Time alone in meditation is great, and important, but Zen living can happen around the clock. You can have your stillness and keep moving, too.

You Gotta Have Faith

Most people don't associate the term *faith* with the term *Zen*. Isn't faith for religions where you are supposed to believe things without proof?

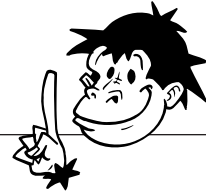
Actually, Zen does require a leap of faith. To be mindful, you have to believe that life is worth paying attention to. To meditate, you have to believe you are worth getting to know. To reach a state of inner peace, you have to believe that you have peace within you and that your true nature is already complete. You have to believe inner peace is possible, that you are already perfect, that you don't need to add anything to yourself. If, at this moment, you don't believe some of these things, that's okay.

If you can take them on faith, at least for a while—at least through the end of this book—then you can decide for yourself. This is your journey and this is the uncovering of your true self. You aren't the same as Gary or Eve or anyone else. Only you can find who you are and the way to Zen living for you.

In Zen Buddhism, faith in the Buddha's teachings as truth is an important component of Buddhist practice. If you don't believe that desire causes suffering or that desire can be eliminated, or that all things in the universe are interconnected, or that such a thing as nirvana is possible, you can't really practice Buddhism. You can still practice Zen techniques, but you aren't a Buddhist.

We're talking about two kinds of faith, and two kinds of truth. Faith in Buddhist, or Catholic, or Jewish, or Muslim principles is a matter for each spiritual seeker. We won't assume these in this book.

But we do make some assumptions. We have faith that you are already whole and complete, all on your own, and that meditation and mindfulness can help you to apprehend this truth for yourself. We hope you'll bear with us and accept these principles as true—at least for now. Give them a chance.



Monkey Mind!

*In *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, Jon Kabat-Zinn writes, "... If we do not trust in our ability to observe, to be open and attentive, to reflect upon experience, to grow and learn from observing and attending, to know something deeply, we will hardly persevere in cultivating any of these abilities, and so they will only wither or lie dormant." Trust in your ability to live more fully or you will sabotage yourself at every turn.*

The Least You Need to Know

- You already have truth inside you.
- Your attachment to things you can't control is getting in the way of your perception of truth.
- Sitting meditation, walking meditation, pausing to find your center or start over, and the refusal to attach to states of mind that induce suffering can help to nip dukkha in the bud.
- Practicing mindfulness is like waking up in your life.
- Faith in your abilities and in the process of Zen techniques such as meditation and mindfulness are necessary for finding your own truth.



Getting an Attitude: A Zen Approach

In This Chapter

- ▶ Who's in charge here, anyway?
- ▶ The illusion of control
- ▶ If life is a boat, who's at the helm?
- ▶ Navigating with Zen
- ▶ Dispelling your expectations

It might seem like “getting an attitude” isn’t very Zen-like. Isn’t Zen about losing your attitude? In a sense, this is true. Losing your old attitudes, the ones that cause you suffering, is Zen-like, but losing attitudes means gaining new ones because an attitude is the state of your mind, and to be human is to have a state of mind.

A lot of Zen literature talks about not having any opinions or strong feelings about things, but this is misleading. You are human. You will have strong feelings, and you will certainly have opinions. You can’t help it, and you shouldn’t feel bad or guilty or wrong about having feelings and opinions.

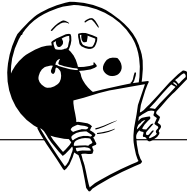
The trick is to have them without attaching to them, to let them be, recognized, acknowledged, fully experienced, then to let them pass away, as they most certainly will. This is the Zen attitude.

But I’m in Charge Here (Aren’t I?)

Isn’t it nice to be in charge? The person in charge makes the rules, is respected, is a leader. He or she knows what to expect and sets the course, like the captain of a ship. If you are in charge, you call the shots, right?

Being in charge is a comfortable position, even though it holds a lot of responsibility. Why be bossed around if you can be the boss? Everyone knows it pays to take charge of life, to take the reins, make it happen, be your own boss. But what does it pay?

It doesn't pay anything. It can't be done. Being in charge is a comfortable illusion that can keep you from recognizing the power you really do have over your life.



Nirvana Notes

The first step to relinquishing our illusory notion of being in charge is to recognize when we self-affirm that illusion: If I can just act like the right kind of person, maybe she will like me. If I can just get that promotion, my life will be great. If I say this the right way, I'll be accepted into that group. If I'm supportive enough/assertive enough/masculine enough/feminine enough, I'll be loved.

You Aren't in Control

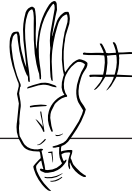
We have some news for you. We won't call it bad news, because it isn't bad. It just is: You aren't in control.

Now don't panic! It may be a scary thought: A life without anyone in charge? Won't there be chaos? Anarchy? Internal psychological rioting? That depends on your attitude. You can look at your life in a couple of different ways.

You can try to be in charge, try to control everyone and everything in your life, and get upset, anxious, or angry when things don't go the way you planned.

You can decide you aren't in charge and can't control anyone or anything in your life, and you can get upset, anxious, or angry at your powerlessness and helplessness in the face of an uncertain fate.

Or, you can recognize that the world spins without your help, that people do what they do, and that your life will run its course one way or the other. Sometimes your plans won't work out. Flights get delayed, people are late, accidents happen, and everyone makes mistakes. You can decide not to get upset, anxious, or angry about things over which you have no power, and you can choose to do your job and live your life with integrity, compassion, mindful observance, and a healthy sense of humor. Guess which way is the Zen way?



One Hand Clapping

"It's not only the stickiness of our desires concerning outer events that catches us. Nor is it only holding on with our hands. We hold on with our minds. We catch ourselves, get stuck ourselves, by holding, often desperately, to narrow views, to self-serving hopes and wishes. Letting go really refers to choosing to become transparent to the strong pull of our own likes and dislikes, and of the unawareness that draws us to cling to them. To be transparent requires that we allow fears and insecurities to play themselves out in the field of full awareness."

—From *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Let's look at an example. Recently Gary was on his way from New York to Boston for a 3 P.M. meeting. He was scheduled on a 10 A.M. commuter flight. This is what Gary was thinking:

We leave at 10 A.M. so I'll be there by about 11:15. That will give me enough time for a leisurely lunch and a good stroll around town before the meeting.

Gary had everything under control, nicely planned, and he was looking forward to the day. But when Gary got to the airport, he was informed that Boston was fogged in and the flight would be delayed.

After waiting for an hour, glancing at his watch every couple of minutes, Gary heard another announcement. The flight was further delayed. This is what Gary was thinking:

Okay, I need to rethink this. Let me do some mental math. We'll probably need to wait in a long line on the runway. If we push away from the gate by 11:45, on the dot, I'll arrive in Boston a few minutes after 1:00. I can get downtown by 1:30, in plenty of time for lunch. I won't have time for the long stroll. Not such a big sacrifice.

Proud of how he had rearranged his plans to meet these unpredictable and changing circumstances, Gary smiled to himself. Everything under control, the day all mapped out so the universe could peruse the plan and comply. No problem.

But then another announcement blared over the airport speaker system. Flights were so backed up, they weren't even going to allow boarding until 1 P.M., at best, and

then the plane would take its place at the end of the line. A collective groan rose from the irritable crowd, broken by a few swear words.

Gary and his fellow New Yorkers (not famous for displaying the quality of patience) proceeded to rush the ticket counter. This is what Gary was thinking:

Unbelievable. How could this happen to me today? Okay, if they are going to keep delaying the flight, I'm going to get a seat on the next plane if it kills me. This is not according to the plan! So I'll make it work. I'll get a seat, and I'll get it now.

When Gary and his fellow passengers finally got on the plane, Gary was so anxious, he was almost shaking. His stomach was in knots, his fists were clenched, he sat in his seat, tensed and leaning slightly forward, as if he might actually be able to push the plane forward with the sheer force of his will. Gary could feel the tension in the air, not only his own but that of those around him. This is what Gary was thinking:

We'll be off the ground by 1:30. We'll land an hour later. I'll sprint to the cab line and get to the meeting by 3:00. Forget lunch. I'm not hungry, anyway.

When the next delay was announced, Gary suddenly experienced an attitude change. You might even call it an epiphany. Calculations? Plans? Mapping out the day for the universe? It all suddenly seemed ultimately absurd.

Gary realized that he had no idea when the plane was going to take off, let alone land. He recognized that he had never known. He had no real information, and he had no control. This is what Gary was thinking:



Monkey Mind!

Irritability comes in many forms and often masks other emotions we'd rather not face. The next time you feel irritable or inexplicably angry, stop, sit down, and think about what is really bothering you. If you can address the real problem, you can save yourself from a miserable day.

What's going to happen if I'm late for the meeting? Quite a few people will be annoyed. Will they kill me? I don't think so. Am I going to lose my job? I don't think so. Can I control the reaction of the people at my meeting? Can I control the reaction of my employers? Can I do anything at all to get the plane there on time?

Nope.

Gary experienced a rush of relief. If he didn't have any control, all he could do was go along for the ride, maybe even relax and enjoy it. Gary had adopted a Zen attitude.

And enjoy the ride is exactly what he did. He pulled out the novel he had stuffed into his briefcase as an afterthought, and settled back into his seat. He thoroughly enjoyed the trip up to Boston that afternoon. By the time he arrived, the sun was shining and it was turning into a glorious day. What a view of Boston Harbor as they landed!

At least a few aspects of this story are probably familiar to you. The moral of the story is that while plans are fine, even necessary, to organize your day and get your various jobs and tasks completed, attachment to your plans is absurd. You can't control the world. You can only control your reaction to the world.

Giving Up Control (Even When No One Else Will)

Even if you know, logically, that you aren't really in control of other people, of your situation, and of the changing environments you encounter, it is really hard to act like it. If you don't put on that act of being in control, what will people think?

Most people act, at least to some extent, as if they control their own lives and the lives, in many cases, of others. They lecture each other, give advice, make rules, enforce rules, enact punishments, and generally talk as if they, or the group with which they are associated, are keeping society together. Parents advise and discipline their children. Law enforcement officers enforce the laws made by lawmakers. Schools have rules, workplaces have rules, cities, counties, states, and countries have rules. It seems there are plenty of people in charge.

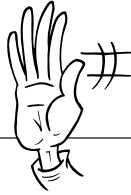
The question is, what exactly do all those "in-charge" people control? Remember Thomas Jefferson's statement about the foundation of American government? "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Each of us must pursue these things on our own. The rules we set as a society make living together easier as we each seek life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. But the finding is up to us, not anyone else. Who we are and what we make of our lives is up to us. And we can't force anyone else to find happiness or make their lives a certain way, either.

So when we say no one has control over anyone, we don't mean nobody can force you to follow the law. Sure they can. Or, at least, they can enforce a punishment if you don't. They can also try to intimidate or coerce or bribe or coax you into certain behaviors. But no one controls who you are inside and what you choose to do—not really. In the same way, you don't control who anyone else is and what anyone else does.

Still, you might believe that if you give up even the illusion of control, you'll be slipping behind, losing your place in line, falling down the ladder, missing out on important opportunities to get ahead.

Giving up something you never had can only clarify your life.

The idea of giving up control can be frightening, but it becomes much easier if you realize that you aren't giving up anything at all. You are only giving up the illusion that you had something. No one can step in and take over something that never existed. You aren't going to fall behind by recognizing reality. Instead, you'll have a better grasp on what is really going on and you can expend your energies in ways that are productive, rather than futile.



One Hand Clapping

"There is a word in Buddhism that means 'wishlessness' or 'aimlessness.' The idea is that you do not put something in front of you and run after it, because everything is already here, in yourself. While we practice walking meditation, we do not try to arrive anywhere. We only make peaceful, happy steps. If we keep thinking of the future, of what we want to realize, we will lose our steps."

—From *Peace Is Every Step*, by Thich Nhat Hanh

Giving up the illusion of control is like jumping off that little hamster wheel and climbing out of the cage.

But because we are so used to thinking we have to be in control, fear is natural. Based on illusion, but natural.

Giving up the illusion of control also doesn't mean giving up rules, plans, or all the necessary things you need to do to live your life among others. It just means giving up control of your attachments to the rules, plans, and other details of life.

But still, you might be thinking, what will people think? How do you exist in the rat race without acting like a rat? Won't you be disqualified?

We doubt it. You'll probably be more likely to redefine the race for others.

Here's an example of something relatively trivial, just for the sake of illustration:

Let's say you work in an office and they have a rule you don't like: no coffee cups at your desk. Now let's say you really, really love your cup of coffee and you work a lot better with a cup of coffee nearby. But because of a couple of unfortunate spills and ruined computer equipment, the rule stands: no coffee cups at your desk.

A lot of people in the office don't like this rule one bit. They grumble and complain. They sneak their coffee cups behind typing stands and hard-drive cases. They talk about the boss, how unreasonable she is, how stupid the rule is. They really let that rule get to them, and so do you. Darn it, you want a cup of coffee when you are in the thick of preparing that report. How else are you supposed to stay awake? If the job wasn't so boring, maybe you wouldn't need the coffee. If your boss gave you more prestige, more responsibility, a promotion, maybe you wouldn't mind. But she

hasn't, and you do mind. If only you could just have that cup of coffee at your desk, your whole job would be so much

Okay, time for a reality check. First off, do you see what you are doing? You are so attached to that rule that you are letting it drive you crazy! What would happen if you decided to give up your false sense of control and stop being so attached to that rule? You would enter the now, and you would have a couple of choices: Accept the rule and move on, or take action to change it.

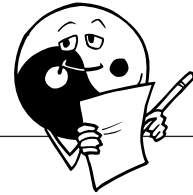
But how would your co-workers react if you just decided to accept the rule? Do you imagine they will say something like, "Hey, what's wrong with Joe? I thought he was on board with this whole coffee-cup hate campaign!" Or, might they say, "Joe must be kissing up to the big boss. He stopped complaining about the coffee cup rule!" Or how about, "Joe, we've all banded together and decided not to talk to you or share any more information with you since you aren't upset about the whole coffee cup thing."

Sounds pretty ridiculous, doesn't it? Chances are, one by one, people in your workplace will think to themselves, "Hmm. Joe doesn't seem to be too bothered by the coffee cup rule anymore. Maybe it's time to move on." Or, "Wait a minute. If Joe stops complaining about the coffee cup rule, he might get that promotion before I do." But the point is: It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks or does because you can't control what anyone else thinks or does.

You really can't. They'll think what they want to think. You can jump through hoops trying to fine-tune the reactions of other people to everything you do, but what kind of a life is that? All you can control is your own reaction to the circumstances in your life. And that's plenty.

Of course, you can probably think of many examples where it would be much harder to ignore the reactions and behaviors of those around you. But the point remains the same: It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks or does because you can't control what anyone else thinks or does.

If you spend your energies getting to know yourself, living mindfully, refusing to get caught up in petty detail and "wheel-spinning" behaviors, and living your life with integrity and compassion, people will probably respect you, even try to follow your example. Nevertheless: It doesn't matter what anyone else thinks or does because you can't control what anyone else thinks or does.



Nirvana Notes

Pet peeves are perfect examples of things we are attached to. Does it drive you crazy when someone cracks her knuckles or chews with his mouth open? What about when someone cuts you off on the freeway or criticizes your new haircut? Maybe you can't stand it when a co-worker is disrespectful or a boss is dismissive. Why waste energy being irritated by things you can't control?

Imagine Your Life Is a Boat

Because we've used the metaphor already, let's think of your life, once again, as your boat. You are the captain of the boat. Maybe you even built the boat. You know all the details of the boat, how it works, its imperfections, and you know every member of the crew, including his strengths and his foibles.

You have to steer a boat, of course, so it goes where you need it to go. But you don't have to steer it all the time.

Living your life like a competent captain means setting a course, and steering your boat when necessary, then letting the wind and waves do most of the work. If you stand at the helm and try to force the rudder against every wave and gust of wind, you'll be miserable and probably seasick. You'll expend a whole lot of effort, and the boat will still go the way it's going to go.

That doesn't mean you go below the deck to party with the crew and completely ignore where the ship is going. That's the way to ram into an iceberg! You have to pay attention to the ship's direction and if you start to go off-course, you need to correct. At various points along the journey, you may need to turn east or south, or take

the long way around to take advantage of the Gulf Stream, to avoid a hurricane, or to harness a particularly persistent wind. That is paying attention.

But you don't waste your energy battling all those little waves, because the ocean is full of them and they keep on coming. Let them come. Enjoy the movement and the perpetual change. It makes the sea voyage interesting.

A famous visual representation of this wonderful metaphor is a series of four paintings made by the nineteenth-century American Hudson River School painter, Thomas Cole, called "The Voyage of Life." The four paintings, "Childhood," "Youth," "Manhood," and "Old Age," explore a man piloting his boat on the river of life through each of life's passages. Painted in 1842 and popular in their day, the series is now on permanent display at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. Look up the images on the Internet for some inspiration!

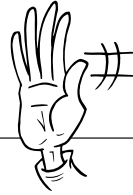


Monkey Mind!

It is all too easy to get caught up in what other people think of you. Ironically, the more worried you are about other people's opinions, the more negative those opinions tend to be. Those who don't give a thought to what others think tend to be the most revered.

Your New Navigation System

We're enjoying this voyage of life metaphor, so we're going to keep going with it. We hope you'll bear with us.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of two monks traveling along a road. They came upon a beautiful young girl who was unable to get across a stream. The older monk offered to help. He picked her up and carried her across. Several miles down the road, the younger monk could no longer contain himself. "Master, we aren't supposed to associate with women, yet you actually touched that beautiful woman. You picked her up!" The master answered, "I put that woman down on the other side of the stream. Are you still carrying her?" This story illustrates the difference between physical involvement with the world and mental attachment to the world.

Adopting a Zen attitude is like installing a new navigation system in your ship. This new navigation system is particularly designed to work with the ocean, rather than against it. Forget the whole "man conquering the sea" idea. With this new system, human and sea become one.

Living Zen means to open yourself to a full awareness of your surroundings and yourself. Only then can you use the storms and winds and waves to propel you through life, rather than fighting them or trying to master them or even pretending they aren't there. Any good sailor knows that you must lose yourself and become one with the boat, water, and wind to achieve your goal. You cannot plot an inch-by-inch course because every second, conditions change. You can only say, "I will go to X." The sailor who struggles to get there a specific way will be the last one to arrive.

In other words, stuff happens. Recognize it. Accept it. Use its momentum to propel you.

Letting Go of Expectations

So how do you do all this? How do you use what happens in your life rather than trying to control it? First you have to let go of it. You can do this in several ways, but the first big step is to let go of your expectations.

We are trained from an early age to develop expectations. When you were a baby, an adult fed you, kept you dry, probably rocked you to sleep. Soon you learned to expect food, a changed diaper, a cuddle, and a lullaby at bedtime.

As you grew, things happened that caused you to set up all kinds of expectations. Maybe you were bitten by a dog and came to expect aggressive behavior from all dogs. Maybe a sibling teased you mercilessly, and you learned to expect teasing. You may have then become guarded or defensive around that sibling. If you grew up with supportive or unsupportive friends, you learned to expect similar behavior from other friends.

But setting up these patterns of expectations can be very limiting. Assuming every dog is going to bite you severely limits your view of dogs. Assuming every friend won't be there for you when it counts—or assuming every friend will be there when you need it—severely limits your ability to develop productive and rewarding friendships with each new person who comes along.



Nirvana Notes

What do you assume? Make a list of everything you can think of, from the sun rising each morning to the dependability of a friend. Then, go over the list and imagine you couldn't assume each item—not that the sun won't come up or your friend will betray you, but that you can no longer take anything for granted. How could this open your mind to new awareness and possibility in your life?

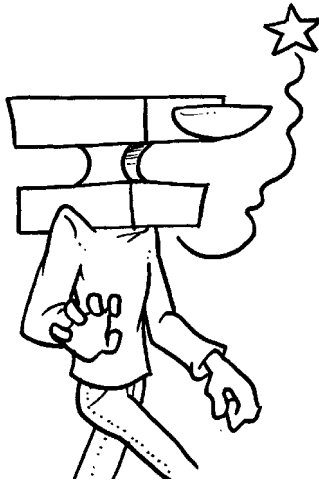
Living Zen means seeing each incident for what it is, and not carrying any expectations forward to apply to any other incidents. That dog bit you, but who knows about this dog? That friend betrayed you, but this friend has nothing to do with that situation.

Of course certain expectations are learned for the purpose of survival. Caution around dogs is sensible, whether you've ever been bitten or not. Total emotional dependence on a friend isn't healthy or productive. You know cars are dangerous so you look both ways before you cross the street and you drive carefully. You know rotten food can make you sick so if something smells bad or looks spoiled, you don't eat it. These examples mean you are remaining aware of your surroundings.

But expecting things simply because they happened before isn't living Zen. It is living mindlessly. Being fully aware means taking every moment for what it is, as it is completely new. What will happen today? What will happen in this moment? You don't know, but the fun part is, you get to open your eyes and find out.

The Least You Need to Know

- You aren't in charge of your life, and you can't control what people think of you.
- "Giving up" control just means recognizing your lack of control, thereby freeing your energy for more productive things (such as helping others, doing your job, meditating).
- Your life is like a boat. The captain can't control the weather, the condition of the sea, or the storms. The captain can only commune with the air, boat, and sea to move the boat forward to its eventual destination.
- The first step to recognizing what you do and don't control in your life is to let go of your expectations. If you don't expect anything, everything will be a new experience.



When Bad Things Happen

In This Chapter

- ▶ Tragedy is just a word
- ▶ The Zen approach to life's little setbacks
- ▶ Applying your Zen attitude adjustment
- ▶ Coping with major loss
- ▶ How to feel the big feelings
- ▶ Your zazen life preservers: sitting, breathing

We can talk about adopting a Zen attitude all day long, but the words won't mean much if we don't acknowledge that sometimes bad things happen, and sometimes horrible, tragic things happen. Do the rules change?

It probably seems to you like adopting a Zen attitude is a lot easier when things are going well. And that's true! Tragedy tests anyone's resolve, anyone's faith, and anyone's way of being. But rather than thwarting your Zen attitude, "bad things" can help you to discover just how powerful your Zen attitude really is.

Tragedy is a relative thing, so the word poses an interesting challenge. What is a tragedy? Both Gary and Eve were brought up steeped in the Judeo-Christian way of being, where people are supposed to be happy with what they have. If something happens, it is the will of a higher power. Be thankful with what you have. Chances are, someone is always a lot worse off. Even in "tragedy," we are supposed to count our blessings.

In a way, this is a Zen-like attitude—not to be satisfied with a less-than-satisfactory existence, but to find the joy and the life and the reality of where you are right now.

But what about the part about somebody else being worse off? That's supposed to make you feel better? If, as a child, you hated spinach, did being told children were starving in India make you relish each bite with joy and gratitude? The more common childhood response is, "Well, then, send the spinach to them!" Whether that comment comes out of a youthful humanitarian impulse or a simple desire to remove all traces of spinach from the continent doesn't matter. Clearly the approach doesn't really work. The tragedy of others is not a reason to celebrate.

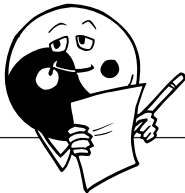
But we digress. What about when tragedy happens to you, or to those close to you?

When Tidal Waves Hit

In the last chapter we compared life to a boat. There you are, sailing along, bobbing on the waves, enjoying the brilliant blue sky, smiling at the seabirds.

Then the sky starts to darken. The waves get choppier. Lightning. Thunder. You have the sense that somewhere far out in the ocean, something major is happening. You sense a deep pull in the ocean. It's something big. It's a tsunami.

When a tidal wave hits your boat, you're going to have to do some work to keep the boat afloat. Or maybe the boat sinks, and you have to swim to shore and build a new one. Let's look at how you can do this work with a Zen-like attitude, because living Zen even through the bad times can help you through those times by keeping your vision clear and your energies directed where they can help the most.



Nirvana Notes

If you've ever had a bad day (and who hasn't), you might stop to think about what made it so bad. Did you label the day "bad" early in the morning when the coffeemaker broke? Was it your attitude that colored the rest of the day? A Zen attitude can erase bad days from your future—not events you don't enjoy, but the bad mood they might provoke.

The Little Tragedies of Life

Not every "tragedy" is of tidal-wave proportions. Some of the things that rock our boats are nasty, vicious little storms that fill the boat with water and ruin everything without sinking the boat or even damaging the structure. These are the little tragedies of life.

When Gary was in ninth grade, he didn't make the varsity band. The tragic nature of this event was made clear as Gary came home, retired to the safety of his room, and wept through the rest of the afternoon, through dinner, and into the evening. He thought his life was over. And wasn't it?

He had practiced. He had accumulated (he thought!) countless “brownie points” by participating in all the relevant fundraisers. He had volunteered for anything that required a raised hand. He had helped make that band possible through his extensive efforts, hadn’t he? Didn’t they owe him a place? How could he show his face in school again? How could he go on?

A few times during that long, tearful afternoon, positive thoughts started to surface: At least I’m a good student. I’ve been recognized for my academic abilities. Maybe I’ll make the band next year. I’m not a complete loser; I succeed in plenty of stuff.

But ever dramatic (as ninth graders are), Gary squelched these thoughts. He was wallowing in his tragedy. He hadn’t made it. He had failed. He must be a loser. He must have no talent. Everyone will laugh. How can he ever respect himself again? And so on, and so on.

Pretty soon Gary’s parents decided to intervene. Enough is enough! Face the setback, Gary. Stop wringing your hands and crying. Practice harder this year. Just like Rocky Balboa, your time will come, Gary. You can face anything and overcome anything with hard work. Deal with it and move on, son.

You could say Gary’s parents were teaching him that tragedy is relative. That a tragedy is a tragedy because we label it as such. Gary’s parents also sprinkled this advice with plenty of the ole “pull-yourself-up-by-your-own-bootstraps” attitude, of which Americans are so fond.

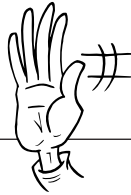
Nothing wrong with that! Good advice, in fact. Tragedy is relative and is only called a tragedy because we call it a tragedy.

But Gary’s parents were also telling him to judge his feelings and reactions to the occurrences in life, and deny them. Cut yourself off from those negative feelings, Gary’s parents reasoned, and they’ll dissipate. Ignore them, and they’ll go away.

This isn’t such a Zen-like attitude. Remember, there is a difference between ignoring feelings and allowing yourself to experience feelings without attaching to them. If you ignore your natural human emotions, you miss out on a great opportunity to learn and grow.

We tend to name something a “tragedy” when it doesn’t meet our expectations. The person with an hourly wage job and a family to support who loses that job feels a tragedy has happened. The Wall Street trader who misses out on a quarter-million-dollar bonus, even after sweating and scheming for months to orchestrate the financial coup, believes that is a tragedy.

And what about that relationship you thought was perfect until your partner revealed his or her differing view? What about that torn rotator cuff, that failing grade, that crashed computer hard drive, that stolen purse, that ulcer, that demotion, that nasty stain, the fact that the transmission just dropped out of the bottom of your car? The list could go on and on.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of how the words “The First Principle” over the gate of Obaku temple in Kyoto, praised as a masterpiece of calligraphy, came to be. Zen master Kosen had been writing the words over and over one day while a presumptuous pupil looked over his shoulder and casually criticized each attempt, telling him the calligraphy was bad. “Master, I know you can do better than that!” the student would say. “Oh, no, master, that one is worse than the one before!” His confidence undermined, Kosen kept trying without success. After 84 tries, the student stepped out of the room for a moment, and Kosen hurriedly dashed off the words an 85th time, without thought, beyond thought. When the student returned, he proclaimed, “Now this, master, is a masterpiece!” This is the attempt immortalized over Obaku Temple’s gate.

Why must we experience such setbacks—painful, expensive, frustrating, and a waste of time, resources, and self-esteem? Even when you’ve done your best, planned, devoted yourself, worked your hardest, applied your selfless love? Doesn’t that guarantee you will get what you want?

Of course not. Every single one of the situations listed above, and every single other situation you can think of, disappointment or triumph, is simply an occurrence. Things happen. That’s all.

You aren’t really in control of the outcome. Your actions may influence what happens, but a whole lot of other factors influence everything that happens, too. Things happen. Events occur. That’s all.

But you will have feelings about these events. Of course you will. And, being human, you need to sit down and have them. Let yourself feel your feelings. Feel the anger, the disappointment, the rejection, the fear. Let the feelings flow through you, then let them end. Let yourself get to the other side of them.

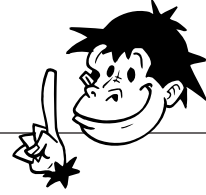
Remind yourself that you aren’t in control. Remind yourself that you’ve experienced a tragedy because you’ve decided to call it a tragedy. You could decide you have experienced an experience. Take the label “tragedy” away and watch your attitude transform.

Sometimes a tragedy presents an opportunity to realize we aren't in the right field. Or in the right company. Maybe we've chosen a relationship with the wrong partner, or car, or computer. Maybe we need a wake-up call about our health habits or risk-taking behaviors. Maybe we can, through the latest experience, find a way to grow into a fuller, more realized human being with greater self-knowledge.

Life hasn't promised us anything. But, more important, every experience can teach you something. You won't enjoy everything that happens to you in your life, but opening yourself to the positive possibilities inherent in every experience is the way to grow.

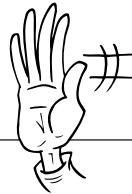
So after that good cry, or pillow-beating, or whatever it is you have to do to experience and then let go of your feelings, open yourself to the clarity inherent in the experience of "tragedy."

So whatever you tried didn't work. Fantastic! Now you know something that doesn't work. Great! Now you can try something else, open yourself up to whatever else is out there. Something that might be a lot better.



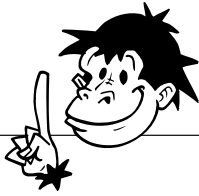
Monkey Mind!

Keeping a perspective about the events in your life is extremely difficult without maintaining a meditation practice. Meditation free from daily distractions lets you work on your attitude, which is simply to be without opinion, judgment, or expectation. This practice helps to keep your Zen attitude in the front of your mind throughout the day.



One Hand Clapping

Water is often used as a metaphor for a Zen attitude. Water flows. It doesn't "go with the flow," it *is* the flow. Water flows over rocks and cliffs, tree roots and boulders, around peninsulas and islands, through wide deep channels and across floodplains. Sometimes the water is deep and still, sometimes it is shallow and bubbly, sometimes it shoots into the air in dramatic sprays. Yet it always flows, under or over the ground. Even when it reaches the sea, it evaporates into the sky and falls again. It carved the entire Grand Canyon slowly, tiny bit by tiny bit. It both accepts, or flows with, and also helps to create the landscape around it, not by fighting the landscape, just by flowing through it.



Monkey Mind!

Studies show that suppressing emotional expression rather than expressing it can increase the susceptibility to hypertension. One Detroit study of 431 men, described in Jon Kabat-Zinn's book *Full Catastrophe Living*, revealed that those with the highest blood pressure rates were those who were subjected to high job or family stress and who tended to suppress their anger.

Ninth-grader Gary realized he didn't really enjoy band all that much. He was already working hard in his academic classes and wanted to find an extracurricular activity that was fun, not something that required long hours of practice and constant competition.

Gary's disappointment (and how often we say *tragedy* when we really mean *disappointment*) taught him that he couldn't make one single, narrowly viewed dream the focus of his life. And, allowing himself his "tragic" feelings opened him to a greater lesson: He was dramatic.

So Gary joined the drama club, through which he soon found himself on center stage, his inner "ham" emerging. Then, through the school paper, Gary discovered he could write.

Maybe that whole band experience wasn't a tragedy after all. When you label, you block your energy to the full range of possibilities. When you take away the label, you open the door.

And Then the Big Ones

Big tragedies are tougher. It probably seems a lot easier to put small, daily disappointments into perspective, but what about when things happen that are really bad, horrible, unthinkable? Someone you love (or maybe you, yourself) is diagnosed with a terminal disease, or gets into a major accident, or drops out of your life completely for one reason or another. You lose your home, or the use of your body, or everything you own. Someone integral to your life dies.

How are you supposed to go on after something like this? This isn't something you can fix. This is major. This isn't something to deal with and move on. Your life has been forever altered. What does Zen have to do with the big things?

Everything. Although it is much harder to peel that "tragedy" label off the really major experiences in life, it is still possible. It's just that the part where you have to experience your feelings takes a lot longer and the feelings are usually a whole lot stronger. Why are your feelings so strong? Because of what the event means to you.

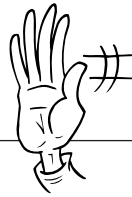
In *The Art of Happiness*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Howard C. Cutler, M.D. (Riverhead Books, 1998), Dr. Cutler writes:

"There is no doubt that our attitude and mental outlook can strongly affect the degree to which we suffer when we are in physical pain. Let's say, for instance, that two individuals, a construction worker and a concert pianist, suffer the same finger injury. While the amount of physical pain might be the same for

both individuals, the construction worker might suffer very little and in fact rejoice if the injury resulted in a month of paid vacation which he or she was in need of, whereas the same injury could result in intense suffering to the pianist who viewed playing as his or her primary source of joy in life.”

Sometimes the natural human emotion associated with a major event (even when it is a “good” event) is so intense that we are afraid to experience it. We put on a happy face. We say everything is just fine. We talk in depth about how well we are handling the situation. In other words, we repress our feelings, we pretend they aren’t there, we sometimes even attribute them to someone or something else.

But feeling our feelings is just as important—more important—for major life-altering events than for the small inconveniences in life. The concert pianist has to feel that suffering so he or she can recognize it and pass through it, even learn from it.



One Hand Clapping

In her book *Stumbling Toward Enlightenment* (Celestial Arts, 1997), Geri Larkin writes, “A strange thing happens as we stumble past the first part of our spiritual path. Just when we start to be able to see clearly, and make more out of our everyday moments, we discover that behind our anger—which we thought we had faced just fine, thank you very much—is rage.” Larkin writes that we all have rage, and recognizing it is an important first step in dispelling it. Then Larkin proposes: “So let go of your rage. Let go of your anger. Forgive. Pay attention. Let your own inherent gentleness free you. With these practices, you can free the whole world as well.”

When you’ve let yourself feel, you can come out on the other side. You can. You might not believe it while in the throes of your grief, but many, many people who have experienced a major loss have come through it, learned from it, and made their lives better. Our society is full of such people, who stand out as an inspiration to others. There are people with a terminal disease, or who have endured the result of a major accident, or who have lost a child, who say their lives are better than ever before because of what they have learned, how they have grown, what they have finally understood about life.

People who come out on the other side of their tragedy really do learn a lot: never to take life for granted, how to embrace each moment, how to help others. They have learned to recognize what is important, what is beautiful, what is worth their attention. One more thing about the major events of our lives: Aren't most of our major "tragedies" a matter of loss? We lose all our money, all our possessions, our shelter, our loved ones, our health, a part of our body. To truly embrace a Zen attitude is to recognize that we never owned any of it to begin with.

We don't own anything.

Sure, according to society, we do. This is my house. This is my money. This is my spouse. This is my child. This is my body. To live in a society, everyone must take responsibility for certain things. We need places to live and certain possessions to hold jobs and entertain ourselves. We need money to buy food, clothes, and other things we need or want. Parents must be responsible for their children, and partners help and support each other. We take care of ourselves to stay healthy and feeling good.

But none of it is really ours. We live with others, we accumulate things, but any of it can be taken away at any moment. This isn't meant to be scary. It's only meant to remind you that every moment counts right now and every person you have the good luck to know can enrich you, but if you attach yourself to anything or anyone, even yourself, you are fooling yourself into believing in a reality that isn't real or lasting.

When you lose something precious to you, you will mourn it. You will grieve. You may experience a huge range of emotion and may feel compelled toward all kinds of behaviors. You might experience severe depression, or rage. Of course you will. You are human. Let yourself feel it, and let yourself gradually come to see how this experience, like others, has happened, and has taught you something. If you are angry because you thought something was yours and it was taken away, let yourself be angry. Then let yourself see that it wasn't yours. You were, simply, lucky enough to experience whatever, or whomever, it was for a part of your life.



Nirvana Notes

Watch out for self-perpetuated habitual suffering. Do you dwell obsessively on feelings that make you sad? Do you let yourself become overly sensitive or reactive? Do you nurse your grudges and fuel your own anger? Noticing these patterns and refocusing on the here and now (mopping the floor, balancing the checkbook, reading) can help to dispel chronic suffering, which can be largely a matter of habit.

Relax, Breathe, Prioritize

Strong feelings can sometimes seem unbearable—pain, rage, depression—and hopelessness can overwhelm you. No matter what the cause, when your natural human feelings threaten to take over, remember three things: relax, breathe, and prioritize.

First, let yourself sit with your feelings. Or lie down. Relax. Let them wash over you while you aren't busy doing something else.

If you find you are too overwhelmed or overcome to sit still, you need to exercise! Take about 20 minutes to engage in some kind of fast-paced exercise. Go on a brisk walk or run. Lift some weights. Dance. Do some power yoga or a kickboxing videotape. Then try again. Even if you think you can't sit still, sit down and try it. Sit down and be with your feelings.

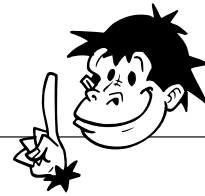
Second, breathe. Let your breath take over, let it measure your feelings into manageable pieces: the inhale, the exhale. Use your breath to center and focus your awareness. Shunryu Suzuki says we are only a swinging door for the breath, that's all. Let the door swing; let yourself sink into and become your breath. Imagine you are nothing else but that breath. Your strong feelings feel unendurable because you are attaching your own ideas, conceptions, regrets, and fears to them. Let them be. Visualize them as physical things: a crystal ball filled with sparks, perhaps, or a dark cloud flashing with lightning. Don't try to get into that crystal ball or that cloud. Just watch them rage. Keep breathing. Don't get into anything but your own breath.

Then, when you feel more calm, make a short list for yourself about whatever it is you are going to do *right now*. Don't worry about how you'll deal with this problem, or how you'll make it through the night, or any of the other details that threaten to invade. Maybe it is dinner time. Your list could look something like (you can be very basic with yourself here):

- Stand up.
- Walk into the kitchen.
- Make soup.

Or maybe your list will look more like:

- Stand up.
- Walk to closet.
- Put on walking shoes.
- Step out the door.
- Walk around the block one time.

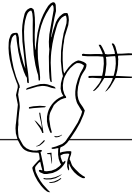


Monkey Mind!

If you are unable to rise out of a deep depression, and your depressed feelings are interfering with your functioning in your work and your life, if the feelings persist for longer than two weeks, and/or if you have serious thoughts of killing yourself, please see your doctor. Serious depression can be effectively treated with medication.

There now. You know exactly what to do next to plan and execute those regular life things you need to do, and do them. If your feelings are still present, let them be present next to you or above you, but only let the breathing be within you. Then you'll get through the day.

And tomorrow, too.



One Hand Clapping

"In meditation, the taming of the heart takes place through the gradual cultivation of mindfulness, in which nonjudgmental awareness is extended from the body to feelings, emotions, and states of mind. In its interpersonal method, psychotherapy has created a unique situation in which the flow of feelings between people can be tapped and acknowledged. In its cultivation of awareness, meditation seeks to create an inner holding environment in which the raw material of emotional experience can be reintroduced and made use of. While the methods differ, the intent is the same: to recover a capacity for feelings that we are all somewhat afraid of."

—From *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, by Mark Epstein, M.D.

Keep Sitting

Through it all, even when you think you can't bear it, spending some time each day in zazen can become a valuable anchor for your soul and a sanctuary for your mind. Sitting puts those tidal waves on freeze frame, or at least helps you to see them from above for a while, rather than from underneath. Even if you sit for only two minutes, you can stop the action and regroup, find your center, breathe, and remember where you are—right here, right now.

No matter what the weather of your life is like at this moment, sitting and focusing on the now can bring clarity to your being, and even gladness. You'll remember who you are, and then you'll remember how life is: ultimately interesting, ever-changing, full of waves and sea creatures, storms and calm, other ships, some armed with harpoons and others with white flags, each ship only what it is, rocking and shifting just like you are by the movement of the sea or the stillness of the doldrums, full of the beauty of diversity and the beauty of unity, and the lovely, intricate shifting and blending of the two.

The Least You Need to Know

- ▶ You aren't in charge of anyone or anything, and when you realize it, you will set yourself free to really live.
- ▶ Humans tend to categorize, label, and set up expectations. Cultivating a Zen attitude means simply living, experiencing, and being without categories, labels, or expectations.
- ▶ "Tragedy" is only "tragedy" because you label it as "tragedy." Removing the label and simply experiencing the experience can help negative feelings to pass and can turn "tragedy" into a learning opportunity.
- ▶ When humans experience catastrophic loss, it is more difficult to put things into perspective, but like less serious losses, major loss is difficult because we attach our expectations, false sense of ownership, fears, and regrets to the things we have lost.
- ▶ Letting go of the attachments to our feelings of pain, grief, and sorrow can help us to move through any experience.



What's the Point ... Nirvana?

In This Chapter

- There has to be a point
- Nirvana: What is it, and do you want it?
- Other Zen perks
- Foiling math, complying with physics
- Improving the world

We've already mentioned, more than once, that true Zen doesn't have any goals. And we know that's hard. No goals? Why do it? What's the point? We want so badly for there to be a point.

Instead of gearing your life toward a goal, Zen means living the goal, shifting the goal from future to present. We like to talk about what Zen can do to make this moment right now more real, fulfilling, beautiful.

However, saying there is no point to Zen isn't exactly the whole story. Historically Zen masters and students have admitted that attaining nirvana is not only the point of Zen but their primary goal, their innermost desire.

But hey, wait one second, back the truck up: What is nirvana, anyway? Is it anything we need to know or care about today? A question not easily answered. But let's see if we can color in the picture just enough to give you the idea, without actually giving you nirvana (which we can't, of course, or else we'd be glad to do it!).

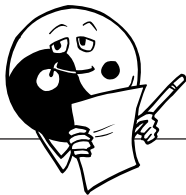
You Say Satori and I Say Nirvana

The subject of enlightenment and how to get it has been the source of much debate and even some dissension among different Zen and other Buddhist sects. Some feel enlightenment should happen all at once, others believe it happens a little at a time. In either case, however, the real work in reaching this goal is in learning how to stop striving for it. In the preface to the series of drawings/poems called the 10 Bulls (by twelfth-century Ch'an master Kakuan), Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki (in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*) write, "The enlightenment for which Zen aims, for which Zen exists, comes of itself. As consciousness, one moment it does not exist, the next it does."

Yet haven't we mentioned that having a strong desire for nirvana comes out of dukkha, or attachment? We know that basing your actions and efforts on dukkha isn't true Zen. Here's the Zen irony again: Wanting nirvana means you don't have it, can't have it. Having it means it doesn't even occur to you to want it.

When you experience enlightenment, enlightenment, as a thing, doesn't exist. It is like saying, "Oh how I want to exist!" You just do. You exist. Why discuss it? It is everything you are. It is ineffable and indefinable. After you are enlightened, there is no such thing as enlightenment.

Of course many texts and Zen masters try to describe enlightenment, indescribable though it may be. The Venerable Dr. H. Saddhatissa, in his little booklet called *An Introduction to Buddhism*, describes nirvana (he calls it nibbana) like this:



Nirvana Notes

Many Buddhists believe that assuming the Buddha's meditation posture when he was enlightened is important for becoming enlightened. Many books describe how to assume this posture: Sit in the lotus position with your hands in front of your navel, your thumbs together to form an oval, your back straight and centered over your hips bones. For more on meditation posture, see Chapter 9, "Learning to Meditate."

The goal of Buddhist life is Nibbana, a word better known in its Sanskrit form as Nirvana. The Buddha said, "Nibbana is the highest happiness." Hence the highest aim of the Buddhist is the attainment of it. Attempts have been made by writing many books to define this exalted state. It has to be appreciated that Nibbana is something that has to be realized within oneself, rather than described, explained, or talked about, as it is not within the scope of logic, being a supermundane state.

In Sanskrit, the word *nirvana* means "blowing out," as if blowing out a flame. The symbolism refers to total satisfaction in the present moment, where all attachments to past, future, and anything else but the now dissolve. In *The Beginner's Guide to Zen Buddhism*, Jean Smith describes Nirvana as "... the state of being where there is no grasping, no desire for things to be different from the way they are In those moments, we are experiencing our life as nirvana."

So what does that mean for us? You may be thinking, "Sure, nirvana sounds nice, but not very practical." If you are sitting around in meditation all day, marveling at the intense wonder of the present moment, how are you going to get anything done?

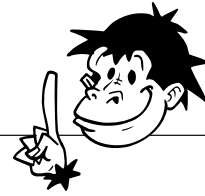
Actually, that's not how it works at all. When the Buddha attained enlightenment, he spent the rest of his life in service to humankind. Enlightenment doesn't stop life. On the contrary: It begins life. It is also a process. Nirvana isn't the end. It begins a gradual evolution of awakening throughout your life, during which you participate fully in life with compassion and understanding.

Back in the twelfth century, Chinese Ch'an master Kakuan devised 10 pictures telling a story of a man looking for and finding a bull. These pictures have been redrawn many times by many different people, and each picture has a little Zen epithet to describe it. We include our version here, in Appendix C, "Ten Bulls." Look at each stage of this experience, meant to represent the search for and apprehension of enlightenment.

The most important thing about these pictures is the last picture, "In the World." After the bull has been captured and after both the bull and the self are transcended (in picture eight), the man goes out into the world: "My clothes are ragged and dust-laden, and I am ever blissful." The final step of enlightenment is a firm and devoted presence in the world, not a removal from it.

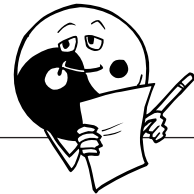
But it still sounds kind of out there, doesn't it? As if, should you suddenly attain nirvana, all your friends would think you had gone a little loopy? "Gee, Jordan isn't the same ever since that so-called enlightenment episode. Let's not call her to go to that movie tonight."

The other side of the story is wanting enlightenment too much. If you imagine enlightenment will make you spiritually, intellectually, or morally superior, you don't have the right idea either. Zen won't make you into anything special. Zen won't make you into anything you aren't already.



Monkey Mind!

It is easy to become frustrated with Zen's paradoxes and seeming contradictions, its advice that Zen can't be learned from books, can't be taught, can't even be understood logically. Just remember, everything written or spoken about Zen is just the finger pointing to the moon. Zen will only happen within you, through your own work. Nothing matters but you in the now. That's not so complicated!



Nirvana Notes

What does enlightenment mean to you? Make a list of all your preconceptions about nirvana or enlightenment. Are any items negative, or qualities you wouldn't want? Are others qualities you desire? Now, crumple up the list and throw it away. Your preconceptions mean nothing. As long as they exist, you won't be enlightened.

You don't need to wear "ragged and dust-laden clothes" once you've become enlightened and you won't want to walk around with your nose in the air. You don't need to drop your friends or join a monastery or stay ever concerned with spiritual issues. You might not care quite so much about what you wear, but that's beside the point.

The point is, you are still you. Even more you than you were before! This can be a little scary for people who aren't quite ready to confront themselves, but oh how much more real, exciting, and alive your life will be when you really get to be yourself.

It is important to remember that enlightenment is not, in any way, foreign to who or what you are. It is already in you. It is you. It is the real you, unbothered and unchained. It is you, right now.

Also, many modern Zen masters claim that nirvana isn't a constant thing, that it happens during moments of clarity. It isn't some strange, cult-like state where your personality changes or you become suddenly wise and utter only pithy nuggets of great meaning for the rest of your life. Some teachers say that *kensho* is the word for those little glimmers of enlightenment, that temporary loss of self and absorption into the present moment and what you are doing, while *satori* and *nirvana* are words for a more pervasive and permanent state of enlightenment.



Zen-Speak

Kensho, satori, and nirvana are words for enlightenment, often used interchangeably. Originally, the meanings differ. **Nirvana** is a Sanskrit word meaning "extinction," referring to liberation or release from the cycle of death and rebirth. Satori and kensho are Japanese words. **Satori** refers to enlightenment as experienced by the Buddha, a comprehension of the unity of all things. **Kensho** refers to those pre-enlightenment moments of self-realization.

But we think this is a matter of semantics. Enlightenment happens once in a while, and the more it happens, the more you learn how to live that way, right now.

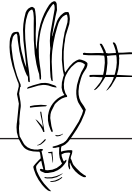
There's that word again, *now*. You can let all the rest go. When it happens, it feels great, or better than great: It feels right. And when it happens again, you think, "Oh yes! This is the way to be!" And when it happens yet again, you smile with understanding ... or pure being.

You spend your life juggling with it, trying to keep that awakened state in place as often as possible. You won't have it all the time. Plenty of famous, historical Zen masters had their nasty and ultimately unenlightened moments. But then you find it again.

Practice Zen so you can live a more enlightened life right now. That's all there is to it. The more you live in the now, the more enlightened you will become. Or maybe it will hit you all at once. In any case, it isn't something to fear, because:

Enlightenment is not, in any way, foreign to who or what you are.

You have enlightenment inside of you. It just needs a bit of excavating. That's the work of Zen, and if you really, really need to use the word, that is Zen's ultimate goal.



One Hand Clapping

In his book *A Western Approach to Zen* (Quest Books, 1971), Christmas Humphreys describes the achievement of enlightenment:

"We walk into the sea, to the ankles, waist, chest; then suddenly we are swimming and the sea contains us. The clouds and earth on a sultry day become highly charged with positive and negative electricity. The build-up of force takes time but the discharge in a flash of lightning is sudden. Our eyes are shut; at last we open them and suddenly 'see.' Let us open them and see, not heaven but the world about us filled with, shining with, the very expression of, Zen."

Zen Perks

We mentioned briefly in a previous chapter how there were other benefits to Zen that, while not goals, exactly, are certainly strong arguments for practicing Zen living. Let's look at them in more depth since these Zen perks are so relevant to the stressed-out, busy, and sometimes isolated lives of typical Westerners.

Mental Clutter Control

There are two kinds of stress: the kind that helps, and the kind that makes things worse. Have you ever noticed that sometimes, when you have a lot on your plate, it feels great? For some people, the more they have to do, the more efficient, effective, and happy they are—up to a point.

Then there is the kind of stress that has the opposite effect. This kind of stress can happen whether you have a lot to do or not. It happens when you accumulate too much mental clutter. You can have a to-do list with hundreds of items on it, but if you deal with them one at a time, with your full attention, then check them off and move on without giving them any more thought, you aren't going to be stressed. On the other hand, if you have a to-do list with only one or two items but you are so worried about them, so filled with trepidation that you won't get them right or they



Nirvana Notes

The best time to take a five-minute break to sit still, be quiet, and listen to your breathing is when you think you have the least time for it. The busier you are and the more overwhelmed you feel, the more you need the clarity and decluttering of meditation.

can't possibly get done or no one will agree with the way you do them or they are totally beyond your ability, your brain is getting all jumbled with attachments.

How can you find anything in there when it is such a mess? It's like trying to cook dinner when the kitchen is stacked high with dirty dishes, none of the pots and pans have been washed, and the dishwasher is full but you haven't run it yet.

This happened to Eve, just this morning. The kids wanted French toast, but last night she hadn't cleaned the kitchen after dinner because she was so tired. She had a ridiculous amount of work to do, but she didn't do it. She was too busy worrying about it. "How can I finish three books and two articles by the end of the month? It can't be done. No one could do it. How can I do it all working only a few hours a day? I won't be able to get it done and then I won't get paid, won't get any other jobs, I'll have to give up this whole writ-

ing pipe dream and go back to the nine-to-five world that I detest, I'll have to have a boss again, I'll have to put the kids in full-time day care, my whole family will be so disappointed. Why did I ever think I could work and be a stay-at-home mom at the same time? It's too hard! I can't do it!"

Eve ended up spending the evening staring at a scary movie on television. She didn't really watch it. She just stared at it. Nothing got done: not the articles, not the chapters, not the dishes. And now, this morning, the kids were clamoring for their breakfast.

So, frustrated and irritated, Eve grabbed a skillet from last night's dinner, still coated in oil and bits of yellow rice, and began to scrub it around a pile of dishes in the sink. Then, suddenly: *crash!*

She had accidentally knocked over a stack of plates next to the sink that were precariously perched on top of a rickety colander. Six plates and a coffee cup shattered on the kitchen floor.

The kids stopped clamoring and stared. Eve stared. But, before she could explode in frustration, Eve's four-year-old, Angus, said, with a worried expression: "Mommy, were those your favorite dishes in the whole world?"

And Eve laughed. There was her cluttered mind, shattered on the floor. "No, Angus. Those weren't my favorite dishes," Eve answered. "I don't care about those dishes at all." "That's good, Mommy," Angus said with relief. "Because they're all broken." "All broken!" chimed in two-year-old Emmett with a grin.

Eve couldn't help grinning, too, as she realized how precariously perched all her worries had been. They weren't real and they didn't matter. One bump of the elbow and they were gone. They didn't have a hold on her at all.

Eve simply had some work to do. That's all. Mindfully, she cleaned up the mess, made the breakfast, loaded the dishwasher, and took the kids to the park. During naptime, she returned to her book chapters. She realized how much she had over-exaggerated what had to be done. Sure she was busy. Aren't we all? But she could handle it. This is a job worth doing, she told herself. Later in the day, she realized she wasn't even tired anymore.

The effect of those dishes crashing on the floor was something like the effect of puzzling out a Zen riddle, then suddenly getting it. A moment of *ken-sho*, when it all makes sense. And poof, the mental clutter was gone.

For you Harry Potter fans who have read the fourth book in the series, *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, you may remember how Professor Dumbledore kept a *pensieve* in his office, which was a basin filled with a bright silver liquid where the professor could store excess thought when he had too much on his mind. What a handy device! Unfortunately, *pensieves* don't exist. Fortunately, we have Zen!

Our brains get cluttered. It is human nature. Zen helps to unclutter them by dissolving the clutter in an instant. Zen helps us to let it go, and when we do, the clutter floats away like a helium balloon. (If only that worked for the dishes!)

Winking at Stress

One of the things we love about Zen is its sense of humor. Whenever we get too serious, Zen reminds us how pointless it is to be too serious. Being too serious means being too concerned about things, and in Zen, concern is replaced by compassion, striving by existing, worry by joy.

So Zen is a great way to put stress into perspective. When those dishes crashed to the floor, Eve remembered to wink at her stress. Wink wink, nudge nudge. You and I both know you aren't so important. Nice disguise, but I can see right through you, stress! Zen masters are famous for their ability to put a humorous spin on that which would seem a matter of the greatest gravity. They make jokes on their deathbeds. They pose the most absurd of questions. And when everyone gets too serious, the Zen master does his or her best to undermine everyone's assumptions.



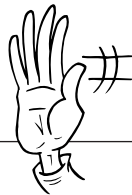
Nirvana Notes

Most people hate housework, but housework is the perfect opportunity to practice mindfulness. Wash the dishes, sweep the floor, or polish the windows and mirrors with total attention rather than with dread, distraction, and annoyance. It is a completely different experience.

If you are farsighted as Eve is (literally, as in the vision impairment), you know what it is like to hold something right up in front of your face and not be able to see it. Only when you hold it back a bit does it come into focus. The same goes for Zen koans, stories, and parables. They can be absurd, funny, ridiculous. If you take them too seriously, if you attach to them, you'll miss the point.

And the same goes for the things that cause you stress. If something “horrible” happens—your air-conditioning goes out in August, you forget to mail the mortgage payment, you get dumped, or snubbed, or sneezed on—Zen lets you step back a few feet, take a look at what is really going on, and then snicker a little.

If you don't attach to the things that cause you stress, they can't cause you stress. Pretty simple, although it takes a lot of practice.



One Hand Clapping

In her book *Mindfulness*, Ellen J. Langer suggests that mindfulness and creativity can be more easily obtained through an open-ended approach to the so-called factual world. She writes, “In most educational settings, the ‘facts’ of the world are presented as unconditional truths, when they might better be seen as probability statements that are true in some contexts but not in others.” In a study by Langer and Alison Piper, objects were identified to one group as: “This is a hair dryer,” “This is a dog’s chew toy.” To the other group, the objects were introduced as “This could be a hair dryer.” “This could be a dog’s toy.” Then Langer and Piper orchestrated an urgent need for an eraser. Members of the “could be” group were the only group to suggest using the rubber chew toy as an eraser.

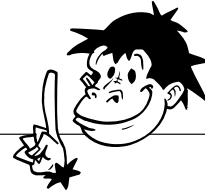
Making Room for More Tea

Another old Zen story tells of a man who goes to a Zen master in a monastery and asks to be trained in Zen. Hoping to impress the Zen master, the man launches into a speech about the many Buddhist texts he has read and the complex and erudite theories he has apprehended. The master invites the man to sit down for a cup of tea. The Zen master begins pouring the tea into the visitor’s cup, but rather than stopping when the cup is full, he keeps pouring and pouring. Alarmed, the man exclaims, “Master! The cup is overflowing!”

The Zen master stopped pouring the tea and looked at the man. "This cup is like your mind," he said. "How can you learn anything when it is already full?"

The point of this story is that all our minds are already full of expectations, opinions, and preconceptions. When we first approach Zen, most of us have an idea of what it will be about, what we want from it, or what it can do for us. With all this in the way, the story suggests, we don't have any room to receive the real truth of Zen. So first we must empty our minds of all these premade thoughts. Only then can we experience true Zen, which is to live in the now.

Only when we dump out our teacup can we make room for the really good tea. It is easy to think that the "really good tea" must be Zen, or Zen wisdom, or all the stuff the Buddha said, but that isn't it. Zen is the dumping of the teacup. The really good tea is your life, your existence, your you.



Monkey Mind!

Expectations, opinions, and preconceptions aren't easy to recognize because they are so ingrained in us. We see what we expect to see, we recognize what we already know, and we pay most attention to the familiar and the things we want to see. That may be comfortable, but it leaves a whole lot of life unnoticed, unappreciated, and unused.

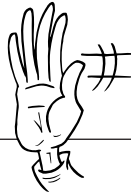
Stilling the Waters

Remember our analogy about the moon being truth, and how truth's reflection gets all jumbled when the waters of your mind are in turmoil? Zen helps to still those waters. Yes, you will still experience waves, storms, all that stuff that gets your "life's boat" tossing and moving forward and backward, on and off course. You will still experience weather. But because the ocean (life) gets moved around so much by external forces, you certainly don't need to be churning it up yourself with a big stick. Zen helps you to still the waters of your mind from internal roiling.

How? Through mindfulness. And how do we learn mindfulness? Through meditation. In the next section of this book, we'll go into more detail on how to start meditating, why meditating is helpful, what it can and can't do, and how it can help still the waters of your mind by letting you practice mindfulness in a conducive environment, so you can carry that mindfulness into the world.

Zen's Goalless Goals

So, when it comes right down to it, Zen is full of goalless goals (another one of those Zen paradoxes). A goalless goal isn't something in the future, but something to experience now. What is there to experience? Let's look at a few basic Zen concepts that Zen masters teach—sort of a "sneak preview" to enlightenment.



One Hand Clapping

"... Zen celebrates in its unique way the lightning strike of creative intuition. Though these peak moments last only a few seconds, they illuminate existential issues, transfigure the mundane, rinse the person of every self-centered desire and aversion. The deeper each experience penetrates, the more the personality reintegrates itself to set up new priorities. But this process is selective. It is not a delete button that wipes out all of one's previous personal history and memories. Rather does it permit their elements to realign along new motivational interfaces. There they can yield the kind of flexible, adaptive responses that will transform behavior along a higher plane of values."

—From *Zen and the Brain*, by James H. Austin, M.D.

1 + 1 = 1

In Zen, basic math goes out the window because $1 + 1 = 1$. No, that's not how we all learned it. Also, $1 + 1 + 1 + 1 = 1$. You can add as many ones as you like and the answer will still be 1.

This is a principle traditionally described as having been realized by enlightened beings throughout the history of Buddhism. While you can know this truth, technically, enlightenment means becoming this truth, perceiving it internally. Knowing it without thinking about it.

We are all one. Everyone is different, but we are all part of the same thing, all waves in an ocean, blades of grass in a field, air molecules in the atmosphere. Every living, breathing thing and every nonliving, nonbreathing thing are all part of a unified whole, and every part depends on every other part.

While this concept may contradict basic arithmetic, it is right in line with basic physics. You may have heard of chaos theory, a concept that became suddenly popular in the public mind a few years ago. (The concept was simplified for general consumption in the book and movie *Jurassic Park*, in case you are wondering where you might have heard of it.)

What is chaos theory? Once upon a time, scientists believed that since everything in nature was a matter of cause and effect, if you understood the cause well enough, you could predict the effect.

But as we all know from being the victims of inaccurate weather predictions, predictions often don't come true. That's because, according to chaos theory, we can never really measure anything with infinite accuracy, and the complexity of systems are often such that we can never fully understand a cause.

Therefore, in such cases involving complex systems (a severe storm watch, a crashed computer, a theme park containing live dinosaurs), we can never predict an outcome with unerring accuracy.

But (and here's the Zen part), the basic premise, that everything is a matter of cause and effect, is still true. Chaos theory doesn't deny this. In fact, it supports it. Your daughter's coughing fit might trigger a series of events leading to a thunderstorm in Nairobi. The earth's ecosystem is so incredibly complex that we are all connected in a way that defies objective understanding. It isn't that it can't be understood. It isn't anything mystical, it's just ultimately complex.

Chaos theory completes the notion of cause and effect with the knowledge that, cause and effect or no, we can't possibly know what will happen or control what will happen in any given situation, unless the cause and effect occur with very few variables in isolation (something that would rarely happen—in fact, we can't even think of an example).

In *Zen and the Brain*, by James H. Austin, M.D. (MIT Press, 1998), Dr. Austin writes about the recognition of the interconnectedness of all things, "Interbeing is the whole BIG PICTURE. It relates this page of paper back through the pulp to the logger who fed his family by felling the tree, back through the parents who raised him, on through the wheat fields which nourished them all, to the rain clouds and soil and sunshine that made possible all these and everything else."

So if everything happens because of something else, we are all part of a great big, ultimately complex system. We are like individual cells in a giant body. Everything that happens impacts everything else (this is also the basis of karma, discussed in Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Zen Buddhism"). We are all one, just as much as we are all separate. We don't live in isolation and nothing we do, or even think, happens without its ripples in the great ocean. We can't predict the ripples, but we make them all the time.

Serve Others? Who's Serving Me?

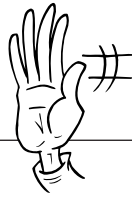
Some who have achieved enlightenment devote themselves to a life of service. Some become Zen teachers, others help their fellow sentient beings in other ways not specifically related to a Zen organization.

In the West, we are taught that volunteerism is a noble thing and that those who "have" should "give back." But what about those who don't have much? In Zen, what you have is irrelevant. The only important thing is to perceive that, because we are all one, everyone and everything else around you is connected to you.

Helping other humans to survive and find happiness, helping to preserve the earth's natural resources, helping to save others—children, animals, each other—from abuse and neglect, helping to make the world a better place means improving and uplifting the great body of which you are a part. It isn't something you force yourself to do. If you have to force it, it isn't Zen.

It simply makes sense. You take care of yourself by taking care of your environment, and everyone and everything in it. By helping others, you are helping yourself because you are inextricable from all others.

That's not to say that serving others in Zen is totally selfish. It isn't a matter of helping only to help yourself, but it also isn't a matter of pure altruism. Altruism is concern for and action to improve the welfare of others without regard to the self. This isn't a Zen approach because it implies there is a separate self to disregard while serving others. The self and the others are all part of the same thing, so in serving one, you serve them all.



One Hand Clapping

In *The Art of Happiness*, His Holiness the Dalai Lama explains the difference between compassion and attachment:

"One kind of compassion is tinged with attachment—the feeling of controlling someone, or loving someone so that person will love you back ... a relationship based on that alone is unstable But there is a second type of compassion that is free from such attachment Genuine compassion is based on the rationale that all human beings have an innate desire to be happy and overcome suffering, just like myself. And, just like myself, they have the natural right to fulfill this fundamental aspiration It is based on the other's fundamental rights rather than your own mental projection. Upon this basis, then, you will generate love and compassion. That's genuine compassion."

Making This Life Better

Because Zen exists in the now, recognizing the importance and the immediacy of the present moment has an interesting effect: You learn to make the present moment better. If this is it, if this is your life, if the present moment is everything, then why

waste it watching second-rate sitcom re-runs on television until 3:00 A.M.? Maybe you will want to do that sometimes, but an enlightened awareness will also make you want to make the most out of each moment.

Since life is just a series of present moments that can slip away quickly, Zen helps you to get the most bang for your buck. Maybe you'll turn off the television and step outside into the sunlight. Maybe you'll decide to spend time with a friend instead of surfing the Internet. Or maybe you'll decide to surf for online Zen tutorials (there are plenty—see Appendix A). Or, maybe you won't change much about your external life. It is your Zen, your present moment. Whatever you make of it, you can learn to make the most of it.

The Least You Need to Know

- The goal of Zen is to live your goal right now rather than look ahead to it.
- Nirvana, sometimes called *satori*, *kensho*, and enlightenment, is the freedom from attachments to thoughts, feelings, and desires, and a complete and total absorption in the present moment.
- Other Zen perks include mental clutter control, an ability to handle stress-inducing situations with humor and lightness, a purging of preconceptions and expectations, and a mind that remains calm and clear in any situation.
- Enlightened people recognize that everyone and everything in the universe is connected and interrelated in an intricate system.
- Enlightened people are frequently compelled to spend their lives helping others and improving their environments, in order to make the most of each present moment.

Part 3

1-2-3 Zazen: Zen Techniques for Zen Living

This is the nuts-and-bolts part of the book. It's one thing to talk about adopting a Zen attitude, but we know it is easier said than done. The practice of some tried-and-true techniques can make the job easier. We'll talk about what it takes to get started (hint: you've already started!), and then we'll answer all your questions about meditation, the heart of Zen (which means "meditation").

Next we'll sit you down and help you to start meditating. We'll talk about various techniques for training the body and disciplining the mind, like how to sit, how to breathe, how to be mindful, how to do walking meditation, and how to practice koans, those famous Zen riddles meant to prod the mind into a new way of thinking (or not thinking!).

We'll end with a discussion of the other aspects of your daily life. How do you keep meditating every day? Should you eat in a more Zen-like way? Do you have to be a vegetarian? What about exercise? Housework? We'll cover it all.





You've Already Started

In This Chapter

- The secret of Zen living
- You have Zen within you
- So how do you get to it?
- On your mark, get set, go!
- Introduction to zazen

We've spent the first seven chapters of this book talking about what it means to live Zen, both historically and today. Perhaps you are wondering where to start. How do you begin living in the now? How do you begin letting go of your attachments? How do you begin practicing mindfulness? What exactly are you supposed to do?

You've already started. You have! Right now is happening right now, and any time you want to acknowledge it and start making the most of it, you can. There is nothing to wait for, to train for, to hope for. You can do it right now, and in many ways, you probably already do it.

But you can get better at it, which is a little like on-the-job training. To some extent, mindfulness is something you can simply begin to do, but the first time you consciously begin to be mindful, you probably won't be able to sustain it for very long.

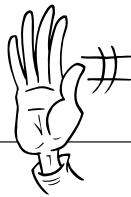
To help you, we offer some techniques, since mindfulness and letting go are, we admit, much easier to talk about than to do. The most helpful technique for living your Zen is meditation, which we will cover briefly here and in more detail in the next chapter.

But first, let's talk about some helpful, hands-on adjustments you can make to your life right now (which is, of course, what Zen is all about).

The Secret Is There Is No Secret

The word *Zen* has an air of mystery about it for Westerners, something akin to the concept of the ancient Chinese secret. But the thing about Zen is that there isn't anything secret about it. You don't spend years studying to uncover some great mystery. There is no treasure map, no secret compartment, no special information you get only after going through some sacred ritual. Remember, Zen just means the real you in the right now.

This echoes back to our idea that Zen should have a goal: self-improvement, if nothing else. And, as we've said, that usually happens. But the first way to really understand the importance of now is to give up the idea that you are uncovering any special knowledge that exists outside of yourself. *You* are the secret, the X on the treasure map, the secret compartment. You have it all within you.



One Hand Clapping

Remember the children's story "The Little Engine That Could"? We think this is a great metaphor for Zen living. The little engine felt compassion for the toys that couldn't make it over the mountain and the children who wouldn't receive them. He looked deep within himself, below the exterior of a small and insufficient engine, and discovered his own true nature. He focused on his task fully and completely, refused to let doubts, regrets, or negative thoughts impede him (through a very successful use of positive self talk: "I think I can, I think I can!"), and using his inner resources, he accomplished the job!

You Already Have What You Are Looking For

This concept is a little bit difficult for Westerners raised in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Aren't we supposed to give things over to a higher power? "You can't do it all, but God can." This is one of the points on which Christianity and Buddhism seem to differ.

However, we don't see why these ideas can't coexist. If you have a religious faith that involves a higher power, you can still look within yourself to find the gifts you have

been given. You can still immerse yourself in the present moment to fully appreciate and savor the life you have been given and the world that has been created and grows and breathes and lives all around you. Buddhism doesn't say you are God. It doesn't really talk about God, leaving that for other faiths to tackle. That's why Zen doesn't contradict other religions.

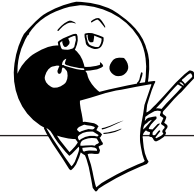
Many Christians and Jews practice Zen, finding that it fits beautifully into their personal spiritual or religious beliefs. People of many other faiths practice Zen, too. Although some Zen Buddhists might believe that Zen must be Buddhism and Buddhism must involve adherence to certain concepts (there is nothing wrong with such beliefs), we feel that those who choose to practice Zen should feel free to find a way to make Zen work for them.

Zen has much to give you, but everything it has to give is already inside you. Isn't that wonderful? Your perfection, your personal fulfillment, your self-actualization are already there, like a seed or bulb or a tiny sprout just waiting for nourishment, encouragement, and some regular tending.

Duty, Discipline, Devotion

Zen is also in the doing. We all have jobs to do: regular (or irregular) employment or school, being a parent, a daughter or a son, a sibling, or a friend, and many other duties in life. Society and good health require a certain amount of personal discipline. And our lives are immeasurably enriched by practicing devotion: to a cause, to an art, to our jobs, to our beliefs, to our families, to our friends, to our earth, to our God, or gods, or goddesses.

This everyday life, called *samsara*, is the real place for your Zen living to change things. These three external manifestations of human life—duty, discipline, and devotion—are the ideal arenas for practicing Zen living.



Nirvana Notes

If you are interested in the link between Zen and Western religion, many good books are devoted to the subject, including those that approach Christianity and other Western religions from a Zen perspective, and those that approach Zen from a Christian, Jewish, or otherwise primarily Western perspective. Check your library, the Internet, and Appendix A, "Further Reading," for suggestions.



Zen-Speak

Samsara is the Sanskrit word for everyday life in the phenomenal world. Technically, it refers to the succession of births and rebirths before the release from this cycle that comes out of the attainment of nirvana. The word is often used to refer to the daily existence on earth.

Do your duty without attachment and without resentment or obsession. Practice personal discipline so you can better maintain a sense of control, well-being, and good health for your own body and your own mind. Devote yourself with compassion to the world and the people and things in it—without attaching to them, without needing them, without desiring them, but simply by loving them.

Isn't There an Instruction Manual?

All these things sound good, but once again, you may be thinking, yes, yes, but how do I do it?

Life doesn't have an instruction manual, and neither does Zen, even though there are plenty of books out there that are happy to tell you how to do one or both (live life, practice Zen, live Zen). Both life and Zen are encountered through direct experience. You live, you learn. No one can tell you how to do it, beyond offering suggestions you may or may not choose to take.

But those suggestions can help a lot when you feel like you don't know where to go or feel that your life needs some direction, a jump start, or has gotten on the wrong track. If you ever feel like you don't know who you are, what you are doing, or where you are going, just remember: now. Now is everything.

If that isn't enough in the way of guidelines, you can also use the Buddha's five noble precepts as an anchor for your daily life. In the book *For a Future to Be Possible: Commentaries on the Five Wonderful Precepts* (Parallax Press, 1993), Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh has simplified these into five commonsense guidelines, in the form of vows, for right living that give Zen practitioners something on which to hang their hats, so to speak. In short (and in paraphrase), they are:

- The destruction of life causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate compassion and learn how to protect the lives of people, animals, and plants, refusing to kill, to let others kill, or to condone any act of killing in action, thought, and lifestyle.
- Social injustice causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate loving kindness and work for the well-being of people, animals, and plants, refusing to steal and vowing to share my material resources.
- Sexual misconduct causes suffering, so I vow to respect my commitments and not to engage in sexual misconduct, and to work to protect others from sexual abuse and the effects of sexual misconduct.
- Words can cause suffering, so I vow to speak only with kindness and love and to listen deeply, never speaking words that could cause division and discord but working to avoid or resolve conflict.
- Unmindful consumption causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate good physical and mental health in myself and in society by only eating, drinking, consuming, and paying attention to things that result in physical, mental, and societal peace and harmony.

A tall order, yes. These precepts are things to think about. When you are ready for each one, it will happen in your life. If you are looking for a place to start, you can start with any of these and try to integrate it into your daily life.

Now what about mindfulness? How can you begin to live mindfully right now? What can you do besides think to yourself, "I'm going to be mindful right now" (which doesn't always work very well, especially if you are new to the idea)? In the spirit of the instruction manual, let's look at a few techniques for bringing yourself back to now.

Your Life Just Started: Go!

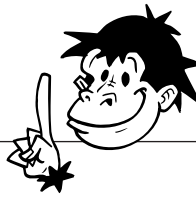
We don't mean to inflict a sense of urgency on you, but your life just started. So go! Go! Go!! Right this second, your life is happening. This is it, right here, right now. This is as good as it gets. There is nothing to wait for. There is nothing to hold out for. This is it. So go!

Yet, by *go*, we don't mean get up and start running. We don't mean to push yourself higher up the corporate ladder or elbow your way to the front of the rat race. We don't even mean you should get up and clean the house or pay the bills and stop lying around, wasting time.

Life isn't a race. It isn't as if everyone has already left and you didn't hear the starting gun. Life isn't a competition.

When we say *Go!* all we mean is wake up. Bring yourself into your present moment. Cultivate your awareness. You don't have to lift a finger, but you do have to engage your brain in what might be a fairly unfamiliar way.

And the easiest way to do this, to get going, to wake up, to become aware, is (ironically) to sit still.



Monkey Mind!

How many times have you felt you missed an important event just because you weren't paying attention or were too overwhelmed to really experience it? Many report "missing" their own weddings, births of their children, graduations, sports victories, award ceremonies, and other supposedly memorable moments, even though they were right in the middle of the action. Zen living tones your mind so you don't let life pass you by.

Let's try it. This isn't exactly meditation just yet. We'd just like you to sit down for a minute. Get comfortable. You can sit on a chair or on the floor, whatever feels best, but wherever you sit, sit upright with your spine straight, not slumped back in a cushy recliner.

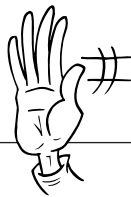
Now we would like you to try to notice every single thing you can notice with each of your five senses. Concentrate first on what you can see. Mentally list everything you can see from where you are sitting, no matter how big or small: a couch, a bay window, carpet fibers, dust bunnies, whatever. (You can also do this outside: sky, each cloud, a parked car, each blade of grass.)

Really focus on the world as you are able to perceive it visually. If your mind starts to wander to things you should be doing or even to a mental commentary about what you see, gently guide it back to your visual investigation. An old Zen saying goes something like, "When you hear a dog bark, do you think of your own dog?" If you do, you are already making associations, and your mind is wandering. If you hear a dog bark, just hear that dog bark, and leave it at that. Think: I hear a dog barking. Or even just: Dog barking.

After you think you've seen it all, focus on what you can hear. An airplane, a car passing, the air-conditioner, the refrigerator compressor, people talking, music, wind? Note everything in your environment you can perceive by hearing.

Next focus on everything you can smell, then everything you can feel. Taste you can save for whenever you eat your next meal or snack.

The point of this exercise is to become totally immersed in the present moment and your environment. This is what mindfulness feels like. (This kind of attention to detail in your immediate environment is what will help you to remember where you put your keys.)



One Hand Clapping

"There is a great attraction in the short cut, and if there is some profound method which offers a quick way, we would rather follow that than undertake arduous journeys and difficult practices. So here we see the true importance of asceticism: punishing oneself leads nowhere, but some manual work and physical effort is necessary. If we go somewhere on foot, we know the way perfectly, whereas if we go by motor car or airplane we are hardly there at all, it becomes merely a dream."

—From *Meditation in Action*, by Chögyam Trungpa

Too often, we travel through life as if watching television. We drive around and watch the world through the glass of the car window. We look out the window in our homes (once in a while) or in our offices (if we are lucky enough to have windows). We communicate through computers, phones, faxes. In so many ways, our modern world puts several layers and filters between us and the actual world, the person we are speaking with, the things we see or hear.

These filters make it very easy to slip into the automatic mode, to forget that we are alive, that this is life happening right now. Practicing engaging your senses in your immediate environment can be a startling and enlightening way to remind yourself that you are alive, and that you can wake up any time you want to wake up.

So stop floating through life as if it is a dream and wake up! Your life has begun. See. Hear. Smell. Touch. Taste. Let the world touch you and move you. Now is the only moment you know you have. Wake up and be there for it!

Living Now

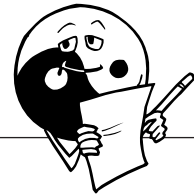
It is much easier to concentrate on being present in the present moment when you are sitting still, but Zen is also about doing this in daily life. Let's practice this a little, too. One of the best ways to do this is by starting with some simple task you know you have to do. Everyone has to clean, so let's start there. Let's wash the dishes.

You probably have a dishwasher. It seems these days, most people do. You may or may not use it all the time, but today, let's forget about the dishwasher. Eat a meal (mindfully), and then wash your dishes by hand.

Your first reaction may already be something worth paying attention to. Are you thinking: Wash my dishes by hand? I don't *think* so! That's why I have a dishwasher, so I won't have to wash dishes by hand! I hate washing dishes! What a waste of time! I have better things to do. Forget this Zen business if it means washing dishes.

Or, if you don't have a dishwasher, maybe you are thinking: Dishwashing? Oh no! My one goal in life is to get a dishwasher. I'm always doing dishes, constantly doing dishes, and you are going to try to convince me it's fun? Yeah, right! I have better things to do!

We would like to suggest that perhaps you don't have better things to do. Perhaps washing the dishes from your meal today is the best possible thing you could be doing.



Nirvana Notes

Zen is not about making your life more primitive, more difficult, or more labor-intensive (although manual labor is traditionally an important part of the Zen monastery or Zen retreat experience). While a simpler life is more conducive to Zen living, if the dishwasher, the washing machine, the central air, and the new car make your life simpler (making mindfulness easier), by all means, continue to use them.

We'll even go so far as to say that if washing the dishes is what you are doing at any given moment, it *is* the best possible thing you could be doing at that moment.

Whether you have a dishwasher to save time (although a dishwasher also uses up a lot of energy, which costs money, which takes time to earn), or do your dishes by hand every day and hate every minute of it, think about what repels you. Why do you “hate” washing dishes?

Think about what kind of ideas, memories, or feelings you attach to this basic chore. Washing the dishes from one meal will probably take less than 15 minutes. Imagine cutting out just 15 minutes of television time. Would it be time better spent? Let's find out.

First turn off the television, the radio, or whatever else you might have running in the background to distract you from the “unpleasantness.” Run the soapy water in the sink. Notice how the water sounds, looks, feels. Notice how the bubbles billow up. Find a good scrubber—sponge, wash cloth, dish brush, or whatever. Look at it. Notice it. How does it feel in your hand?

If how you feel about dishwashing keeps creeping in, acknowledge it—oh yes, another thought about how I don't like this chore—then get back to your present moment.

Put the dishes into the water. Watch how they slide in, or clink in, how they fit together into the sink. Then, one by one, select a dish, a utensil, a glass, a mug, and scrub its surfaces clean. Don't rush through it. Live it. Notice it. Try not to miss a second. Like it's your wedding day.

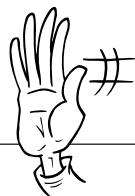
Rinse each dish clean and put it in the dish rack. Then, when all the dishes are clean, one by one, with the same attention, dry them and put them away.

Was that so bad? If you think it was, you were probably spending most of your time still attaching to those feelings you have about dishwashing, rather than simply doing the dishwashing.

If you found the experience surprisingly pleasant, great! Just think how your life could transform if you experienced every task just that way. We aren't saying you should get rid of your dishwasher. (To be honest, we don't plan to get rid of our dishwashers.) The point is to bring the same mindful reverence to any task you do throughout the day, from brushing your teeth in the morning to loading or unloading the dishwasher to driving to work to washing the car to making and eating your dinner to brushing your teeth before bedtime.

Begin at the Beginning—Again!

Just when you think you've got this paying attention thing down, your mind wanders. Perhaps even during the course of that washing-the-dishes exercise, you felt as if your mind kept wandering, wandering, wandering away.



One Hand Clapping

In his book *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, Thich Nhat Hanh talks about washing dishes in a Buddhist monastery, often for more than 100 monks, with only ashes, rice husks, and coconut husks for scrubbing in a pot of water heated over a fire. Hanh writes:

"Nowadays, one stands in a kitchen equipped with liquid soap, special scrubpads, and even running hot water which makes it all the more agreeable. It is easier to enjoy washing the dishes now. Anyone can wash them in a hurry, then sit down and enjoy a cup of tea afterwards. I can see a machine for washing clothes, although I wash my own things out by hand, but a dishwashing machine is going just a little too far!"

Even accomplished Zen monks, teachers, masters experience this wandering mind. Human minds wander. But the great thing about existence is that every moment is the present moment, so every moment is a chance to begin again. And again. And again. It doesn't matter how many times you collect yourself back into the present moment. No magic number means Zen success. If you embrace the present moment upon your return from your mental wanderings one, two, three, or 60 times a minute, you are still embracing the present moment. And that is living Zen.

Let's try another exercise. Sit down comfortably again, and bring your attention to your breath. Feel how it moves into you, out of you, into you, out of you. "Watch" the breath by devoting your complete attention to it.

Pretty soon, your mind is going to wander. Without realizing it, you'll start wondering what that sound is from outside, or you'll be planning tomorrow's menu, or going over that conversation again that you had with your co-worker. What was it he said about Wait a minute! That's not paying attention to your breath!

Begin again. In, out. In, out. In, out. In, out. Some meditation techniques start with counting the breath, but don't even do that now. Just notice how it feels to breathe in, breathe out.

Suddenly you realize you might have forgotten to turn off the coffeemaker. You jump up and run into the kitchen. It's off. What are you doing? You forgot to keep breathing! You slink back to your spot and sit.

And you begin again. In, out. In, out. In, out. Are you late for something? What day is it? You glance at the calendar. Tuesday. Isn't that the meeting with your support

group? Or is it the parent-teacher conference? You feel almost frantic to think of someplace you have to be. You start to get up to check your planner, but you catch yourself this time. It can wait.

And you begin again. In, out. In, out. In, out.

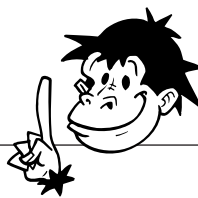
This exercise is so difficult, especially for beginners, because your mind isn't used to paying attention to anything for very long. And it resists! Just watch how it has you jumping up and down, scrunching up your forehead in worry, how it has your eyes wandering desperately around the room for something interesting to look at, how bored you feel, how much that spot on your back itches that you can't quite reach

Yikes, this isn't so easy! Paying attention ... even when it's ... (gulp) boring?

Oh, yes. This is living Zen. That boredom part is hard, and you have to move on through it—acknowledge it, feel it, and let it go—before you can really understand and appreciate the beauty in those average, formerly-thought-of-as-dull moments in life, and before you can master meditation.

And so you begin again. In, out. In, out. For your first time, see if you can do this for five minutes. That's a long time to sit there and breathe. If you keep yourself on the floor without jumping up and rushing off to do something, check something, look up something, stir something, turn something, change something, or call somebody, congratulate yourself. Great start! We mean it.

You may be comforted to know that much of your frustration stems from the simple fact that you aren't in the habit of paying attention. The more you get into the habit of mindfulness, the easier it becomes, and your 60 beginning-agains-per-minute will soon become two, one, and even fewer.



Monkey Mind!

If you are in the habit of not paying attention, you can get in the habit of paying attention. It isn't easy, but just like any habit it can be broken and reformed. Try not to get frustrated and give up just because you can't change years of habit in a few days (or weeks). With perseverance and the cultivation of self-discipline through zazen, you can learn to live mindfully almost all the time.

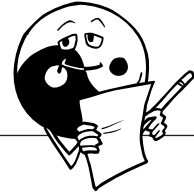
Entering the Meditation Zone

This last exercise was really a premeditation exercise, so let's talk about meditation. Meditation is at the heart of Zen. The word *Zen* means "meditation," just as the Chinese word *Ch'an* means "meditation."

But there exists a common misconception about Zen. Zen isn't just meditation. Or, it isn't just sitting meditation (called *zazen*). You could say Zen is just meditation if you mean meditation in life, as a synonym for mindfulness. But sitting meditation is just a technique of Zen, designed to help you discover what it feels like to be mindful under conditions that are much more conducive to mindfulness than running around doing your daily work.

Sitting in *zazen* isn't a rehearsal for life. In Zen, you are never rehearsing because your practice, at the moments during practice, is your life. It is always now whether you are in *zazen* or standing in a long line at the grocery store or running full-speed after the tow-truck that just towed your car.

But sitting in *zazen* lets you pay attention with all your faculties under very basic conditions: you, sitting still. It is in *zazen* that you can learn to cultivate mindfulness so that it can flower all over your day.



Nirvana Notes

Many people begin practicing *zazen* by counting their breaths, one for each inhale and exhale, up to 10, then back to one. Counting keeps the mind focused on something so it can begin to calm down. Eventually you won't have to count. You can just be.

Everyday Zen Means Everyday Sitting

Ever since she co-authored *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Meditation*, Eve has had many people say to her, "Oh, I can't meditate. I can't just sit there." Eve usually can't help answering, "Well, you could meditate. You just don't want to meditate."

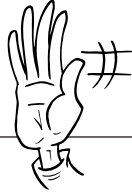
Many people are interested in meditation because of its purported benefits. They want to be more relaxed, manage stress better, think more clearly, feel more serene.

But they don't want to just sit there, for heaven's sake! What a waste of time! How irritating! How utterly unbearable.

Sometimes, yes. We hate to break it to you who still haven't quite accepted the idea: Meditation means sitting still. Every day. For an actual period of time exceeding a couple of seconds. Meditation gets boring. Meditation gets uncomfortable. Meditation can be downright miserable at times.

That's because our minds, like wild animals, don't want to be tamed. They don't want to follow any rules. They don't want to be mastered. They want to master us. And they usually do! Only through sitting, sitting, sitting, do we bring our minds under control.

The good part is, the more you meditate, the more you really do experience the benefits. It is all worth the effort. It does, without a doubt, take effort, but most it is an effort most of us are perfectly capable of making. Just about anyone can sit, like it or not. The next chapter will tell you more.



One Hand Clapping

"I learned that the core tool of Buddhism is meditation, with its focus on the breath. We are taught to follow our breath, in and out, in and out, watching it leave us, watching it enter us. In the watching we are calmed, and are made ready for serious spiritual work. And while there are other tools—chanting, volunteering, prostrations (bowing to the floor)—it is meditation that forms the path we stumble on and the walking stick we can grasp when the going gets unbelievably rough. Meditation is what sneaks spiritual progress into our days, finally offering the taste of bliss that is at the bottom of all our yearning."

—From *Stumbling Toward Enlightenment*, by Geri Larkin

Shhh ...

The last point we'd like to make about meditation is that it can become a refuge, an oasis of quiet in the middle (or at the beginning or end) of your busy, noisy day. How incredibly rejuvenating, to just sit and be quiet for a few minutes. Wow! Quiet doesn't have to be a rare luxury. It can be a daily treat.

Meditation may get boring and it may be extremely difficult, but for those aching to capture just a few moments of peace, this is your chance. (Parents of small children may choose to meditate for this single reason alone—just ask Eve!)

The Least You Need to Know

- ▶ Your life has already begun, and you can start living in the moment right now.
- ▶ Everything you need to live mindfully and completely is already within you.
- ▶ Doing your job, maintaining personal discipline, and developing devotion toward fellow sentient beings and the care of the world are ideal arenas for practicing mindfulness and letting go of attachments.
- ▶ Zen meditation is called zazen, and it means simple but mindful sitting to cultivate full awareness.
- ▶ Meditation is difficult because the mind is in the habit of attaching to thoughts, feelings, ideas, and opinions.
- ▶ The peace and quiet meditation affords can be an oasis in a hectic day.



Learning to Meditate

In This Chapter

- ▶ Your meditation questions answered
- ▶ Yikes, not the lotus pose!
- ▶ How and where to sit
- ▶ What about your hands?
- ▶ Settling into position

Since the heart of Zen is meditation, we will spend this chapter talking about meditation in general and Zen meditation in particular, and then we'll get into position.

Zazen has some traditional guidelines in terms of position, and we'll also give you some additional options. We'll offer you some meditation "warm-ups" to get you into the right frame of mind, and some different techniques you can try when you are having difficulty sitting.

Meditation FAQ

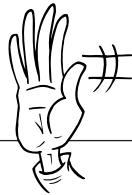
People have a lot of questions about meditation in general and zazen in particular. Before we launch into a full-fledged explanation of zazen and other forms of Zen meditation, let's address a few "Frequently Asked Questions."

What Is Zazen, Exactly? Do You Do It in a Certain Way?

Zazen, or Zen sitting meditation, is the most well known form of Zen meditation. It involves sitting in one of several specific positions in total, open awareness. While many books give you lots of guidelines for exactly how to sit, in the true spirit of Zen, while zazen has certain guidelines to it, whatever works for you is your zazen. We aren't going to say that if you don't sit in this particular way or center your mind on this or that, it isn't zazen. Zazen is simply you, sitting with full awareness.

But getting to this point, as we've mentioned, isn't easy. Zazen has a method because ...

1. People like to know how to do something in a way that will work, rather than just guessing at it.
2. People try to sit the way they believe Buddha sat when he became enlightened.
3. Over the centuries, certain ways of sitting have proved to be more effective—that is, more conducive to meditation and more helpful in cultivating the self-discipline that makes mindfulness possible.



One Hand Clapping

"There can be no doubt that for most Westerners, who seem by nature more active and restless than Asians, sitting perfectly still in zazen, even in a chair, is physically and mentally painful. Their unwillingness to endure such pain and discomfort even for short periods of time undoubtedly stems from a deeply entrenched conviction that it is not only senseless but even masochistic to accept pain deliberately when ways can be found to escape or mitigate it."

—From *The Three Pillars of Zen*, by Roshi Philip Kapleau

Do You Have to Meditate to Practice Zen?

Zazen really is the heart of a traditional Zen practice. Depending on whom you ask, zazen is either the best way or the only way to really understand the nature of reality, including your own true nature. Some argue that mindfulness in daily life is the heart

of Zen, rather than sitting in meditation. But the fact remains that without the sitting, you probably won't really master the mindfulness. You may get it here and there, now and then, but without the personal discipline you cultivate through zazen, you probably won't develop your Zen living skills very well. Remember, even the Buddha had to sit under that fig tree for a good 12 hours before he finally figured it all out, and he had been practicing sitting meditation regularly for six years.

How Does Zazen Develop Self-Discipline?

By being difficult! You won't want to sit there, being aware. Your mind is used to action, activity, stimulation, entertainment, and movement. Sitting is hard work and takes effort, as does the cultivation of any productive new habit. Finding the inner will and perseverance to develop this new habit is certainly a matter of self-discipline.

To Practice Zazen, Do You Have to Follow a Lot of Rules?

If you choose to meditate in a *zendo* (a Zen meditation hall), you may need to learn certain rules of form and practice based in whatever tradition (Soto, Rinzai) that particular zendo follows. But the rules aren't the point of zazen. Rules of form and practice help to cultivate that personal discipline, maintain a conducive meditation environment in the zendo, and make the meditation experience as successful and productive as possible.

In your at-home meditation practice, you will need far fewer "rules" such as facing the wall or walking in a certain direction around the room, but maintaining certain guidelines of form that have been time-tested over the centuries will, again, make the experience as successful and productive as possible.

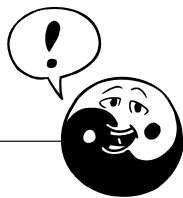


Zen-Speak

A **zendo** is a Zen meditation hall. Many larger cities have zendos where people can come to practice zazen together or participate in Zen retreats. Certain rules of etiquette and form are typically practiced in a zendo. These vary according to different Zen traditions.

Why Would You Face a Wall While Meditating?

In Soto Zen, meditators typically face a wall, just as Bodhidharma (according to legend) meditated facing the wall of a cave. Facing a wall minimizes distractions. In Rinzai Zen, meditators typically sit in a circle and face center. At home, you can face where you like, as long as it helps minimize distractions (in other words, don't face the television!).



Zen-Speak

A **sesshin** is a period of intense practice (typically a week or two), with long sessions of zazen. It is often called a Zen retreat.

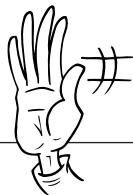
Is Zazen Better Practiced Alone or in a Group?

Either way can be effective, but group zazen has a quality all its own that many Zen practitioners find invaluable. Zen meditation retreats, called *sesshins*, and zendos where people meet on a regular basis to meditate, help to remind you that you are part of a sangha, and that is one of the three treasures of Buddhism: the community of people you meditate with, who are essentially representatives of the world community. Meditating with others reminds you that you are part of a larger whole and also helps to engender compassion toward all other beings. (In case you

forgot from Chapter 2, “A Brief History of Zen Buddhism,” the other two treasures of Buddhism are the Buddha himself and the dharma, or the truth the Buddha taught.)

Is It Sacrilegious to Meditate?

Certainly not! We’ve already mentioned how Zen works in concert with any religious belief or system. All religious traditions employ some form of meditation. Zazen simply helps to clear out your muddled mind so you can think more clearly and act with more perspective, compassion, and conviction (and with less attachment, grasping, and desire). Some might say true Zen is the absence of all beliefs, but we think that is fairly unrealistic. Humans have beliefs, opinions, thoughts, feelings, values, philosophies, even creeds. The point is to see them, to acknowledge them, but not to cling to them because they are all things of the world. Hold them lightly and be open to whatever life brings you. (We can’t help thinking a higher power would approve of such an approach.)



One Hand Clapping

In his book *You Have to Say Something*, Zen master Dainin Katagiri (1928–1990) writes,

“In Chinese, the character *za* is a picture of two people sitting on the earth. This means we have to sit zazen with others—not just with other people, but with all beings. You can’t sit zazen alone—that is, you can’t sit within an egoistic, selfish territory that is all your own. It’s impossible. To sit zazen, you must open yourself to the universe. To sit zazen with all beings is for all beings to sit zazen with you.”

What Is the Best Time of Day to Meditate?

That depends on you, your schedule, and your particular inclinations. Some people prefer morning, some midday, some evening. Meditate when you can. If you think you should only meditate in the morning but you aren't a morning person, you'll probably never do it. If you meditate when you are particularly tired, you'll probably just fall asleep. Early morning, however, is probably the most typical time to practice zazen. It is quieter, more peaceful, and more naturally serene. It seems to be a more optimistic time of day because the day is just beginning. Because "Zen mind" means approaching everything as if it is new, morning also seems appropriate. Sleepiness can be dispelled by a brisk walk, jog, and/or a cool shower before zazen.

What Is the Difference?

The difference between meditation, mindfulness, concentration, relaxation, and visualization is as follows:

- Meditation is a conscious process wherein the meditator makes an effort to be fully aware without attaching to thoughts and feelings. Eventually, mental clamor settles down and awareness becomes more acute. Meditation can also refer to the practice of one-pointed awareness, focusing on a visual, aural, or other point (like a mantra or a candle flame) until the meditator becomes one with the point of awareness. (These come to the same thing because mindfulness and one-pointed awareness eventually both lead to the awareness of the unity of all things.) Meditation is also the artificial environment created for practicing non-attachment, mindfulness, or one-pointed awareness—sitting just to meditate, walking just to meditate, and so on.
- Mindfulness is what we practice during meditation, but can also be practiced during daily activity. It is the process of being fully aware of our external and internal environments.
- Concentration is an effort to focus on one particular thing rather than on general awareness. It is often a technique for easing into meditation, and it trains the mind so that the more it is practiced, the better the mind becomes at focusing for longer periods of time.
- Relaxation is a physical and/or mental process of leaving effort behind—relaxing muscles or thoughts—without a specific focus on awakened awareness. Relaxation is great for stress reduction and helps to unclutter the mind, making mindfulness and concentration easier. One relaxation technique is visualization.
- Visualization is a technique wherein you imagine certain scenarios for relaxation (walking on a beach at sunset, sitting in a field of flowers, wading in a mountain stream) or for personal development (you succeeding in your job, in love, in school, and so on). It is more a tool for personal transformation than it is meditation, although some people like to use visualization for relaxation alone.



Zen-Speak

Shavasana is the Sanskrit word for corpse pose. It is a meditative yoga relaxation pose that involves lying on your back on the floor in total relaxation.

called *shavasana*. Technically, lying down to meditate isn't zazen, since zazen means sitting meditation. However, as we said before, if lying down is the only thing that works for you, then that is your zazen.



Monkey Mind!

There is a difference between lying down for Zen meditation because it is the only option—a physical disability or illness prevents you from sitting—and choosing to lie down because you just don't feel like sitting up, are too tired, too lazy, and so on. It is much more difficult to stay acutely aware when lying down. You won't cultivate personal discipline, and you'll probably just fall asleep.

Is Meditation Uncomfortable? Do You Have to Sit on the Floor?

No and no. Sometimes, physical discomfort is something you can work through in meditation, but the point is not “no pain, no gain.” Remember, the Buddha discovered asceticism wasn't the way, but moderation was. That means don't recline in a cushy armchair with your feet up (you'd soon fall asleep), but don't sit on a bed of nails, either.

Although the floor often provides the best place to meditate (with the proper cushions), some people can't sit on the floor for whatever reason and a chair works just fine, too. Even lying down can work, particularly for the yoga style of relaxation/meditation

Is a Meditation or Zen Teacher Necessary?

That depends on who you are and how you work. Some people find much more success with a teacher. Others who would never seek out a teacher (or wouldn't at first) can make great strides meditating on their own. If you like the idea of a teacher, go for it! You'll probably learn a lot. If you don't, no problem. Read everything you can about zazen, and give it a try. Maybe you will eventually seek out a teacher, and maybe you won't. It's your path.

Are You Supposed to Meditate with Your Eyes Open or Closed?

That depends on your personal preference. Although the traditional zazen technique is to keep eyes unfocused, directed slightly downward, and only partially closed, some people keep them all the way open and others like to close them.

Can Anybody Meditate?

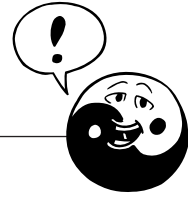
Absolutely. That is, anybody can meditate if he or she is willing to make the effort to meditate. You can't expect to meditate for three minutes and immediately incur all the benefits, but if you are willing to do the work and persevere, no matter who you are or what you perceive your limitations to be, you can meditate.

Lotus Pose? Are You Kidding?

Let's start with the basic form for zazen. In traditional zazen, you would use a large rectangular mat called a *zabuton*, and then place a small round cushion, called a *zafu*, on the mat. The *zafu* is where you sit. For the traditional Japanese sitting pose (see the diagrams that follow) you can also purchase (or build) a meditation bench, also called a *seiza* bench, which is a low angled bench for sitting with your legs folded under the bench, so you don't actually have to sit directly on your legs or bend your knees quite as much.

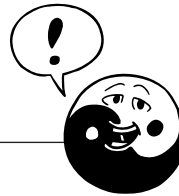
If you don't have this equipment (which is pretty expensive whenever we've seen it), you can use a regular exercise mat, carpet, or blanket, and a couch cushion or folded bed pillow. (The Buddha didn't have to order any equipment from any New Age catalogue, so you shouldn't have to, either, unless you really want to spend the money).

Now you want to make a tripod, so your weight is evenly distributed on each knee and on the cushion (on which you are sitting) or bench. Two positions are the most stable: the *lotus pose* and the Japanese sitting pose.



Zen-Speak

A **zabuton** is a rectangular mat or cushion typically used in a meditation hall, at retreats, or if you purchase your own, in an at-home zazen practice. The **zafu** is the full, small round cushion placed on top of the mat and used as a seat during meditation.



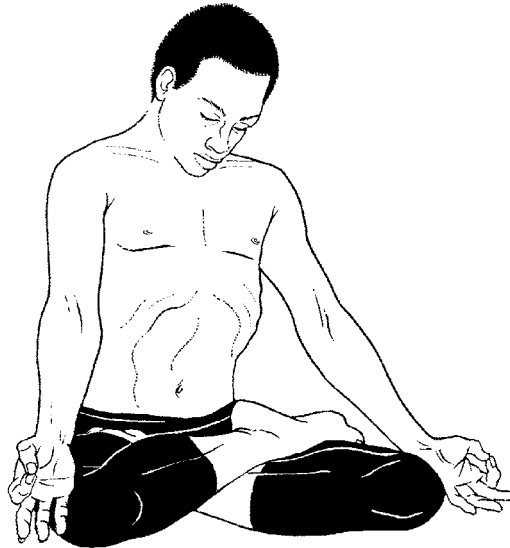
Zen-Speak

The **lotus pose** is an ancient yoga/meditation pose that is meant to mimic the perfection of the lotus flower, providing a stable, solid position for meditation. Sit cross-legged and place each foot on top of the opposite thigh. In the half lotus pose, place one foot on top of the opposite thigh and the other foot under its opposite thigh.

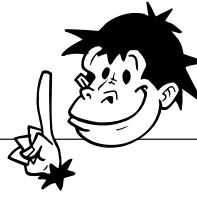
The lotus pose is popular among Zen practitioners and is infamous for being difficult to achieve. In this pose, you sit cross-legged with each foot on top of the opposite thigh. Once you've achieved a degree of hip flexibility, the position isn't difficult at all, and is perfect for zazen because it puts the body into a very stable, solid, steady position, making it easier to keep the head up, the spine straight, and the concentration intact. It also twines the legs so that right becomes left, left becomes right, which is a satisfying metaphor for the balancing effect of zazen.

For people who practice yoga regularly or who are otherwise particularly limber, the lotus pose might be a breeze. If you can't get into it, though, you are certainly not disallowed from practicing zazen. You just need to sit in a different way.

Meditating in lotus pose.



In Japan, the favored meditation position is the traditional Japanese sitting pose. For Japanese sitting pose, sit on the cushion with your knees bent and each heel and calf tucked under each thigh. (If not for the cushion, you would be sitting on your heels.) This pose gives you the same stable position with the weight on the cushion and both knees, putting less stress on your knees than crossing your legs. Just be sure not to open your feet out to the side, which can be hard on your knees. Your heels and calves should be right under your thighs.



Monkey Mind!

For Westerners not used to sitting in a cross-legged position (you may not have done it since childhood), it can be difficult to get the knees down onto the floor. Sitting on a cushion helps, but many people have to push their knees down to the floor again and again. Over time, your body will adjust, and your knees will stay down by themselves.



Japanese sitting pose. Feel your breath as you enter the position.

Other Ways to Sit

Sitting in the full lotus pose takes a lot of flexibility in the hips, knees, ankles, and feet, more than some people have at first. If you aren't comfortable in the lotus pose, you have some other sitting options:

- **Half lotus.** In this pose, you sit on your cushion and put one foot on top of the opposite thigh and leave the other foot under its opposite thigh. After a time, when your legs get tired, you can switch sides.

- **Cross-legged.** In this pose, you sit on your cushion with your legs in a regular cross-legged position, with each foot under the opposite thigh to help push the knees toward the floor. Remember, your posture will be most stable if your weight rests on your two knees and the cushion rather than on your legs.

Cross-legged sitting for meditation. Remember good posture—don't slouch like the figure seated at left, and use a cushion to stabilize you, if necessary.



- **The chair.** Maybe you just can't muster the floor sitting yet or aren't able to because of a physical constraint. While it isn't traditional, you can certainly practice zazen in a chair. You are still sitting! Use a straight-backed chair to help you maintain an upright posture. If you are wheelchair-bound, that will work fine, too. Slumping makes it difficult to breathe correctly, and even if your untrained torso thinks slumping is easier and feels better, it is actually much harder on your body. Sit with your spine as straight as possible, head lifted, lower back tucked in, and feet planted squarely on the floor in front of you, in line with your knees.

What About Your Hands?

Now that you've got yourself into position, what do you do with those hands? There are several options for zazen hand positions. Depending on whom you talk to and where you learn your techniques, you will discover there are several traditional hand positions typically employed for zazen. We suggest you pick whichever position feels most comfortable and correct for you. If you don't like any of the hand positions we suggest here, just rest your hands on your knees, either palms down or palms up.

The most common hand position for zazen is probably the *cosmic mudra*. This hand position works no matter what sitting position you choose. Place your dominant hand (right if you are right-handed), palm facing up, just below your navel. Rest your other hand in the palm of your active hand, then bring both thumbs together to form an oval. Hold your hands in your lap so your thumbs meet just below your navel. Rest your wrists and forearms on your thighs.

Hold your upper arms out just slightly from your body, as if holding a raw egg in each armpit—you don't want to be so loose as to drop the egg, but you don't want to smash it, either. During meditation, if you feel your arms or hands getting tired or if they won't stay in place in your lap, bring your awareness to your hands and arms and concentrate on relaxing them. Don't press your thumbs together. The entire hand position should be light and easy.

While the cosmic mudra is the most common for zazen, other meditation hand positions include resting each hand, palm up, on each knee and forming a circle with index or middle finger and thumb (a common pose for yoga meditation), or simply resting the hands on the knees or in the lap.

Is everybody in position? Great! Now it's time to start with the breath, so go on to the next chapter.



Zen-Speak

Cosmic mudra is the traditional zazen hand position, in which the dominant hand cradles the other hand just below the navel with thumbs meeting to form an oval shape.

The Least You Need to Know

- Zazen is Zen sitting meditation, or sitting in controlled conditions to practice mindfulness.
- Zazen has certain traditional guidelines that make meditation more effective, but in reality, other positions can be zazen if they work better for you, develop your self-discipline, and are practiced with full awareness.
- Standard zazen posture is to sit on a cushion in the lotus position, Japanese sitting pose, half lotus, or cross-legged, but if these are uncomfortable, you can practice zazen in a chair.
- In zazen, traditionally the hands form the cosmic mudra, one hand cupped in the other, thumbs meeting to form an oval just below the navel.



Breath, and Other Paths to Mindfulness

In This Chapter

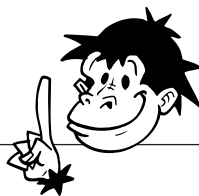
- ▶ Follow the breath for focus
- ▶ Count the breath to tame the mind
- ▶ Managing mental tantrums
- ▶ Other tools for accomplishing mindfulness

Now that you are sitting in what we hope is at least a relatively comfortable position, you may want something to do. To go suddenly into sitting is tough, as we've said, and one of the best ways to begin calming and focusing your mind so you can become more aware is by paying attention to the breath.

Start with Breath

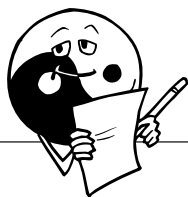
Begin by watching your breath. Don't try to do anything to it. Don't worry about doing deep breathing or any particular kind of exercise. Just pay attention to what your breath is doing.

If you find this difficult or uncomfortable, try lightly placing the tip of your tongue on the roof of your mouth and breathing through your nose.



Monkey Mind!

If you have allergies or asthma, or find that nose breathing makes you feel tense for any reason (Eve feels suffocated trying to nose-breathe when the weather is humid—don't ask her why), breathe through your mouth. Nose breathing is healthier because it allows your nasal passages to filter the air, but it isn't worth discomfort or a panic attack if you feel as if you can't breathe that way.



Nirvana Notes

Paying attention to your breath is useful in many situations besides zazen. If you are nervous, edgy, jumpy, overwrought, or otherwise on edge, take one minute to follow your breath. You'll feel calmer.

Keep watching the breath. Just watch. Don't worry about it (am I doing this right?), criticize it (I really should breathe more deeply), or even praise yourself for it (wow, I'm really good at this!). These are all attachments. Just watch it without opinion or commentary.

In, out. In, out. What does your body do as you breathe? What moves and what stays still? How does the breath feel coming out of your nose or mouth? How does it feel on your upper lip, in your nostrils, in your throat? What does your stomach do? Your chest? Your shoulders?

Even though you won't consciously be trying to change anything about your breath, the more you notice it, the more you may tend to breathe more slowly, calmly, and deeply. But if you don't, that's fine. Just notice.

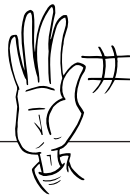
Breathe Like It Counts

Your mind is wandering again, isn't it? We thought so, because ours wanders, too. If you are having a very hard time keeping your mind on the breath, you can begin to count your breaths. This isn't really meditating. It is more like concentration. You aren't just being aware, you are concentrating on the counting, but this is a nice way to anchor the wayward mind that refuses to settle down.

Let each inhale and exhale together be one. Count only to 10, then go back to one. If you can't make it to 10 without your mind straying, count to five and then go back to one. Try to focus and really pay attention to the count. Imagine each number in your head. *One* (in, out), *two* (in, out), *three* (in, out).

Even counting won't keep your mind completely focused, and again, it will wander (and wander again). When your mind wanders to something else, notice it, then keep counting. I wonder if the lettuce is still good. A salad sounds perfect for this hot weather ... oh yes, *one* (in, out), *two*. If thoughts arise (and they will), note them, and keep counting. Maybe for that article, I could start with an example about meditation ... oh, I'm thinking about my article. *One* (in, out), *two*. If feelings arise (and they will), acknowledge them, and keep counting. This is easy! I'm really good at it! I must be a natural! Oh, now I'm feeling proud of myself. *One* (in, out), *two*.

And so on.



One Hand Clapping

"You may remember the Greyhound Bus slogan that invited you to 'Take the bus, and leave the driving to us.' What a great feeling, to relax, lean back in a comfortable seat, and let your silver-haired, reliable-looking, uniformed driver take you to your destination. It's a wonderful feeling to let someone else do the driving—someone you trust to do it right. Imagine your breath to be that smiling, trustworthy, dependable Greyhound driver. Just as he always knows what he is doing, so does your breath. It is right by definition. Trusting your breath permits you the freedom to accept experience, without the need to constantly monitor whether everything is okay."

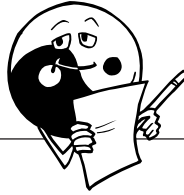
—From *The Best Guide to Meditation*, by Victor N. Davich

Breathing Through Boredom

As you relax and your thoughts begin to slow, you are going to get bored. We promise you. You are going to start complaining to yourself. You aren't going to like it. How do you get past this stage, when you can hardly stand to sit there? Breathe.

Now you are learning about the self-discipline part of zazen. You start to itch. You start to squirm. Your mind starts to bang-bang-bang for you to get up and just do something. I can't stand it! I have to move! I have to get something done! I can't just sit here wasting my time!

This is the mind once again, protesting a new set of rules with all the vehemence of a two-year-old who is told “no” for the first time. Think of it as a mental temper tantrum. If you are a parent, you know the number-one rule about temper tantrums: Don’t give in!



Nirvana Notes

You can use the self-discipline-enhancing principles of zazen practice to help break other destructive habits in your life, too, such as overeating, smoking, being sedentary, or watching too much television. You can teach that unruly mind of yours what is productive behavior and what isn't. For more on breaking bad habits, see *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Breaking Bad Habits*, written by Gary with co-author Suzanne LeVert.

When Eve's two-year-old, Emmett, first started throwing temper tantrums, they were invariably because he wanted to do something that he wasn't allowed to do, like climb the bookshelf, stand on the kitchen table, or run into the street. When Eve said, "No, Emmett. You aren't allowed to do that," he would scream, with all the gusto a two-year-old can muster: "*Em-mett wan-na do it!*"

"No."

"*Emmett wanna do it!*" (Faster, scowling and insistent.)

"No."

"*Emmett wanna do it!*" (Getting high-pitched.)

"No."

Tantrum. Face crimson, limbs flailing, shrieking, kicking, sobbing great big dramatic tears.

This is what your brain is doing when you get bored and frustrated with sitting. Your mind wants you to get up and distract yourself from awareness. It doesn't want to bother with the subtleties of awareness. It just wants to keep jumping and flitting from thought to thought, activity to activity.

But here's the thing: As soon as Eve walks out of the room, Emmett's tantrum stops. If nobody can hear him, he isn't going to waste all that effort.

Likewise, if you hold firm and stay consistent (like a good parent should!), refusing to give in to your mental impulse to scrap this whole zazen business and go have an ice cream sundae or watch television, if you refuse to attach to your mental tantrum, it will stop. It really will! Instead of letting your mind engage you, simply be aware: Now I'm having the feeling of boredom. Now I'm having a thought about quitting. There goes my mind, rebelling again. How interesting. *One* (in, out), *two*

The trick, in other words, is to keep all your thoughts and feelings at arm's length, for perspective. Don't jump right into them and become them. See them for what they are: just thoughts. You aren't going to drop over dead if you keep meditating for five more minutes. But you will have taken one more step toward making zazen a habit your brain can accept.



Nirvana Notes

A Zen retreat can be a difficult and ultimately joyous and transformative experience, and you usually don't need to be a Buddhist to attend one. If you are interested in the idea of a Zen retreat, look for local Zen centers in your area, or search the Internet for Zen retreats around the country. Check out Appendix A, "Further Reading," for some good Web sites and other resources to get you started.

Attending a Zen retreat is a good way to establish the zazen habit faster than you might normally be able to do. When you meditate for hours a day, the first day is like hell. The second day is worse. Then, suddenly, your mind accepts what is happening and becomes serene. Just like Emmett doesn't even try to stand on the kitchen table anymore, knowing it is a futile effort, sooner or later your mind will figure it out. Okay, I guess we're sitting here for a while. I might as well relax and pay attention.

Finding the Meditation That Works for You

Strictly speaking, zazen is the standard meditation for Zen, but Zen is your individual path, so another form of meditation might work better for you. Many excellent books about meditation are available that explain hundreds of meditation techniques.

We hope you won't go meditation-shopping just because zazen is difficult. All meditation is difficult in the same way. The difference lies in posture and position, and also

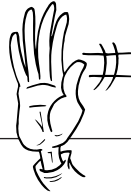


Zen-Speak

A **mantra** is a word or words chanted during meditation as a point of focus and to evoke certain energies in the body.

whether the practice is more a meditation or more a visualization exercise (where you picture a certain thing or series of experiences), a relaxation exercise (such as scanning your body for tension and consciously relaxing each part), a concentration exercise (where you focus on a single point or object or a sound such as a chanted *mantra*).

All these techniques can help you to train your mind to be more focused, clear, calm, quiet, and peaceful. Only when you are able to transcend technique, however, are you really practicing Zen meditation.



One Hand Clapping

Jesuit priest Anthony deMello (1931–1987), known for his inspirational lectures and writings that blend Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, offers the following exercise for meditation (excerpted here and reformatted into paragraph form) from his book *Wellsprings*:

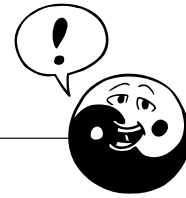
"... I start with me: I become affectionately conscious of my body: its posture, its state of well being or discomfort, its present mood. My awareness rests on every part of me: each limb, each sense, each organ, my breathing in and out and the workings of my lungs, my heart and blood and brain and every other function: my seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, thinking, willing, reminiscing, feeling. Before I come down from the mountaintop I look at all creation and draw it to my heart."

Techniques and Tricks

As long as we have mentioned techniques, let's look at a few, in brief. In certain traditions, the techniques are the primary focus of concentration or meditation. *Mandala* meditation is a technique of Tibetan Buddhist meditation. Many different Buddhist, Hindu, and western religious traditions employ the technique of mantra chanting for meditation and/or prayer. In yoga, the focus of meditation is on breathing techniques,

or total relaxation, or rousing *kundalini* energy. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, meditation is often centered on prayer to God. More recent (or revived) traditions focus on moving meditation, dance meditation, different methods of mindfulness meditation, and creative visualization.

Of course, there are many crossovers in techniques between traditions, as well—mantra chanting in Christianity, breathing exercises in Buddhism, and so on. But for Zen, anything that is a technique is mainly for helping to focus your mind when you can't seem to get it into a mindful state. Techniques are like Zen first aid, and they can work very well for this purpose. Techniques are also used in Zen to help jolt the mind into a new awareness, such as with koan meditation.



Zen-Speak

A **mandala** is a circular, geometric design that draws the eye to its center, designed as a focus for meditation. In yoga, **kundalini** is a psychospiritual energy force in the body that can be released and used through certain techniques.

Koans

We'll talk more about koans in the next chapter, but briefly, a koan is an inscrutable story, riddle, or enigmatic saying that the Zen practitioner is meant to contemplate until he or she thinks of an answer. Koans aren't questions you can answer by looking up information on the Internet (although many koans are discussed on the Internet). They must be understood on an intuitive, not logical, level. Even if you read the so-called answer to a koan in a book or on a Web site, you won't have the answer—or, you won't have *your* answer—because answers can differ for different people and only a Zen teacher who knows you and sees you in person can hear your answer and determine if you have the right answer for you.

Koans are frustrating for Westerners, who like clear-cut answers and solutions to loose ends, but the koan isn't a math problem. It is a device for popping your mind into a new level of understanding. Koans are the hallmark of the Rinzai sect of Zen Buddhism, but other branches also use them, and anyone can practice them, Buddhist or not.

Kinhin

Kinhin isn't a technique, exactly. It is just zazen in motion. In other words, it is Zen walking meditation, as opposed to Zen sitting meditation.

In a Zen monastery, zendo, or at a Zen retreat, sessions of zazen typically alternate with sessions of kinhin, ranging from slow, steady walking to brisk jogging. The purpose of kinhin is not just to stretch your muscles so they don't atrophy sitting there on the floor, although walking does feel pretty good after a long session of sitting.



Zen-Speak

Kinhin is Zen walking meditation; the walking counterpart to zazen.



Nirvana Notes

Practicing kinhin outside, especially out in the country or in a large park far from the traffic, noise, and pollution of the city, is a lovely way to work on mindfulness.

Kinhin isn't practiced to get anywhere, either. It is simply walking for the sake of walking, in full awareness. Some people say Zen priests encouraged kinhin so their monks wouldn't get too attached to or obsessed with zazen.

In a zendo, kinhin involves certain protocols. While walking, the hands are placed, typically right fist in left palm in front of the chest, elbows out at right angles, posture erect. Continue to watch the breathing or count the breath. In *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Philip Kapleau advises:

"Begin walking with the left foot and walk in such a way that the foot sinks into the floor, first the heel and then the toes. Walk calmly and steadily, with poise and dignity. The walking must not be done absent-mindedly, and the mind must be taut as you concentrate on the counting. It is advisable to practice walking this way for at least five minutes after each sitting period of twenty to thirty minutes."

Different traditions have different methods for kinhin. Typically, in Rinzai Zen, the walking is fast, and in Soto Zen, it is slow. Depending on where you practice kinhin, the guidelines may vary widely. If you practice at home, simply walk along some easy, familiar, preferably circular route so you don't have to think about where to go. Walk mindfully.

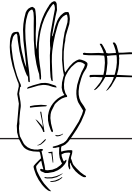
Level Two: Just Sitting

Once you've got your mind under control, you'll find you can leave your techniques behind and progress to the next level: just sitting. Sit in full awareness, noticing thoughts and feelings, not engaging them, not judging them, simply being. This stage of meditation will imbue you with a deep, inner sense of joy, peace, and compassion. You'll wish everyone could experience such tranquility and inner serenity. You'll feel great.

But reaching this level doesn't mean you'll always be able to reach it. When you've been practicing meditation regularly for a long time (months, years), you will find it easier to practice pure zazen, but sometimes you will have less successful meditation

days, and sometimes you'll need to use some of your techniques (counting the breath, visualization, relaxation) to help center you.

Some Zen teachers advise students to count breaths and/or follow breathing for many weeks or months before they attempt "just sitting." Some may give koans only when "just sitting" is mastered, some when following the breath is mastered. But if you can achieve "just sitting," you'll know you are moving in the right direction. You are learning how to "be" under controlled conditions. That means you are ready for the next level.



One Hand Clapping

"You should not be like an actor, who puts on a costume for the performance and takes it off immediately at the end. Many of us are like that. Although we undertake the practice very seriously during the meditation session, after it is over, we revert to the same negative person again. We do whatever we like—fighting, quarreling, and so forth Things are easy during the actual meditation session because there is no one to interfere with you When you meditate, you are trying to transform your mind, but the effect really shows only during the postmeditation period."

—From *Awakening the Mind, Lightening the Heart*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

Level Three: Perpetual Meditation

Even though the most experienced of Zen masters continues to practice zazen in order to keep the body and mind disciplined and aware, the ultimate purpose is to carry that zazen into daily life. Remaining in a state of perpetual meditation—total awareness, mindfulness, a full immersion in the present moment—is the ultimate in Zen living. It may seem impossible when you are still struggling with your five-minute mindfulness practice and can't even get to 10 in your breath counting without almost bouncing off the walls, but didn't some adult in your life always say, "Anything worth having is worth working for?"

This is worth working for, and we hope you'll stick with us. Very soon, you'll be glad you did.

The Least You Need to Know

- Techniques to help calm and focus the mind toward mindfulness include following the breath, counting the breath, visualizing, relaxing, or focusing on a visual point (such as a mandala) or sound (such as a mantra).
- Many religious, philosophical, and spiritual traditions throughout the world use different meditation techniques, and all of them may be useful for quieting mental clamor.
- Koans are enigmatic Zen aphorisms or questions to consider on an intuitive level.
- Kinhin is the walking counterpart to zazen.
- Eventually you will be able to sit in awareness without techniques, and then to carry that awareness throughout the day.



A Koan Is a Koan Is a Koan ...

In This Chapter

- The point of koans
- But they seem so ridiculous
- Transcending logic and duality
- Your personal koan practice
- Some thoughts on a few famous koans

Koans are probably the most familiar technique of Zen, beyond basic meditation, known to Westerners. Although many Zen practitioners (especially, although not exclusively, in the Soto Zen sect) don't employ koans, many others do (particularly, although not exclusively, in the Rinzai sect).

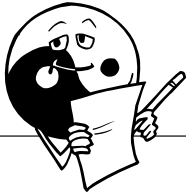
Koans, as we've briefly described before, are those enigmatic puzzles, strange utterances, seemingly paradoxical or nonsensical stories, questions, or anecdotes meant for pondering until they are internalized and understood on a level beyond logic and reasoning. They help to anchor the wandering mind on one point, just like a mantra meditation or gazing at a mandala in other traditions. Koans are also meant to pop the mind into a state of more enlightened understanding.

But do they work?

Words to Live By

Koans aren't for everyone, and some people don't find them helpful, preferring instead to cultivate pure awareness without the mental machinations and somersaults

required of koans. For others, however, koans are of great benefit to keep the mind in place, similar to counting the breath but a little more interesting. For still others, the understanding koans can impart is as essential for Zen living as anything.



Nirvana Notes

Western Zennists may find it helpful to rephrase certain koans and stories in Western terms to remove the artificial “foreignness” of the traditional koans. This can help you detach from the koan itself and move to its content.

Koans are, of course, simply words put together by somebody. They aren’t beamed down from some divine source. They aren’t even really parables or wisdom or advice in the traditional sense. You can’t get enlightenment from words. You already have truth within you, remember? It doesn’t come from the outside, from printed words on a page or even words spoken by someone. The words are just a tool to help you reach what you have within you. The koan itself shouldn’t get in the way. It is merely a gateway to the self and to the apprehension of truth.

Koans can indeed become words to live by if you see them not as advice, not as a divine message, but as a simple reminder that life isn’t necessarily logical, certainly not fixed, and often not what it seems on the surface. Things don’t always make sense or yield to the sword of logic. Or, if they do theoretically, much in life is beyond our current ability to comprehend it (remember chaos theory?).

Illogical Logic

If life is absurd, however, that doesn’t mean you should just give up and accept the absurdity without putting any effort into your life. Zen isn’t cynicism. You have to internalize this illogical logic, and one way to do this is by internalizing a koan. Ironically, the result is that eventually you can accept the absurdity of life and you won’t have to put any effort into this understanding. But it takes effort to get to that point.

You have to take in the understanding that logic doesn’t always work in life and that the greatest truths are perceived on a level beyond logic. Koans help us to debunk the myth that logic is everything. By foiling logic, they clear the path so you can keep moving into postlogical territory. *Star Trek’s* Mr. Spock probably wouldn’t approve, but that’s probably because Zen wasn’t a common practice on Vulcan (as far as we know!).

Koans also tackle the notion of duality. Being humans, we think dualistically. In other words, there is an “I” and a “you,” an “us” and a “them,” a “subjective” and an “objective,” a “self” and an “other.” But is that really true? Or is duality an illusion, something temporary, like those ocean waves that all look so distinct, but

disappear and reappear somewhere else in the space of a breath? What happened to that one, choppy, foam-topped wave you were watching just a moment ago? Where did it go? Was it ever really a thing, or just a temporary manifestation of ocean?

If a nonsensical koan is true, if logic doesn't make sense, if there is no "self" and "other," if a wave is just ocean, what is left? Ah, that's when it gets interesting!

You can practice with koans on your own, and many Westerners prefer to contemplate koans privately without "presenting" answers to a teacher. Traditionally (and many Zen practitioners and teachers still do it this way), koans are practiced under the guidance of a teacher, who assigns koans he or she thinks are appropriate for the student, and then, in what is called *dokusan*, the student meets with the teacher to present the answer for the teacher's approval or rejection.

Because so many books have been published containing poems and responses to koans by various Zen masters, and because certain koans have become so popular, it is virtually impossible to replicate the experience of long ago where a monk, in private, would be assigned a koan he had never heard before. The koan system was secretive and mysterious.

Today's open-book, Western Zen changes the experience entirely. Do you try to fool your teacher into thinking your answer is enlightened, even though it just happens to be the exact answer uttered by the famous Zen monk Joshu?

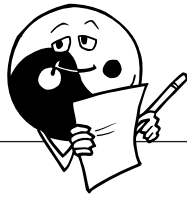
The meditation on a koan to which you already know at least one answer that has been accepted by a teacher presents a unique challenge. To the monk in a Zen monastery who needs to "pass" to move to a higher level of responsibility, knowing the answer could be an irresistible opportunity to "cheat" by trying to convince a teacher he or she has discovered the true answer. In *The Three Pillars of Zen*, Philip Kapleau attributes this trend to a degradation in the Rinzai tradition.

But we think that to meditate on a koan even if you know a "right" answer intellectually is even more of a challenge than never having heard the koan. Laypeople have a freer, more open field in which to do this. Since we aren't getting "graded" and since our koans don't determine our career path, we don't have to cheat (unless our egos convince us to cheat). We have the luxury of working past the intellectual answer to find our own answer.



Zen-Speak

Dokusan is a private meeting between a student and a Zen teacher, for the student to ask questions, receive encouragement, or present the answer to a koan.

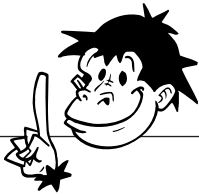


Nirvana Notes

Koans don't come from anywhere special. Who's to say they aren't everywhere? Listen for koans in your daily life: A bus driver muttering, "Exact change only." A child chanting, "My house has no roof and can fly!" A friend commenting, "There is nobody in this crowd." You might find some truly engaging puzzles worth contemplating. Others might not yield much. Remaining open to the appearance of koans in your life can be enlightening in itself!

But Koans Are Silly

"If internalizing a koan means spending months and years obsessing over the sound of one hand clapping, forget it! That's silly!" you may be thinking. Some koans do seem silly at first, until you remember that the point isn't the koan itself. The point is to grow your awareness. And the point is also, to some extent, that very silliness to which you find yourself objecting.



Monkey Mind!

When contemplating a koan, if you feel like you are really stuck, let it go for a while. Store the koan in the back of your mind and do something active. Sometimes physical activity without direct contemplation can yield an enlightened answer to any problem, whether career dilemma, relationship impasse, or koan (maybe all three have the same answer!)

Let's look at how you might approach a koan that sounds silly:

A monk once asked Zen master Tozan, "How can one escape the cold and the heat?" Tozan replied, "Why not go where there is no cold and no heat?" "Is there such a place?" asked the monk. Tozan replied, "When cold, be cold. When hot, be hot."

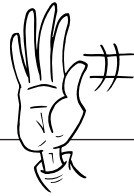
Here's what you might ponder as you meditate on this koan:

Huh? Being cold hardly sounds like a way to escape the cold. A nice space heater and an afghan would probably work better. And being hot to escape being hot? Give me central air and a glass of lemonade, thanks.

Besides, how can a place where there is no cold be a place where you can be cold? That must be the illogical part. And what is the point of emphasizing cold and hot?

I guess I'm not normally the serious victim of the elements like a Zen monk might have been long ago. I don't spend my days huddled within the stone walls of a monastery without climate control. But for a Zen monk, maybe this question had more urgency to it.

Still, I feel discomfort in my life. Let me see. To escape cold, be cold. To escape hot, be hot. Life is full of discomfort and dissatisfaction. When did I feel it last?



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of a monk who saw a turtle in the monastery garden. The monk watched the turtle for a time, then approached his teacher and asked, "Why is it that most beings cover their bones with flesh and skin, but a turtle covers its flesh and skin with a bone?" Without speaking a word, the teacher took off one of his sandals and put it on the turtle's back. This koan is meant to foil distinctions and duality. The monk saw beings as made of skin, flesh, and bones, here and there organized in different ways. By putting the sandal on the turtle, the Zen master attempted to demonstrate the absurdity of such a delusion.

Yesterday my friend criticized an idea I thought was great. That really hurt my feelings. This morning when I put on my jeans, I couldn't zipper them and I discovered I had gained five pounds. What an ego blow. And this afternoon I tripped over that bath toy and bruised my knee. Then there was that muscle cramp I got last week. That really hurt.

Of course, none of these are exactly life-threatening discomforts, but they weren't any fun, either. So, they can still count as suffering.

So to escape the pain of a bruised knee, feel the pain? To escape the cramp, feel the cramp? To escape my hurt feelings, feel my hurt feelings? Is that the message? Hmm. Won't that make the feelings worse?

What was that Zen explanation for suffering? Suffering comes from attachment. So a bruised knee hurts because I am attaching to the pain. I'm angry for not seeing that toy. I feel clumsy. The pain makes me regret the incident. I wish it had never happened! I wish I had never bought that toy for little Junior, who never plays with it anyway! I'll probably have a big bruise that will remind me of my inner klutz whenever I see it. Then it will turn an ugly yellow. It's throbbing! Ow!

Yeah, that sounds like attaching to the feeling, all right. I wonder what would have happened if I would have sat down and concentrated on the pain without forming any opinions about it. Just felt it, really felt it, moved into it and through it? Sounds intense. I guess all that attaching helped distract me from the intensity of the actual experience.

But if I had let myself feel it without attachment, it would have simply become an experience, rather than a matter of suffering, ouch, ow, oh poor me, poor me. I would have really lived it. And I would have escaped the suffering.

Oh! I get it. To feel hot, you have to embrace the heat, really feel it, without attaching the old spiel, "It's the humidity that kills me! I hate living here in the summer. Oh, the heat is horrible! How can I get anything done? Am I sweating through this shirt? This whole house is like a sauna," yadda yadda yadda. Instead, be the heat. Be hot, period. Then you don't suffer.

That makes sense! Wow, I'm pretty good at this koan stuff. It's a snap!

Before you get too proud of yourself, let's remember one important thing:

Understanding a koan intellectually is not understanding a koan.



Nirvana Notes

Whenever you get caught up in frustration, irritation, pain, sadness, or any other brand of suffering, a simple reminder—a sort of Zen-in-a-nutshell—can help a lot (at least, it helps us!): Suffering is ignoring this moment. Freedom is in this moment.

Sure, that was a great little session of personalizing a koan. But it is one thing to say, "Oh! I figured it out! Don't complain, just experience!" and quite another to understand it on such a level that you make it part of yourself.

We're guessing that our imaginary Zennist thinking the above thoughts would probably attach just as vehemently to the pain the next time he or she falls on another discarded toy, gets a muscle cramp, or feels insulted by a friend.

Our imaginary Zennist understood one possible interpretation of the koan, and it is a good interpretation. We like it. We agree with it, even. (Maybe because we wrote it!) But if our Zennist paraded that answer in front of a Zen master, he or she would probably get waved away. Getting it isn't getting it. You don't internalize a koan in three minutes.

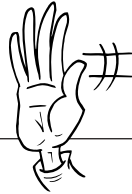
Now, if our Zennist friend decided to keep going, that might be a different matter.

Be the heat. Be hot. Then you don't suffer. Let this sink in. Let it ring within me. Be hot to escape the heat. Be cold to escape the cold.

Maybe our Zennist kept this koan in mind all day, all night, mentally pulling it out and looking it over every so often, during a free moment. Be hot. Be cold. Feel the pain. Maybe the Zennist lets the koan linger for weeks, or months, or longer.

And then one day, the big Oh! It happens. Our Zennist becomes the koan. Suddenly, the koan has personal meaning beyond the intellect. Intuitive meaning. One day, perhaps on a particularly sweltering August afternoon or at the peak of a frigid February night, our friend becomes the heat, or the cold, and it all makes sense. The suffering stops in a moment of kensho.

Were our Zennist to visit a Zen master now, the result might be quite different: a serene nod, perhaps a smile—and the assignment of another koan!



One Hand Clapping

On his deathbed, the Buddha said, “Be a light unto yourself.” Commenting on this message, Zen priest Steve Hagen, in his book *Buddhism Plain and Simple*, wrote:

“To awaken is not to hold the idea of awakening. You can’t practice waking up. And you can’t fake it or imitate it. You have to actually want to wake up. You’re the one you can count on. You’re not other-dependent. Everything you need is here now. Just rely on this—immediate, direct experience. You’re the final authority. Whether you awaken or not is completely up to you.”

Now that we’ve talked about what it means to really apprehend a koan, let’s look at some famous koans and how we might start thinking about them.

The Sound of One Hand Clapping

There is an old Zen story about the famous koan that goes, “You can hear the sound of two hands clapping together. What is the sound of one hand clapping?” In the story, as it is related in the koan collection *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, transcribed by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, a little 12-year-old boy has the desire to study Zen. He worked in a Zen temple, but wanted to meet privately with the teacher, just like the older Zen disciples did. One day he approached the teacher, but the teacher told him to wait. “You are too young yet,” the teacher said.

But the little boy persisted and at last the teacher relented. He met with the boy and gave him the koan. “You can hear the sound of two hands clapping together. What is the sound of one hand clapping?”



Monkey Mind!

Keeping a koan in mind over a long period of weeks, months, years, is different than obsessing about the koan. Obsessing means you are too attached to the koan. You may only be able to understand it by stepping back a little and loosening your hold.

The little boy bowed and retired to his room to meditate on the koan. Outside his window, he heard music being played by the geishas. “Aha!” thought the little boy. “That must be it!”

The next evening, the boy met with his teacher and played him the music he had heard. “No!” said the teacher. “That’s not the sound of one hand clapping. That is music.”

Crestfallen, the boy went back to meditate some more. During his meditation, he heard water dripping. “That must be it!” thought the little boy. But the next evening, the teacher sent him away again. “That is the sound of dripping water, not one hand,” said the teacher.

The little boy tried many sounds in front of his teacher: the wind blowing, the owl hooting, the locusts buzzing, and again and again and again.

The little boy meditated on the koan for one year. Then one day (at the ripe old age of 13), the little boy got it. After using up the possibility of every sound he knew, he suddenly understood what was left: soundless sound. And soundless sound is the sound of one hand clapping.

Had someone told the little boy the answer on the first day, he wouldn’t have understood, at least not on a deep level. In the same way, knowing the answer this boy finally came to won’t keep this koan from working for you. You can meditate on it, contemplate it, turn it over in your mind for the rest of your life. When you finally get it—really get it—you’ll know it.

Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?

An oft-quoted koan, and probably the most famous Zen koan in the East, is, “Does a dog have Buddha nature?” This koan is often assigned to new Zen students.

The story attached to this koan has a monk approaching the famous Zen master Joshu in an attempt to understand the concept of Buddha nature. As he started to speak, he noticed a dog wandering by, and asked Joshu, “Does a dog have Buddha nature?”

Almost before the monk could finish asking the question (so the story goes), Joshu shouted, “*Mu!*”

In Japanese, *Mu* has two meanings. One is the opposite of *U*, which means “is.” *Mu* means “is not.” The other, according to Gyomay M. Kubose in the book *Zen Koans*, is the Absolute *Mu*: “The Absolute *Mu* of Zen Buddhism transcends ‘is’ and ‘is not.’”

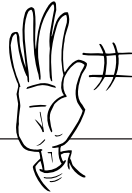
Joshu's answer, therefore, isn't "No, dogs don't have Buddha nature," or even "No, don't ask such silly questions." Neither is the answer, "Of course a dog has Buddha nature. We all do!" The answer doesn't avoid the question, either, as it might seem to.

The shouted "*Mu!*" was meant to break the monk's obvious obsession with the concept of this being and that being and all beings having Buddha nature. In response to this koan, Kubose writes:

"The essence of Buddha's teaching is non-attachment. All human troubles and sufferings, without exception, are due to attachment. Even attachment to the idea of non-attachment is attachment! Joshu wanted the monk to transcend the relative world, transcend the teachings, transcend U and Mu, transcend Buddhism, and gain the free and independent world of enlightenment Thus, Mu is crucial: it offers no surface upon which the intellect can fasten. The word Mu must be experienced as the world 'MU!'"

Joshu's answer was the "right" answer. Yet if someone asked you the question and you responded, "*Mu!*" because you had read it in this book, you wouldn't have the answer. Or you wouldn't *necessarily* have the answer.

You would have to turn the koan over and over in your mind, live with it, meditate on it, until you become it and are finally able to respond intuitively—and from an internal place rather than from the place in your brain that receives information and spits it back out. Maybe then, you would shout, "MU!" Or maybe something else. But only then would you understand.



One Hand Clapping

A famous Zen koan tells of a monk named Wakuan who looked at a picture of the heavily bearded Bodhidharma and said, "Why doesn't that fellow have a beard?" Of course, Bodhidharma does have a beard. This koan urges us to foil our preconceptions based on appearances. In *Zen Koans*, Gyomay M. Kubose writes:

"When we say 'Bodhidharma' we immediately conceptualize him. If we say 'Buddha,' we conceptualize the Buddha. If we say 'Christ,' we conceptualize Christ. We make ourselves victims of concepts. By refuting appearances, Wakuan invites us to go beyond the duality of beard and no-beard and see the real Bodhidharma."

Why Did Bodhidharma Come from the West?

“Why did Bodhidharma come from the West?” is also famous and often quoted in popular culture, including in Jack Kerouac’s novel *Dharma Bums*. (Remember, Bodhidharma was the one who brought Buddhism from India to China—in the Far East, India is considered the West). You won’t find the answer to this koan searching around to discover some evangelical intention on Bodhidharma’s part. The Zen master Joshu’s answer was, “An oak tree in the garden,” but you won’t find your answer by spouting something irrelevant to the question (as Joshu’s answer seems to be). You don’t need to know any historical facts to answer this one, so don’t go to the library to start researching the question.

Maybe you will start thinking about the things in front of you, everyday life, your own intentions for moving forward or doing anything. Perhaps you will consider whether or not Zen is related to place, or why anyone ever embarks on any difficult journey.

No one can tell you the answer. Only you can discover within yourself if Joshu’s answer was correct, and what your answer would be.

Nope, we’re not going to give you any more than that. As we’ve been saying all along, you need to work through these koans on your own!

What Is Buddha?

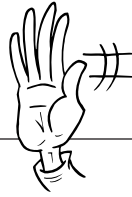
Many responses have been written to the koan “What is Buddha?” Some familiar answers are “Mind is Buddha,” “This mind is not Buddha,” and from the sublime to the ridiculous, “Dried dung.”

The point of this koan is to demonstrate the inexpressible. Buddha cannot be described or defined. Your answer will come from your own true nature. Contemplating “What is Buddha?” is just like contemplating “Who am I?” We think “Who am I” is a great koan to launch your own personal koan practice.

Stepping Off the Hundred-Foot Pole

Another koan asks, “How can you proceed from the top of a 100-foot pole?” We think this koan is a wonderful metaphor for Zen practice in general and koan practice in particular. Climbing a 100-foot pole is hard work, just like contemplating a koan, meditating, and following the Zen precepts. But what do you do when you get to the top? Practice, intellectual understanding, rules, and techniques will only take you to the top. But you have further to go.

Once you’ve grasped the truth beyond logic, duality, and the material world, you’ll step off with ease. Beyond the pole is a universe of knowing beyond thinking, awareness that is bigger than the sky, and truth that is as apparent as daylight. Stepping off, you’ll see it has always been high noon. You just had your eyes closed!



One Hand Clapping

Another popular koan is “What was your face before you were born?” Like the koan about Bodhidharma’s beard, this koan is meant to encourage the Zen student to consider the face of the self apart from the physical face; the face that has nothing to do with symmetry or imperfection, blue eyes, a small nose, or a prominent chin. It exists beyond distinctions and expresses the unified nature of the self with all reality. The true face of the self exists beyond self, yet it is also the true expression of self, your true face. In *Zen Koans*, Gyomay M. Kubose writes, “Zen urges: look within. Unmask and strip the ego self; when all your outer self is taken off, you will find your Self.”

The Least You Need to Know

- A koan is a puzzling or illogical question, statement, or story to help the Zen student transcend logic, the intellect, and notions of duality.
- Koans seem silly or absurd precisely because they are undermining pre-conceived notions. To take the absurd seriously is to foil logic.
- Knowing the intellectual answer to a koan, or someone else’s answer, is not knowing the answer to a koan. Each individual must perceive the answer on an internal and intuitive level.
- Traditionally, a Zen teacher assigns an appropriate koan to a student who periodically meets in private with the teacher to offer answers. The qualified Zen teacher can tell whether the student has truly understood the koan or not.
- Some of the more famous koans are “What is the sound of one hand clapping?”; “Does a dog have Buddha nature?”; “Why did Bodhidharma comes from the West?”; and “What is Buddha?”



Eating, Moving, Breathing: Maintaining a Zen Lifestyle

In This Chapter

- ▶ How to maintain that meditation practice
- ▶ The Zen of eating
- ▶ The Zen of exercise
- ▶ Ordinary Zen, extraordinary Zen
- ▶ Take a moment

Meditating once or twice is easy. Meditating every day is not. Remembering to live in the moment every now and then is easy. Reminding yourself to live in the moment every day is not. Most of us aren't in the habit of living Zen. But habits can be changed.

In this chapter, we'll go with you through your day and help you to find opportunities for Zen living. Meditation isn't the only time to live Zen. You can live Zen every minute, when you eat, when you exercise, when you read, when you work, when you clean, when you don't do anything at all. Only when you have established a Zen lifestyle in your daily life can you truly say you are living Zen.

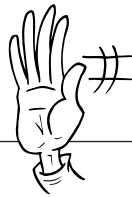
Zen and the Art of Meditation Maintenance

Meditation. Talking about it is easy. Getting excited about it is easy. Doing it is tedious. How do you get yourself to meditate every day? Do you really need to meditate every day?

If you want your zazen to make a difference in your life, you really do need to make it a habit. We know, we know—this is easy to say but really tough to do. As you progress through the weeks trying to meditate, you will probably find that you do it here and there, when you have a spare moment, when you happen to wake up a few minutes early, when you happen to get to bed a few minutes early, when you are particularly stressed in the middle of the day. But on a regular basis, when you don't "need" it? It may seem like taking an aspirin when you don't have a headache.

Ah, but they say a daily aspirin can prevent a heart attack! Daily meditation may have a similar effect. According to Jon Kabat-Zinn in his book *Full Catastrophe Living*, "Greater resilience in the face of stressors and reduced reactivity are characteristic of people who practice meditation regularly." Just like anything else—vitamins, herbs, exercise, a healthful diet—to get the full range of benefits, the habit has to become a part of your lifestyle.

Daily meditation won't magically transform your life into one of immediate and perpetual stress-free tranquility. But you will be able to tell the difference.



One Hand Clapping

"... The fact that you can learn to respond to stress with awareness does not mean that you will never react anymore or that you will not sometimes be overwhelmed by anger or grief or fear. We are not trying to suppress our emotions when we respond to stress. Rather we are learning how to work with all our reactions, emotional and physical, so that we may be less controlled by them and see more clearly what we should do and how we might respond effectively Responding to stress requires moment-to-moment awareness, taking each moment as it comes."

—From *Full Catastrophe Living*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Meditation does more than change your response to stress. It changes your response to yourself. Or we could say it eliminates your response to yourself because you begin to see things the way they really are. You are simply you, and the world and your life are simply the world and your life. You start to appreciate the beauty and the wonder of the mundane.

Those daily meditation moments will gradually spread across your entire day until you feel as if you are meditating—as in responding in total awareness—all day long.

Practice Makes Practice

Don't expect big changes like that right away, however. You don't play Rachmaninoff after your first piano lesson. And just like the piano, meditation takes practice. And more practice. Daily practice.

We won't say "practice makes perfect," either. You are already perfect. You aren't striving for anything. You are who you are. Practice only makes practice, just like being is just being. Practice meditation for its own sake, to uncover your perfection. Meditation isn't training for some quest to find happiness. It *is* happiness.

But oh how difficult it is to do it. If you like nice, neat guidelines, we'll be happy to start you on your way. Here is a meditation plan you can use to set up and begin practicing your new habit. Stick to the plan and commit to it. If necessary, rearrange your schedule or other, less productive habits to suit it.

Don't just follow the plan when it suits you. You brush your teeth every day so you have nice breath and don't get cavities. You don't just brush before a big date, right? (At least, we hope that's not the case!) Think of meditation the same way. It isn't just for the moments when you are overwhelmed by stress. Meditate every day so your life doesn't slip away unlived.

Use the following chart as a meditation record. Fill out the particulars and check the box when you have accomplished each meditation session. This chart provides for two five-minute meditation sessions each day. With some rearranging, just about anybody can spare 10 minutes. You know it's true.

We suggest that Session 1 be first thing in the morning and Session 2 be before bed, but work these sessions into your schedule whenever you can. Record the date for each day, the time of each session, then check the box when you have completed the session. To time your sessions, use a watch with an alarm, an egg timer, your microwave or oven timer, or whatever will alert you to the end of your meditation without you having to look at the clock every 30 seconds while meditating (if you can see a clock, you will keep looking).

Date	Session 1	Session 2
Day one:	Time:	Time:
Day two:	Time:	Time:
Day three:	Time:	Time:
Day four:	Time:	Time:
Day five:	Time:	Time:
Day six:	Time:	Time:
Day seven:	Time:	Time:

After your first week, add one minute to each meditation session per week until you have worked up to a satisfactory 30 to 60 minutes of daily meditation. (For some, 30 minutes is plenty. For others, 60 is a delight.) You'll be up to 30 minutes in about three months. You can make copies of this chart and use it every week.

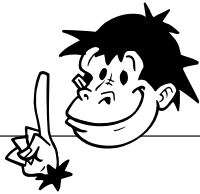
You will probably be tempted to meditate for longer sooner. We advise against this. You may be able to do it for a while, but then you will likely get burned out and quit. This nice, slow, gradual pace doesn't take a big time commitment and is much easier for the beginner to handle. Stick with us. We won't lead you astray!

Zazen, Kinhin, Zazen, Kinhin

When you are meditating for longer periods, you will probably experience some discomfort from sitting. Your joints might get stiff or creaky, or even painful. You might get a cramp or your legs might fall asleep. Your back might hurt, your neck get tired, and so on. Meditators describe a range of complaints.

In meditation, physical discomfort is one way for your body to get you to stop meditating and get up before it is accustomed to this new habit. Don't worry, the sitting isn't bad for you. We might worry about your activity level if you meditated eight hours a day, but 30 to 60 minutes is not going to be detrimental (unless you have a specific medical condition, in which case you should follow your doctor's advice).

When you feel discomfort, try to really feel it rather than attaching to it and letting it carry you away, distracted. Another good way to handle the discomfort of sitting is by practicing periodic alternations of zazen and kinhin.



Monkey Mind!

Trying to meditate for too long at first is just like trying to exercise beyond your ability when you first start a workout program. You will get frustrated, even injured, and you won't want to keep it up. To keep from foiling your efforts, work into all new activities gradually.

Kinhin, you may remember, is Zen walking meditation. In Zen monasteries, monks typically alternate zazen and kinhin. Say you are up to 10 minutes. You might practice zazen for eight minutes and kinhin for two. Or, Zazen for five, kinhin for two, zazen for three. Just make sure you continue in your meditative awareness as you transition from one to the other. Don't use it as an excuse to just get up and move around.

Also, the period of zazen should eventually be at least 20 minutes. If you can work up to 20 minutes of zazen and 10 minutes of serious meditative kinhin per day, that is a great accomplishment.

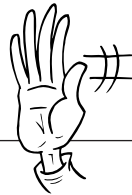
When you practice kinhin, walk slowly or briskly, in full awareness, around your meditation space in circles. Or, if you can do so without becoming too distracted or attached, walk around your yard or down your road. This works best if you live in the country.

In the city or in a busy neighborhood, maintaining a meditative state while walking is extremely difficult. Best to stay in your meditation space.

This is also the reason why we don't just suggest doing kinhin and no zazen at all. Zazen provides the most stable, least distracting atmosphere for meditation. Kinhin is wonderful but it is harder to keep from getting distracted, and harder to notice when you are distracted. If your mind wanders while watching the passing trees and flowers, you will be so entertained that you won't notice nearly as quickly that you are also thinking about what to add to your shopping list and when you can get the car in for an oil change.

In zazen, your mental wandering is much more obvious because nothing distracts you from noticing that you aren't concentrating on your breath. In a way, zazen is also harder because mindfulness is more challenging if your brain isn't being entertained by moving scenery, and this is also important to understand. Together, zazen and kinhin are perfectly complementary.

You can also add extra kinhin throughout your day—a meditative walk at lunch, a stroll through the park after work, an evening meander around the neighborhood. Whenever walking in kinhin, keep your mind totally focused on your environment, not on the thoughts that try to distract you.



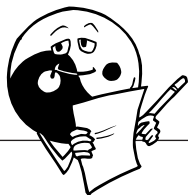
One Hand Clapping

In his book *Peace Is Every Step*, Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh describes walking meditation:

“Walking meditation is really to enjoy the walking—walking not in order to arrive, but just to walk. The purpose is to be in the present moment and, aware of our breathing and our walking, to enjoy each step. Therefore we have to shake off all worries and anxieties, not thinking of the future, not thinking of the past, just enjoying the present moment. We can take the hand of a child as we do it. We walk, we make steps as if we are the happiest person on Earth.”

The Brown Rice Myth

What about the rest of your life? Besides being aware, are there Zen “rules” you have to follow? Do you have to eat brown rice and vegetables every day, dress in robes, quit wearing makeup or expensive neckties, start doing tai chi? Do you have to (gulp) shave your head?



Nirvana Notes

When undertaking daily life—meditating, eating, drinking, exercising, resting—remember the Buddha’s discovery that the Middle Way, or moderation, is the most conducive to self-realization. Neither too much nor too little, neither over-indulgence nor denial, will keep things clearly in focus because your mind and body will be distracted by a state of extremes. Keeping things in balance makes mindfulness easier, and mindfulness makes it easier to keep things in balance.

Of course not. Awareness. That’s it. That’s all there is to it. Remember our summary of Zen? Now.

But (isn’t there always a but?), we must caution you that the more you cultivate your awareness, the more you will find yourself wanting to change certain things about your life. We aren’t telling you to change, we’re just preparing you. You’ll want to change. Or you’ll want to live in a way that is more representative of you.

We won’t say how, specifically, you might alter your lifestyle, because how you adjust your own life to suit your newly awakened awareness is a highly individual matter. Maybe you’ll stop smoking. Maybe you’ll stop compulsive eating. Maybe you’ll stop blowing every other paycheck at the mall. Maybe you’ll appreciate your friends and family a little bit more. Maybe you won’t lose your temper so easily. Maybe you’ll discover that your job isn’t right for you, and you will take steps toward a new career.

The great thing is, you don’t have to do any of it. You don’t have to feel coerced, “Oh, gee, I guess I really shouldn’t eat this cheeseburger.” “Gosh, I guess maybe I should go visit my great-aunt Sylvia, even though it’s so boring, as long as I am trying to be compassionate.” No, no, no, that isn’t how it works at all. There isn’t any pressure on you to do anything but be.

But by learning how to be, how to wake up, how to live in the now, you learn how to savor every drop of life. You may find you don’t want to waste a moment distractedly stuffing potato chips down your gullet or staring at a really, really bad television show, or all those other things people do to distract themselves from themselves and from the present moment. You will want to live in that present moment. As long as you are really noticing, experiencing, living your present moment, you will find you want to make it worth living. Through the practice of zazen, you’ll start to understand exactly *how* to live that present moment. And that’s exciting.

Do You Have to Be a Vegetarian?

A lot of people, especially Westerners, struggle with the Buddhist precept of non-violence. Does that mean never eating meat? Let’s look at it again (as stated in Chapter 8, “You’ve Already Started”):

“The destruction of life causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate compassion and learn how to protect the lives of people, animals, and plants, refusing to kill, to let others kill, or to condone any act of killing in action, thought, and lifestyle.”

This wording seems to support vegetarianism, yet Zen Buddhists in some countries are not vegetarians, and Jack Kerouac (in his novel *Dharma Bums*) writes something to the effect that being a vegetarian always seemed to him like splitting hairs because all sentient beings eat what they can.

In other words, do what makes sense and feels right to you. If you feel it is truly important to practice nonviolence in all ways and you don't feel right about condoning the killing of animals for food by buying and eating meat, then be a vegetarian. If you feel humans are designed to eat meat and you don't feel compelled to give it up, don't.

Every Last Bite

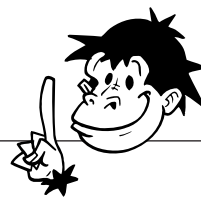
Even if you eat meat, however, eating in a Zen way means really experiencing your food. We all have a lot of reasons for eating what we eat, eating the way we eat, eating when we eat. But how often do you gulp down your food on the run, eat at your desk while working, or stare at the television or newspaper as you eat? Few of our reasons have to do with sensible choices about nutrition or even about really enjoying our food in the moment of eating it.

We eat to socialize, to comfort ourselves when we are lonely or scared or depressed, or to keep stress or anger from getting out of control. All of these reasons for eating are self-destructive, yet even when we know this, we still do it.

As we've talked about in this book, part of having a Zen attitude is to have and then release our feelings. Eating to cover them up is antithetical to this process. If you can stuff yourself, thereby dulling your feelings of loneliness or fear, you are negatively impacting both your physical and mental health. You are interfering with your own wholeness and personal growth.

While we don't all have to eat brown rice or give up meat or go macrobiotic or Ayurvedic or whatever else, we do need to take a look at the role of food in living a balanced life. That means learning to recognize when you are using food in a way that is mindless, defensive, or protective.

That takes some discipline, and it isn't easy. We've found the only way to make it work is to keep coming back to the present moment, to the Zen of eating: When you eat, eat. Live in the moment of your eating. Really taste. Really experience the flavor, the texture, the whole process.

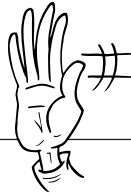


Monkey Mind!

A feeling many of us attach to food is guilt. Feeling guilty about eating too much or not enough, or of eating the "wrong" things such as sweets, high-fat foods, red meat, or dairy products is perhaps just as damaging as the foods themselves. Whatever you eat, eat it with full awareness and joy at each bite, and it will nourish you.

To eat in the Zen way, every bite, every crumb, should be fully and completely tasted. Even food you don't really like will become an experience. If you are present in your eating, you can't binge, and you may find more enjoyment from healthful foods and more awakened awareness that unhealthful foods aren't as good as you thought they were. Of course, if you really plan to savor every single bite of that chocolate or those french fries, go for it. You won't need much.

The Zen of eating can completely transform your relationship with your food. Let yourself have a relationship with it, not a secret affair. Enjoy it! Relish it! Food gives you energy and life. You don't need to overindulge. Just indulge. Allow yourself the pleasure of tasting. Food is wonderful, and when you eat in the Zen way, even a fresh salad and a ripe pear can be a banquet.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of two Zen masters traveling with their disciples, camping on opposite banks of a river. Two disciples, one from each master, saw each other across the river. "I bet our Zen master is greater than yours," called the first disciple. "He has amazing powers. He can hold a brush and write in the air on one side of this river, and when one of us holds a paper on the other side of the river, the writing will appear." The other disciple responded, "Our master is even greater. When he eats, he does nothing but eat. When he drinks, he does nothing but drink. When he sleeps, he does nothing but sleep." Stunned by this far greater feat, the first disciple came to follow the other Zen master.

The Zen Workout

As you know by now, Zen isn't all about sitting still in silent meditation. It is about living in the now, and the best way to do that is to feel good and have a healthy body that won't distract you with lots of physical complaints. How do you get that healthy body? Through exercise, of course.

We all know that getting or maintaining a healthy, fit body means getting up and moving. We need to exercise. Modern life doesn't require a lot of physical movement (unless you have a very physical job—we sure don't, sitting at our computers!), so we have to invent our own ways of putting that movement back into our lives. But that's all it is: putting movement into our lives. Exercise.

Exercise is that other thing (besides eating more healthfully) that many of us know we should do, but have a hard time actually doing.

Gary admits to having often been vaguely annoyed with people who are obsessed with their workout, leaving important meetings to go on a lunchtime run, as if that were more important than anyone or anything. And what about people who expect to be scheduled around so they can get in their workout, people who say they will “just die” if they don’t get to the gym? Please. Chill out and have a Twinkie, right?

What most of us probably respond to when we feel these feelings is a degree of awe at the self-discipline someone else has developed. Why can’t we do that? Those people who exercise every day must be irritating people if they can be that single-minded. (Like that makes sense!)

Some people do get obsessed with exercise, using it to control others or avoid feelings (the way we can avoid feelings with food). But exercising doesn’t mean you have to be obsessed. It also doesn’t mean you earn some kind of societal privilege.

Those of us who get into the exercise habit may have seen things from the other side. We may find ourselves getting annoyed at those who don’t seem to have the discipline or the will to exercise. Can’t they just get up and move? A few push-ups wouldn’t hurt that guy. That girl obviously isn’t doing her sit-ups. If only those people would exercise, they’d look a lot better!

Because our culture is so obsessed with appearance and youth, exercise has become a complex social subject, full of dread and status and obsession, either with not exercising enough or exercising too much. But exercise needn’t be burdened with all that societal garbage. The Zen approach to exercise is simple. Are you listening? Okay, here it is:

Exercise.

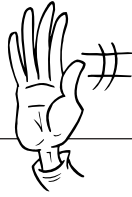
But, wait, no justifications? No rewards? No encouragement about how it will rid you of all your problems, make you look like a supermodel or Mr. Universe, make you smarter, happier, and more interesting? Clip your fingernails and cure your dandruff?

Sorry. The Zen of exercise means that when you exercise, you exercise with your entire attention. And that’s all.



Nirvana Notes

When you are exercising, it is difficult to focus on what you are doing if the movement is too easy. A wandering mind can be a sign that you are ready to step up the challenge to a faster pace, a higher weight, or a more complicated routine. If you are trying to keep track of challenging steps, balance, or breathing, your mind has little chance to wander.



One Hand Clapping

One story goes that when Bodhidharma first visited monasteries around China, he was appalled at the low level of physical fitness of the monks, so he taught them some moves some say were the beginning of chi kung, a precursor to tai chi. Chi kung is an ancient Chinese art of health management. It means “energy skill” and it is tai chi without the martial arts aspect, a holistic approach to health using movements and breathing to manipulate the body’s energy. Tai chi developed later as a martial art, but its slow, deliberate movements are widely practiced today for health, not self-defense.

Of course, you know there are benefits, justifications, and improvements from exercise. You’ve heard all the reasons why you’ll be glad you got in the habit of exercising: a better, more positive outlook; more energy; better muscle tone; more stamina; better ability to manage stress. But if you think about all these things while you are exercising, you won’t be exercising in the Zen way. To exercise in the Zen way, you exercise.

Doing push-ups? Concentrate on your form, how your muscles feel, your breathing, your sweat, your effort, even the discomfort, if you have any. Feel it. Experience the push-ups, or sit-ups, or reps with the dumbbell.

Jogging? Aerobics? Biking? Kick boxing? Yoga? Tai chi? Interval training? Calisthenics? Tennis? Racquetball? Basketball? Beach volleyball? Mud wrestling? Or just a simple walk around the block? Whatever your activity of choice may be, to exercise in the Zen way, you need to exercise with your full and complete attention. Only then can you notice how your body responds and adjusts, fine-tuning your movement to your body’s needs and abilities. You’ll find you exercise with more coordination, control, and confidence. You’ll get more from your workout. You’ll see results faster. You’ll find your whole self becomes better integrated, calmer, more creative.

But don’t think about that part!

As soon as your mind starts to wander, you aren’t practicing a Zen approach. When you grasp for or attach to these “results,” your effort becomes fragmented. So in short, don’t dread exercise. Don’t pat yourself on the back. Don’t look down on (or up at) others who do it better or don’t do it at all. Don’t expect to feel better (although you will). Don’t think it will solve all your problems. Don’t fear how hard it will be, don’t feel pride at how easy it is, don’t feel frustration because you don’t perform perfectly

your first time out. Don't generate any feelings out of an attempt to define, understand, put off, or become obsessed with exercise.

Just do it (to borrow the advertising slogan).

And, when you do generate feelings about exercise (try as you might, we're sure you will come up with a few), acknowledge them—oh, look, I'm dreading exercise today—and then move on with your workout.

The Delights of Dishwashing

We've already talked about how a Zen approach to housework can make it easier, even pleasant. This goes for everything ordinary, routine, and mundane about your life. Zen isn't anything special. It is not a trick to make boring things seem fun or a spoiler to make fun things seem boring. Zen doesn't make anything seem anything other than what it is.

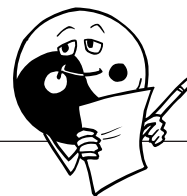
But since we humans tend to make things other than they are, all by ourselves, all the time, Zen can help us to recognize this habit and see more clearly.

When Gary was young, his mother made Gary and his brother take turns helping with the dishes. Gary resented it. In fact, he hated it. He would put it off all evening long. But the dishes waited, and so (to her credit) did Gary's mother. It was his turn, it was his duty, so it was his job and no one else's.

Finally, Gary decided that maybe the night would pass more pleasantly if he dug in and got the job done. He was only wasting time by resisting. He was so caught up in his feelings attached to dishwashing that he could hardly bring himself to action.

With his new approach, Gary actually learned to enjoy washing the dishes, which is a chore similar to exercise, in a way. You get into a rhythm, grab a plate, stick it in the water, scrub it, check to make sure it's clean, scrub a little more, rinse it, stack it, then you do it all over again.

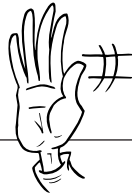
Gary remembers spending that time thinking about his day, what had happened in school, projects he was working on, problems he might solve. While teenaged Gary wasn't necessarily completely focused on the dishwashing process itself, he had learned a valuable lesson about letting go of his feelings about a task he thought was unpleasant. When he let the attachments go, the task was just a task, neither good nor bad, just something to experience.



Nirvana Notes

It's easy to say "don't dread exercise," but how do you start when you can't stand the thought? Give yourself a choice: Exercise, or sit in zazen for 30 minutes (in addition to your regular practice). Start sitting in full awareness. If you sit for 30 minutes, what a great job of zazen! If you can't sit still, get up and exercise—you've motivated yourself!

And when you are done with the dishes, you can see what you have accomplished. That feels good. The same goes for anything in your everyday life. Doesn't it feel great to check off those items on your to-do list, to get all the way through that pile of mail or those bills, to finish a book, to make a bed, to sweep a floor, to mow a lawn? Zen lets you get through your day with results you can appreciate and an effort you really remember. I did that. I did it all, you can say to yourself. And it was an experience.



One Hand Clapping

"Awareness is our true self; it's what we are. So we don't have to try to develop awareness; we simply need to notice how we block awareness, with our thoughts, our fantasies, our opinions, our judgments. We're either in awareness, which is our natural state, or we're doing something else. The mark of mature students is that most of the time, they don't do something else. They're just here, living their life. Nothing special."

—From *Nothing Special: Living Zen*, by Charlotte Joko Beck

Stop! (In the Name of Zen)

One last suggestion for putting more Zen into your day: Every so often, stop. We get so used to go-go-going, never stopping in the middle of a chore or a job or the morning commute to say, look at this view, look at these people, look at this city street, look at this tree.

Every so often, just stop what you are doing and breathe, noticing the world as it stands right now all around you. Open your senses to your environment. Experience your present moment in complete stillness, if only for a few seconds—a microzazen-moment to remind you how it feels to pay attention.

Breathing is an important part of this moment. Breathe in. Breathe out. Feel your breath going in and out of you as you notice the world around you. Here you are. Right now.

And now you're living Zen!

The Least You Need to Know

- Maintain your meditation by committing to very short periods twice each day, then gradually working up to longer periods.
- Alternate sitting meditation with walking meditation to train yourself to meditate under different circumstances.
- You don't have to be a vegetarian, eat brown rice, or be anyone you aren't already to live Zen in your daily life.
- You know you should exercise. Zen can help you cut through all the dread, pride, and other feelings you attach to exercise so you can "just do it."
- Even your daily, mundane activities can be a focus for Zen-like mindfulness.
- Every day, indulge in microzen-moments where you stop what you are doing, breathe, and pay attention to the present moment.

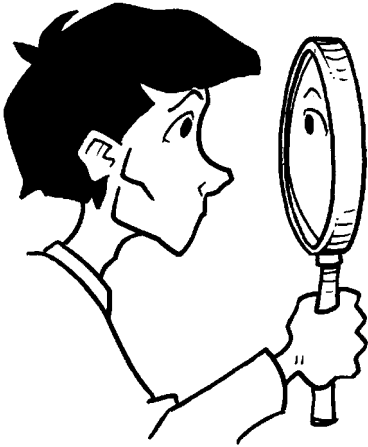
Part 4

Personal Zen

This part of the book is all about you. Who are you, anyway? Have you ever met the “real” you? Has anyone else? Zen can help you to gain self-knowledge, and can keep you from allowing your life to slip away un-lived. People feel. People think. But how do we feel and think without letting the feeling and thinking take over? How do we keep it all in perspective? With a Zen attitude!

Zen can also help you improve your love relationships, and appreciate your personal value whether you are in a relationship or not. When it comes to family relationships, Zen can also help. We’ll cover a Zen approach to parenting, Zen for kids, and Zen for adult children forging a new kind of relationship with their aging parents. Finally, we’ll look at your own personal dukkha: the desires, fears, and worries that cause you to suffer, and how Zen can help you to master them all.





The One Who Stares Back at You

In This Chapter

- ▶ Your reflection in the mirror
- ▶ How to be perfect
- ▶ What to do with all those feelings
- ▶ What to do with those racing thoughts

Once you've integrated Zen living into your life, you may find you come right back around to the question that got you started: Who am I? Let's look at that question, knowing all we now know about Zen.

There you are, in the mirror. That's you, all right. Your friends and family recognize your image. You recognize it. But who are you, really? Humans have been struggling with this question for thousands of years. Who is that person reflected in the mirror (or the lake, before the invention of mirrors)? Why am I here? What characteristics define me? What can I make of myself?

Perhaps the extreme popularity of self-help books has something to do with this eternal question. People are dissatisfied with their lives (that's *dukkha*, remember, from Chapter 2, "A Brief History of Zen Buddhism"?). People think they can be something better. Self-help and self-esteem books promise the realization of these changes. You can be whatever and whomever you want to be.

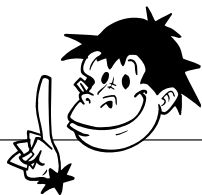
Is it true? Or are we getting duped? Are we stuck with what we've got? Or are we asking the wrong question entirely?

The Real You vs. the Potential You

One difference between the philosophies offered by many general self-help or self-esteem books and Zen is that in self-help books, we are told we can become something new. Don't like the old you? No problem! You can create a new you! Many of these books and systems help you to formulate some kind of major goal—the perfect job, finding your soul mate, even changing your personality—then develop practical strategies toward achieving it.

But what these systems do is encourage people to focus their entire beings on becoming something they are not. Is that realistic? Is it possible? How many times have you tried to change, and been successful for a day or two (or an hour or two), only to slip back into your old patterns, which, even if they are destructive or unhealthy, feel suddenly as comfortable as an old shoe after your foray into the world as someone else?

Living Zen means giving up something that you may find pretty difficult to give up: the idea, the promise, that the present will get you what you want in the future, if only you do the right things, say the right things, feel the right things. That your future perfection, even your future transformed identity, is in your hands, and that with the right tools, you can have it all.



Monkey Mind!

We don't want to underemphasize the power of society's emphasis on appearance, especially for women (although men, increasingly, are also feeling the pressure). It is extremely difficult not to judge your own appearance, especially where it differs from societal perceptions of perfection. The key is to let yourself have these feelings, while recognizing what they are. Acknowledging negative feelings about appearance helps deflate those feelings.

We have two things for you to think about:

1. How do you know what you will want in the future, or who you want to be? How do you know your intellectualized solution will work, make you happy, be any better than what you have right now? Because it worked for someone else? Because money, or a soul mate, or talent, or prestige would make anyone happy? How do you know that is true, and true for you?
2. Is it really in your control to do anything you want with your life?

We would like to suggest the following answers:

1. You don't know.
2. It isn't.

If you think those answers are depressing, pessimistic, hopeless, or a real downer, then you have yet to grasp the essence of Zen, which goes beyond optimism or pessimism (both presume to make judgments about

the future). You don't know who you will be tomorrow or what you will want, and you can't control what will happen to you in your life.

But that's just fine. It doesn't matter. Why?

Because you are already who you are, and you are already everything you need to be.

In this moment, you are complete. You can still have goals. You can still work toward changes in your life. But if you scramble desperately toward some ultimate idea of you that is somehow better, superior, improved, you won't get there. You need to see how complete you are right now before you can make tentative plans for a direction in your life.

We say "tentative plans" because as we live each moment, the world spins on and all kinds of things happen to determine what will happen next. You can't control what might happen to you, or how you will feel about it. All you can do is head that old boat of yours in a general direction, and go with the flow.

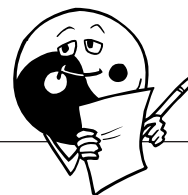
And your goal? Your goal is to be, right now. And the point of your journey? To be, right now. (We figure it can't hurt to keep reminding you!)

So Who Are You?

If I'm so complete, why do I feel so unsure of who I am? Many of us feel unsure of ourselves or wonder who we really are. Our culture encourages our dissatisfaction. We are surrounded by images of perfect-looking people, celebrities (at least for the moment), success stories, those who have "made it" in one way or another, in the terms our culture finds acceptable.

We all get the message that we, too, should keep striving. That if we work hard enough, we, too, can be rich, or famous, or have the perfect body. Or all three! We are continually encouraged to strive for these very external symbols of accomplishment. Affluence, good looks, adoration by the masses, aren't those the ideal markers for success?

And although we may get the message from some sources (parents, teachers, church) that "it's what is inside that really counts," do we really believe it? We say we do. But do we really? Or do we spend time staring in the mirror, pulling back our faces to get rid of the wrinkles, hating the body parts we find imperfect, longing for youth, or strength, for less fat, for more shape, for anything other than what we have?



Nirvana Notes

One way to help deemphasize your dependence on external notions of perfection is to break habits that tune in to those cues. Stop reading those magazines that make you so miserable. Quit watching that television show with all those beautiful people. Is it really that interesting? When you catch yourself attached to the mirror, redirect yourself out the front door for a mindfulness walk instead.

We aren't going to tell you what you "should" be doing. You already know. But we would like you to become aware that the struggle you experience when you look in the mirror is an internal struggle. You are attached to ideas about what a "self" in our culture should be, and those attachments are causing you to suffer.

When we strive to be perfect, we deny ourselves, because in knowing we aren't perfect right now, we know we aren't yet good enough. We are inadvertently putting ourselves down in our effort to "improve."

Who defines perfection? The latest article in a men's or women's magazine? Those professional actors in the movies or on television? Supermodels? Those people you've never met that you see on the street, in a nightclub, at the coffeehouse? Does perfection mean youth? Beauty? Strength? Is perfection that older sibling your parents always compared you to, the next-door neighbor who always had something a little better than yours, the best friend who always came out ahead?

When Gary worked in a substance abuse program, he encountered this attitude all the time. Many of the clients experienced such suffering because of the image of perfection they had in their heads, an image totally unrealistic for who they were, and an image that was ultimately destructive. The difference between that image of perfection and the reality of their lives was a wide, wide chasm, and when they perceived the reality of the chasm, they could find no joy in today, no reasonable way to get across. Defeated, they would slip back into substance abuse.



Monkey Mind!

Many people experience a pervasive feeling of emptiness, and in an effort to fill a void, they engage in destructive behavior: overeating, excessive drinking, and/or substance abuse. Zen urges us, instead, to embrace the emptiness as part of our being. Step into the emptiness and experience it, rather than fearing it, judging it, or trying to fill it.

One client was barely scraping by in a medical job as he worked to maintain his sobriety. He clung to the idea that he was going to be a doctor. A possible future for him? Of course. Would it happen in a day, or a week? Certainly not. Yet in clinging to this idea, the man remained in a kind of limbo, treading water and searching desperately for a faraway shoreline, without any appreciation for the sunlight, the gentle waves, the bright green water around him. Without the now, we can't get to the then.

This client, and so many others in Gary's experience, did not want to look at who he was or where he was, let alone begin to take those baby steps necessary to start moving. But in clinging to some future notion of a life to be, a potential you, today slips away. We can learn so much about ourselves and our lives can be rich beyond measure if we pay attention, look around and take it all in, fold up our binoculars and put them away. The future will happen, gradually becoming present moment by present moment. Only in living now can we understand the flow of life, how we can begin to move with it and where we might end up.

Perfection has nothing to do with anything outside yourself. Why would you think that someone else, with his or her own personal struggles and insecurities, has anything to do with you? Who wrote that magazine article? Who photographed that supermodel? Who hired those actors? Who told you that you should be somebody else? Whoever it was struggles with the same questions of identity and perfection as you do.

People will try to tell you how you should be. They can't help it. Eve is constantly getting advice from people about how to handle her children, her schedule, her writing life, her personal life, and her unruly hair (her going-away present at a former job was a brush and a comb, and her grandmother won't let her in the house unless she ties the whole mess into a ponytail).

Does she listen? Sometimes. She has her moments of self-doubt in front of the mirror. But she refuses to cut her hair, change the way she parents her children, or take any of it too seriously.

No one can define perfection but you, and the only way you can define perfection is by looking inward, quietly, calmly. Let the world's external chaos die down a bit, and look inside. Who is looking back at you? You are. The perfect you. You are already there.



Nirvana Notes

Cultivating balance in your life can help you to get in touch with your inner self. Each day, think a little, feel a little, move a little, rest a little, eat a little, drink a little, sleep a little, and meditate a little. Don't let any one activity dominate, and you will cultivate an inner sense of equilibrium and contentment.

Living Your Autobiography

If you were to write a book about yourself, what would it say? Imagine the book began with today. Would your first chapter begin, "Someday I'm going to" or would it begin, "Today I lived"? To live your autobiography means learning to have something to say about yourself right now.

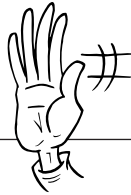
So you are working toward becoming a whatever. How nice. But that's not the real story, nor is it the essence of you. What is going on in your life right now to show that you are awake and alive?

Think about what makes a character in a book or a movie great. Balance? Complexity? We all have hopes and dreams, but isn't the essence of an intriguing character immersion in the now? When people ask Gary about himself, he begins by defining himself by his job and how hard he works. But is that the extent of Gary?

A more memorable "chapter" in the life of Gary might instead be the way he gets excited about stopping in the park for a vanilla ice cream cone dipped in chocolate, how he anticipates the first ice cream of the summer, and that ceremonial last ice cream to celebrate the beginning of fall.

What kind of a 46-year-old successful career man gets that excited about marking the seasons with an ice cream cone? A much more interesting man than one who simply works an 80-hour week and is always looking ahead, ahead, ahead to a future that never actually arrives.

We like to remind ourselves that each day, each moment, we are writing our own autobiographies. Nobody will want to read about how rich or thin or ripped or cutting-edge or famous or stylish or creative you plan to become. Let your story be compelling today. Let this moment be your moment. Let your life be a story worth telling right now.



One Hand Clapping

“The concept of time is one of the great ways in which we are fooled. We believe that the past and the future are, as it were, more solid and of longer duration than the present We live in a sort of hourglass with a big bulb at one end (the past) and a big bulb at the other end (the future); we are at the little neck in between, and we have no time. Whereas when our vision becomes changed, we see that ... we have, in fact, an enormous present in which we live and that the purely abstract borders of this present are the past and the future.”

—From *Zen and the Beat Way*, by Alan Watts

Once More with Feeling

Letting your life begin right now is easy to say, just as all the suggestions in this book are easy to write. But a few things get in the way, you may find. One of those things is your feelings. You can plan until you turn blue in the face, but one highly charged feeling can turn a million plans on their heads. You can have a zazen schedule—or anything else—perfectly orchestrated, but then something happens to spoil your mood and your intentions dissolve.

Humans have feelings, some pleasant, some not so pleasant. We react to our world largely by feeling. Someone criticizes, and the day is a loss. Someone compliments, and you can do no wrong. Our feelings are largely tied to our self-image. If we get an external nod, we feel great. If we get an external thumbs-down, life seems hopeless.

Other feelings aren't so obvious or so directly tied to an event. Feelings from long ago can get buried and may rise to the surface unexpectedly, during meditation or at the onset of a new relationship, during an argument with a loved one or when stress gets the better of us. Just looking in the mirror can bring on a whole avalanche of feelings: This is not how I want to look! What happened to me? What's wrong with me? When will I finally become the person I wish I could be? And on, and on, and on.

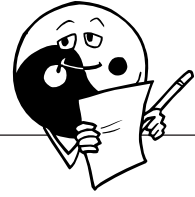
How to Feel

A Zen approach to living with this roller coaster of feelings means acknowledgment. Give your feelings a chance to happen. Hear them out, then let them move on. Even if they aren't yet resolved, you can decide to meet up with them later. Living Zen means learning to recognize your feelings and let them have a voice, but not to let them control you.

You are in control, even if it doesn't feel like it as you let a feeling play itself out. Feelings are just something you have, not something that rule you.

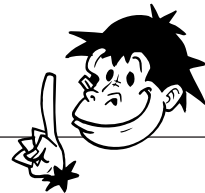
Think of feelings as your children. You made them. Sometimes they are pure joy. Sometimes they give you grief. But you are the parent and the one who sets the rules. Sometimes you let them go wild, in the proper environment. Sometimes you have to rein them in. You don't ignore them, of course. You let them be. But they have to follow your rules.

Whenever your feelings start to get the best of you, try to remember this metaphor: If you let your children rule the house, you're going to have a pretty chaotic house. But if you ignore them or refuse to let them express themselves in any way, your family won't be healthy and you won't be doing your job as a parent.



Nirvana Notes

How would your life be affected if you turned all your mirrors to the wall or draped towels over them for one week, using only the narrow little mirror in your car to check for spinach between your teeth? If you are brave, you might try it. You'll find it isn't easy, but it could transform your idea of yourself.



Monkey Mind!

If you don't learn to live in the present, what good are all those plans for the future? When your plans come to fruition, you won't be able to enjoy them because you never learned how. You're still too busy planning for the future!

Embrace and Disarm

Ignoring or refusing to acknowledge your feelings gives them power. Obsessing over your feelings also gives them power. Embracing your feelings, really letting yourself experience them, gives you just what you need: the chance to be your human self. Feeling your feelings lets them be, so they can go away.

Have you ever noticed how some people seem to be angry all the time, and others cheerful all the time? Both are likely a cover-up against the wide range of human emotions we all experience. If you are always angry, letting your rage control you, you can feel safe. You don't have to take responsibility because you are a victim of your rage. Something bad happens? You've got it covered. Something good? You can be safely suspicious.



Nirvana Notes

Sometimes the best way to let yourself feel your feelings or think your thoughts is to give yourself the gift of silence. Turn off the television and go into a room by yourself. Sit and simply enjoy the silence. Listen to the silence. Then your feelings and thoughts have a space to live in for a while.

The same goes for the cheerful sort. Putting a good face on everything makes it safe. If everything is always sunny, you can pretend the bad feelings aren't there. But they are still there, and they will stay there if you don't let yourself feel them.

When Eve and her husband separated a few years ago, Eve thought everything was great. What an improvement. How great her life was! Everything was just peachy. Deep down, she sometimes wondered why she wasn't upset about it all. But deeper down, she knew that she wasn't going to let herself feel those scary emotions—much safer to be happy about everything.

But then, something strange started to happen. Eve would suddenly start to cry for no apparent reason. Or she would lose her temper, completely without cause. Her emotions were rebelling at being kept way down there in that dark little closet. Finally, little by little, she realized she had better let them come out. As each saw the sun, it wasn't pleasant, but there they were—grief, sorrow, pain.

And then, gradually, as each got its time to be, these emotions packed up and moved out (as all children eventually will).

Think About It

Feelings aren't the only things that characterize the complex workings of the human brain. We like to think, too. A lot. Thinking makes sense. It is a logical approach. It can also be a great way to avoid feeling.

Thinking gives us a sense of control: If we think over every possible outcome, we can avoid a negative outcome. If we think about all the ways to handle a situation, we'll handle it better. If we think, think, think, we'll have control. Right?

Thinking has its place. We need it to solve problems, communicate, and generally get along in society. But like anything else, we humans tend to overdo it. We think so much, we think ourselves in circles. When our brains need a rest, we keep thinking. Thinking keeps us up at night, distracts us from concentrating, and even convinces us that things are true when they aren't true. We assign motives, project outcomes, and create scenarios. We drive ourselves crazy!

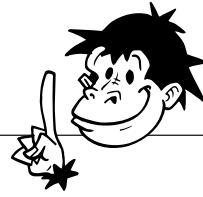
How do we get our thinking under control? The same way we get a handle on our feelings.

How to Think

Just as it is human to feel, it is human to think, and a Zen approach to thought is to acknowledge rather than deny it. Some people believe, for example, that meditation is about suppressing thought. Not at all! Meditation, and mindfulness in general, is about acknowledging, but not attaching to, our thoughts.

If we acknowledge our thoughts and the processes our brains go through to evaluate situations, we can put our thoughts into perspective. Some people keep lists of their thoughts, to keep track of them so they can come back to them later. Some simply name their thoughts: "Oh, there is a thought about what I believe someone might be thinking." "Now here's one about how to solve that same old problem again."

Thoughts given too much control can block your creativity, your emotions, even your ability to communicate clearly. To let yourself have your thoughts then let them pass on is the Zen way to think.



Monkey Mind!

Remember those inflatable punching clowns made for children? Weighted on the bottom, they pop right back up when punched. Imagine if they were weighted in their heads. One bop and they would topple over. Likewise, we can become unbalanced if we put too much emphasis on our thinking.



Nirvana Notes

When you come to a busy four-way stop, do you try to speed up and take your turn first, do you go strictly by the rules (whoever is on the right goes first), or do you hold back and let everyone else go first? Think about how your stop-sign style is reflected in your emotional reactions. Recognizing your emotional patterns is a good way to start putting them in perspective.

Monkey on Your Brain

In this book, we call our “warning” sidebars “Monkey Mind!” Monkey mind is that familiar mental state where thoughts are racing, impeding your concentration and action.

Gary has a friend who was in a hotel in Central America some years back and had an experience so representative of monkey mind that we could hardly have invented a better example.

Gary’s friend recalls someone bringing an actual monkey into a restaurant. Everyone was laughing until the monkey jumped on the head of the woman who brought him in. Then everyone but the woman was laughing. She became very afraid the monkey might bite her. What if it was infected with some horrible virus?

Gary’s friend watched the woman begin to panic. He felt helpless. If he tried to pull the monkey off, the monkey might panic and bite her, or him. The more distraught the woman became, the tighter the monkey clung to her head.

At last, Gary’s friend decided to approach the situation differently. He urged the woman to relax. The monkey hadn’t bitten anyone yet. Why panic about the assumption that it would? Then he grabbed a banana and started jumping around, clowning to distract the monkey. And it worked!

The monkey jumped off the woman’s head and darted toward the banana. Gary’s friend threw the monkey the banana, and everyone was happy.

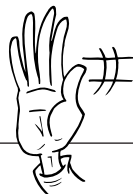
What a perfect illustration of the Zen approach to thinking. The anxiety and panic the monkey (your thoughts) can induce will only give them more power over you. But to engage your thoughts with a lightness and playfulness, with an attitude that they don’t have power over you, will help them to move along.

Human thoughts are like monkeys—funny, curious things, unpredictable, sometimes a little wild, but easily diverted. Taking them lightly, teasing them away, reminds you what they are: just thoughts, not truth. Your thoughts aren’t you. They are just monkeys.

The Thinking, Feeling Zennist

Whether you take pride in your mental abilities (there is nothing wrong with cultivating your strengths) or suffer from your tendency to overthink (or both), just remember that you are not your intellect, and you are not your feelings. You have thoughts and feelings, as you have a car or a computer or a cat.

You might think of yourself as an intellectual or an emotional person (or a computer person, or a cat person), but these labels are antithetical to a Zen approach to life. You can be intellectual, and you can be emotional while living Zen. But these thoughts and feelings come and go. They are not you.



One Hand Clapping

“Mind contemplating mind is like an object and its shadow—the object cannot shake the shadow off. The two are one. Wherever the mind goes, it still lies in the harness of the mind Once the mind is directly and continually aware of itself, it is no longer like a monkey. There are not two minds, one which swings from branch to branch and another which follows after to bind it with a piece of rope.”

—From *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hanh

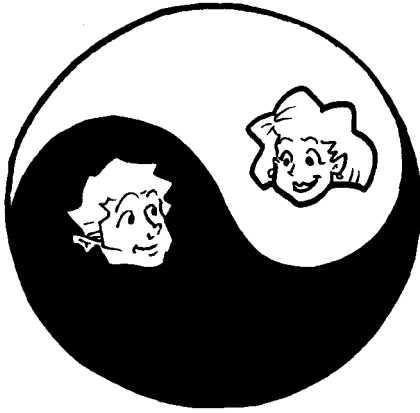
You are the someone who wakes up and pays attention. You are that perfect being alive in the present moment, not missing a beat. You are someone discovering yourself and the life with each present moment, even after you’ve lived your Zen for years.

Living Zen, you can see your thoughts and feelings as flotsam and jetsam in the river that is your life. You might pick out some treasures, or let the rubbish flow past. Some of it might bump up against your boat, and you might look at it for a while, in amusement—look at that funny-looking thought!—or with pleasure—mm, I really like this feeling—or with a little disgust—yuck, what’s that mucky, seaweed-covered piece of junk?

But you have the power to nudge it all past with your oar, so you can get on down the river.

The Least You Need to Know

- Cultural perceptions of perfection are compelling, but you already have perfection inside of you.
- Rather than striving for some perfect future life, Zen encourages you to live your life right now.
- Humans feel. Acknowledge your feelings so they can pass.
- Humans think. Have your thoughts, but don’t mistake them for who you are.



Zen and Your Relationships

In This Chapter

- Why we love, why we argue
- Zen advice on your love life
- The danger of expectations and assumptions
- Zen dating tips
- Why you don't need a partner

You can work on your inner self all you want, but eventually you are going to interact with people (unless you are one of those Zen hermits living in a cave in the remote wilderness—but even then, you will probably have to go into town occasionally to get supplies). And even if you try not to interact with people, you are always interacting with something: your environment, your own thoughts and emotions, your own body.

Life means being in relationship to, well, life. But this chapter is about your relationships to others, and more specifically, your love relationships (or your lack thereof!).

Relationships: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Humans are social beings. We like to be together, most of the time. We look to each other for physical, emotional, moral, and spiritual support. We want to be supported, loved, nurtured. But we don't always get along, particularly when the object of our desire doesn't act in the exact way we had in mind.

On a large scale, foiled expectations have resulted in war. On a more personal scale, we have wars in court, sibling squabbles, nasty neighbors, custody battles, and revenge contests. We argue, argue, argue over everything from politics to religion to who left the cap off the toothpaste. Why can't everybody just get along?

Because it is so difficult to let go of the idea that other people are put on this earth for the purpose of fulfilling our needs.

Humans are complex creatures, full of opinions they don't like to have contradicted, habits they don't like disrupted, and worldviews they don't feel like changing, thank you very much. Some of us love to argue because it is an intellectual exercise. Others of us get so upset by disagreement that we will do virtually anything to avoid it. But when it comes right down to it, we all want things from each other. When we don't get those things, we don't like it.

So what does Zen have to say about living with and loving our fellow sentient beings? Plenty—and not much at all. (Another Zen contradiction.) A Zen approach to relationships won't prevent all future conflict, and it won't give you a magic way to find and immediately secure that one perfect person for you (if there is such a thing). But it can help to make your relationships better.

Zen and the Art of Love

Love, that many-splendored thing. When you have it, your life seems more highly colored, more intense, a roller-coaster ride of thrilling emotions. When you don't have it, you aren't sure it exists, or could ever exist for you, but you have a vague (or not so vague) feeling you must be missing something awfully important. When you manage to hold on to love for a long time, it changes, mellows, grows, cycles, and generally foils your expectations just when you think you've got it pinned down. Is this how it is supposed to be?

Falling in love is a double whammy when it comes to control. Not only do you try to maintain control over your own wild feelings, but you may suddenly feel the need to control someone else, too. You want him or her to fit your idea of what a partner should be (or, more casually, what a good date should be).

What is love, exactly? Physical attraction? Habit? Comfort? We once heard love defined as (we are paraphrasing) an almost illogical fondness for someone. Various branches of science have attributed love to hormones, to the subconscious perception of another person's scent, to the psychological need to find someone similar to a parent or a sibling, or to the basic biological urge to procreate with a suitable partner.

We won't try to define love for you because only you can do that (although we do like that "illogical fondness" definition). But we can tell you how to approach the concept from a Zen point of view:

When you are with the person you love, be with the person you love without expecting anything.

This isn't exactly a revolutionary idea, but you might stumble over that last part. Not expect anything? Well, shouldn't you be able to expect certain things from a mate? Responsibility? Support? Affection? At least a little help with the household chores?

Nope.

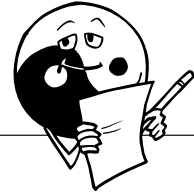
Now before you decide you aren't liking the way this chapter is shaping up and are thinking you might just skip it, bear with us for a minute. We aren't saying you should be long-suffering and your partner should get to do whatever he or she wants. Of course not. In a strong relationship, both people have the same attitude: I am whole, and you are whole, and we choose to go in the same direction together.

This is important. If you are a whole person who can exist as yourself, without needing someone else to "complete you" (sorry, Jerry Maguire), and you enter into a love relationship with someone else who is also a whole person, and you develop an "almost illogical affection" for each other, your relationship will be strong, a bridge between two cities under which the river of life can flow freely.

If, on the other hand, you are waiting for someone to fix you, help you, make it all better, solve all your problems, save you, and kiss your boo-boos, or if you are looking for someone you can fix, help, solve, save, and patch up, well, you may find someone who fits your profile, but we wouldn't drive a car over that bridge.

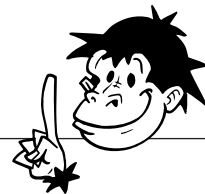
Our Zen paradigm for relationships is a lot more difficult than it sounds, of course. We all bring a lot of our own baggage to relationships: fears, hurts from the past, the expectation that the relationship will be like or unlike other relationships we've seen or experienced (such as that between our parents). Maybe we have friends in relationships that appear to be perfect, and we feel competitive.

All these feelings are normal human feelings. But they are also just that: only feelings. If you recognize the load you bring to a relationship for what it is, then consciously put it down, you are taking the first step toward a Zen approach.



Nirvana Notes

A Zen approach to relationships doesn't mean your relationships will be without suffering. It means acknowledging and feeling the suffering, letting yourself remain open to it, so you can understand where it comes from. Be there for the suffering rather than inventing complex devices to avoid it. Only then can you move through it to build something strong or dissolve something unworkable.



Monkey Mind!

You can't avoid bringing baggage into a relationship, but you can avoid forcing your partner to serve as your personal porter.

The next step is to look your potential partner in the eye: Here you are. Here I am. Let's be together.

Couples get into all kinds of destructive patterns that aren't easily broken. Sometimes one person always asserts an opinion and the other always gives in. Sometimes both are so set on getting their own way so that they don't feel put upon that they argue constantly. Sometimes both are so afraid to offend that nothing ever gets done.

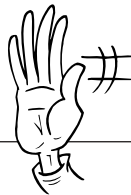
How much simpler to just speak what you feel and let all the assumptions and double-speak go?

You will still have assumptions. It is a hard habit to break and a natural human tendency, too. But the trick is to recognize the assumption as an assumption and let it go without speaking it. Save your words for the genuine stuff. The more you practice, the more you'll learn to recognize it.

For example, if your partner says, "You look great today," or, "I had a really nice time last night," or, "What do you want to do today?" you don't need to say, "What do you mean? Do I usually look bad?" or, "What, normally our evenings are a great big bore?" or, "Are you trying to get me to say what I want to do?" even if that is what you are thinking. Those thoughts are based on assumptions, not the present moment. You assume you know what your partner was thinking, what prompted the comment, when you can't know what prompted the comment.

Why not just assume what others say is what they mean? It is the safest route and probably the most accurate. People tend to attribute way more to words than is often intended.

So think your human thoughts, no matter how silly, paranoid, or irritable. Notice your assumptions, and smile. Then let them go.



One Hand Clapping

"Our life is like a wheel out of kilter. It's not satisfying. 'There's something out there I've got to get. And there's something else out there I've got to keep away from me.' This is bondage—this wanting, leaning, craving for something outside ourselves. It comes from that illusory vision of seeing our selves as separate and real. The only choice we have in life is whether or not to be awake There isn't anything 'out there' that ultimately satisfies. There isn't anything 'out there' that we must acquire or repel. In fact, there isn't anything 'out there' at all. Nothing enters or leaves the mind."

—From *Buddhism Plain and Simple*, by Steve Hagen

This simple concept can carry you a long way. You and your partner can build your relationship on communication grounded in reality, and you will get much more out of your time together if you are both there, really paying attention to each other and to what you are doing. It may be the only thing you need to know to communicate effectively with the love of your life: Be present in the moment with the one you love, without assuming or expecting anything.

We're not saying you and your partner won't ever have problems, won't slip up, make mistakes, and have to talk it out, work it out, forgive each other, or maybe even end the relationship. Human life is full of big and small problems, dilemmas, and things that need to be worked out.

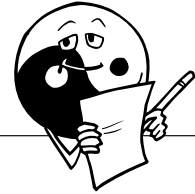
But being present for your partner is the greatest gift you can give. Your relationship will develop an integrity and a reality to it lacking in many relationships that are based simply on false ideas people have of who the other should be, unclear or unrealistic expectations for the relationship based on an idea or assumption about how relationships should be, disappointment when expectations aren't met, and confusion and misery if the relationship ends.

Just be there. The rest will work out one way or the other, and you can't do anything about your partner's actions or feelings. Your partner doesn't owe you anything (and you don't owe your partner anything). Yet, in good relationships, partners choose to give to each other, support and help each other, nurture each other. They give without compulsion, without the idea that they are repaying some debt or fulfilling some obligation.

To move beyond your own ego, past all that stuff you think you "need" from your partner, to a place where you can each become fully developed people traveling through life together, that is the stuff of strong relationships.

If you are present for your partner without expectation, grasping, attachment, need, you are doing everything you can do. That old cliché about "if you love something, set it free" applies here. Love, and let the rest go.

And if your relationship sounds a pretty far cry from all this, don't think we're saying you should throw in the towel. You can start right this moment being present with your partner. The past is gone. Right now is all that matters. Be here now, and start living in your relationship, not hovering over it like an albatross.



Nirvana Notes

In Buddhism, the notion of right action involves acting to promote harmony and unity rather than discord and disagreement. That doesn't mean going along with things just to avoid an argument, however. It means refraining from allowing your attachments and expectations to cause or further an argument.

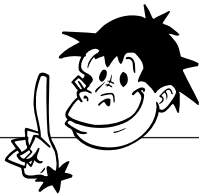


Monkey Mind!

Many relationship problems can be worked out between the involved parties, but if you are having serious relationship trouble, such as domestic violence or alcohol or drug abuse, please seek guidance from a social worker, counselor, or licensed mental health professional right away. Help is out there.

A Zen Guide to Dating

But what if you haven't found the love of your life yet? What if nothing seems to live up to the cultural perceptions of love you observe in movies and on television? Where is your Meg Ryan or your Tom Hanks? Why can't anyone you meet act even remotely like those movie characters who are so sweet, giving, vulnerable, romantic, and attractive ...



Monkey Mind!

Our culture does us a disservice by idealizing and simplifying relationships in the media. Relationships are big, complex, and difficult, not the cute, picturesque resolved scenarios portrayed in movies by perfect kisses and horses galloping into sunsets. Relationships can be ultimately rewarding, but they aren't the solution to loneliness. The solution is within you.

Zen can't help you find your "soul mate." What Zen can do is help you to find yourself. Whether or not such a thing as a soul mate exists (we tend to think each person has many potential compatible partners, friends and lovers alike), Zen can simplify the process of that search in the same way it simplifies the process of living life:

Be present in the moment.

Being present in the moment means that you aren't on a search at all. Searching for some perfect relationship is living in the future, always waiting for your life to start happening. If you are awake to your life right now, you will not only be more likely to recognize people who come into your life that might make potential partners, but you won't feel that desperate need for them. You will find a joy and contentment, even in your own feelings of loneliness.

Being present in the moment gives you a grounded, real sense about yourself that will make you attractive to people. And when you meet people, if you are really there in the moment, they will notice. Really being with someone is a great gift.

If you and that person are compatible (and you can't force compatibility—trying to be someone you aren't simply doesn't work, at least not in the long run), you are doing everything possible to further the possibility of a relationship. Which is to say, you are doing nothing at all.

Zen doesn't have any tricks to getting you dates, getting people to say yes when you ask or getting people to ask in the first place. All Zen does for you (and this is a lot) is help you make the most of the beautiful person you are, and help you to be present for the moment if a good match for you comes along.

But in the spirit of all those dating books and advice out there, we'll give you a handy little list, just so you can keep all this stuff in mind when you are out there in the world wondering (as you will, being human) where Mr. or Ms. Right might be:

The following are 10 Zen rules for dating:

1. Spend time each day in meditation so you can stay in touch with who you are inside.
2. Remember that you can only control your own actions and your own words, not anyone else's.
3. Try not to make assumptions or have expectations. When you do make them or have them, learn to recognize them and let them go.
4. Say or do things that are true to your character. A successful relationship is based on truth.
5. Don't say or do things based on what you think someone is thinking. You have no way of knowing what anyone else is thinking.
6. Don't expect anyone else to fix your life or make you whole. You are already whole.
7. Don't cling to someone else or attach to him or her. You can only be present with someone. You can't own anyone else.
8. You can make plans with a potential partner, but don't attach to those plans. You never know what life will throw at you.
9. Always listen with an open mind and respond with a generous heart. Wait to speak; avoid interrupting.
10. Be genuine, truthful, kind, compassionate, and respectful of your fellow sentient beings, whether you want to date them or not.



Nirvana Notes

Everyone gets lonely. Loneliness has nothing to do with being single or divorced. People in unsuitable relationships are often the loneliest of all.

How Zen Is Commitment?

Living in the moment may not seem conducive to commitment. Can you practice Zen and make a long-term commitment to someone? How do you commit to the future if you are living in the present?

By making plans but holding them lightly.

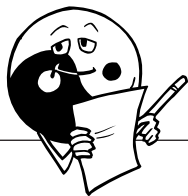
If you find someone you love and the relationship makes you feel strong and happy (rather than diminished or compromised) and your partner feels the same, and if the two of you decide to make a commitment, then more power to you. Steer your boat in the direction of commitment, but remember that commitment means two boats traveling the same river, not one boat with a captain and a passenger.

Oh No! What If I End Up Single?

Yikes! Single? You, who always thought you'd be married, who always knew you'd be married, to the perfect, supportive, kind, generous, loving, affectionate, sexy, drop-dead-gorgeous mate?

Or maybe you never really thought of yourself as marriage material, but now that you aren't a teenager anymore, people are starting to ask those questions. You know the ones: "When are you going to settle down?" "Aren't you ever going to get married?" "Don't you need to find someone to grow old with?" "Aren't all your brothers and sisters married by now?"

Or maybe you find yourself unexpectedly single.



Nirvana Notes

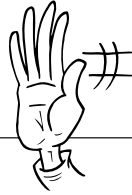
A Zen approach to dating doesn't mean sitting and waiting for love to come to you. You can take action, get out, ask people out, accept when asked, enjoy yourself, or be a social butterfly. The key is to interact with others sincerely and without expectation, really being there in the moment with others.

Our culture constantly teaches us that we must be in love, or at least in a relationship, to be fulfilled human beings. And where popular culture stops, our families start. But being single is far from being a failure. It isn't even a problem, unless we make it a problem. Being single can be a wonderful opportunity.

In New York City, Gary is surrounded by single people. Yes, people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s—many of whom have never been married and are not just "between relationships."

Over in the middle of the country, however, Eve sees lots of people who are looking, looking, looking—and trying to help her look, too. Never mind that she has come to enjoy, even relish single life. Sure, it's hard sometimes with kids in tow (and people with children have a hard time calling themselves "single" with a straight face). But being single means learning to meet your own needs, to look inward for support and

strength rather than to another person, and having the freedom to express yourself in new ways, to change direction, to make plans that are all your own, without having to compromise.



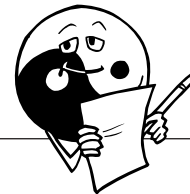
One Hand Clapping

Once a Samurai warrior wanted to learn about Zen. He visited a Zen master and asked, "Tell me what heaven and hell are." The Zen master looked disdainfully at the Samurai. "You think you could understand? You, a stupid warrior? Why, you don't even look like you could win in battle. What a sorry excuse for a fighter you must be." Enraged, the Samurai ripped his sword from its scabbard and moved to pierce the Zen master's heart. "This," said the Zen master calmly, "is hell." Abashed, the Samurai sheathed his sword and bowed deeply to the Zen master. "And this is heaven," the Zen master replied.

When it comes to parenting, being single means making the house rules without having to discuss everything first, disciplining in a way that is totally in concert with your own beliefs, and the opportunity to really stretch out in the bed at night. (Unless a child has a nightmare—and then there is plenty of room for two!)

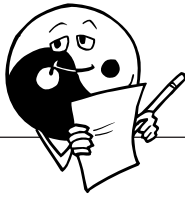
These days, plenty of people are coming to terms with the idea of living as single people. We are all single people, in a sense, and those of us who feel an urgent need to be partnered might examine why. Being single doesn't mean being lonely, or even alone. Single people often have closer relationships with their friends than married people. Some of Gary's married friends tell him he has closer relationships with his friends than they have with their spouses.

But if the best way to find a strong relationship is to be whole, to not need anyone to be whole, then why do it? Should one make a commitment, or marry?



Nirvana Notes

A Zen approach to a sexual relationship enhances the experience just as it enhances any experience. Be present in the moment and you will experience the moment fully. Buddhism also advises against allowing sexual desires to control the mind and body. Desire leads to attachment, which leads to unhappiness. To see your desire as a desire separate from yourself can help to put it in perspective.



Nirvana Notes

The Buddha said, “Be a light unto yourself.” This means that only within can you find truth, meaning, and fulfillment. Find your inner light and you will be whole. Your glow will also be irresistible to others.

Of course. When you feel like a whole person, someone who can be without anyone else around, then a good relationship—one that isn’t based on need but on mutual respect and support of each person’s personal growth—can be a wonderful life enhancer. For some people, life is more enjoyable together than apart when they find someone compatible, going along on a similar path.

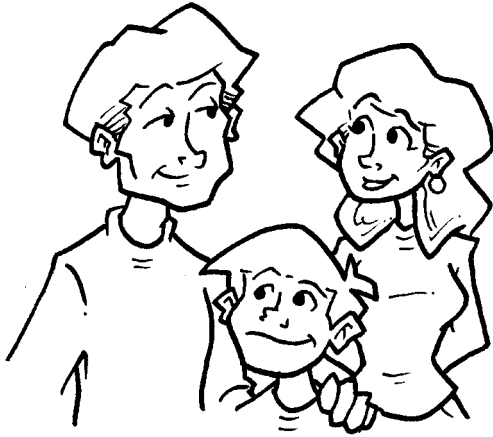
Being with someone just to be with someone is a shallow substitute for fulfillment.

Marriage isn’t for everyone, and no one should feel he or she “should” get married. And, just as relationships aren’t guaranteed, neither is the single life. Many people find kindred spirits on parallel paths later in life after they became completely comfortable with living single.

The key to being happily single is to accept it, embrace it, look for opportunities to make the most of it, and to be willing to work with yourself and reach out to others to establish meaningful relationships. When you least expect it, you might fall madly in love. Or you might not. In either case, you can be fulfilled. After all, all you have is right now. Don’t waste it worrying about “someday.”

The Least You Need to Know

- Humans are social creatures, but because we tend to expect things from each other, we are also constantly at odds.
- Assumptions and expectations can compromise love relationships. Live in the moment with the person you love.
- A Zen approach to dating means keeping in touch with yourself and working to be a whole person, while being completely present with others.
- So what if you never get married? Being single means a life full of opportunities for personal growth.
- Whatever your relationships, work to be your own person making the most of your now.



Zen and the Family

In This Chapter

- ▶ Family life is complicated; Zen helps to put it in perspective
- ▶ The importance of daily zazen for parents
- ▶ How to be there for your kids right now
- ▶ Zen can help kids enjoy their families more
- ▶ Adult children of aging parents can tackle their mixed emotions using a Zen approach

If you've got a family, particularly one that includes small children, you might think you don't have time for zazen, or even much time to think about what Zen is or what it means. We would counter that if you are responsible for orchestrating the daily running of a family, you don't have time not to practice zazen.

Family life can be a lot of fun, a lot of work, a lot of stress, with big rewards and all too often (it seems), no reward at all. Children, whether colicky infants or rebellious teenagers, can challenge anyone's notions of Zen. How do you live in the present moment when you have to ward off impending tantrums, enforce curfews, prepare your kids for life in the world, set limits, maintain boundaries, establish authority, offer advice, and invoke consequences in the face of those inevitable transgressions of the rules?

And even if you don't have kids, how do you live in the moment and cherish the present when your co-dependent younger brother is snoring on your couch, your mother is on the phone lecturing you about how you should have married "that last one" because "you'll never find one that good again at your age," when your sister-in-law has just commented on the unfortunate nature of your latest haircut, and through it all you are thumbing through seven different pamphlets on assisted-living facilities because your grandmother is going to need more stringent care very soon?

Not so easy. Families are a challenge. Zen can help.

Leave It to Zen

Our families see our best and worst sides. Unless we choose to go without, we are stuck with our families. You can't divorce your parents (a few unusual court cases aside) and get new ones. You can't trade in your kids. Your siblings are your siblings, like it or not.

The problem with people who know you so well, and with whom you've spent so much of your life, is that they know exactly who you are. You can't put on an act for them, convincing them you are smarter, more 'together,' wealthier, or less neurotic than you really are. Your family knows, and if you try to fool them, they'll be sure not to let you forget your folly.

You might think such an arrangement is great: People who know you so well that you don't have to put on an act. Wonderful! What a relief! And often (more often for some families than others), relief is exactly what family provides. But at other times, especially when you don't want to be reminded of all your faults or the kind of person you were in junior high, and especially if your family tends to enjoy dispensing advice or criticism, families can be great sources of stress. Joy, too. But also stress.

So what do you do, short of writing everybody out of your will and arranging your disappearance? Why not leave it to Zen?

A Zen approach to family can accomplish a lot ... and (you guessed it!), nothing at all. People in your family may know just how to push your buttons, but a Zen attitude toward family can have the curious effect of eliminating your buttons. The next time you are with family, practice mindfulness and nonattachment. Both are key to a successful Zen attitude, as we've discussed before, and both are just as key when cultivating a Zen attitude towards family.

Let's say that little brother of yours, who doesn't feel like college is for him and just can't seem to "feel comfortable with" any gainful employment for more than a few weeks rolls off your couch onto the floor, wakes up, and says, "Hey, I hope you're making something good for breakfast."

What do you do? Do you lecture him about getting a job? Do you explain, in a strained tone, that there is nothing left to eat in the house because he already ate it all? Do you tell him to fix his own *#@! breakfast? Do you bomb him with cocoa puffs?

Or, do you answer the question? "I did make breakfast two hours ago. I'm afraid you'll have to fend for yourself this morning." Now, it would be easy to infuse such a comment with sarcasm, mock civility, or blatant anger. But none of these would be leaving the situation to Zen. A Zen response would be without judgment. It would simply be a response.

But oh, how you long to lecture that do-nothing brother of yours! Oh, how you long to berate him, to show him the error of his ways, to make him see how he is wasting his youth! We'd like to remind you of a comment we've made many times before in this book: You can't control other people.

Nope, not even your family members. This is tough to remember when you know people so well that you *know* what is good for them. You *see exactly* what they are doing wrong. You can *precisely predict* when they will repeat their mistakes. But it doesn't matter. If someone asks you for advice, sure, knock yourself out. But if you attach desperately to the notion that you can change your family members, you are in for lots of misery. Suffering. *Dukkha*.

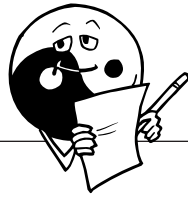
But what about when you are on the other end of the lecture? What about that mother or father or great aunt or grandfather who keeps telling you what you should have done, what you might have been, what you could have achieved, had you only done X or Y or Z? Do you at least get to tell them off, tell them to mind their own business, explain that they can't control you, make them, coerce them to adopt your Zen approach so you don't have to listen to it anymore?

Afraid not. Because, once again, you can't control other people, not even when they are trying to control you. But there is a good side to this one: You can't control them, but *they can't control you either*.

Sometimes, it may feel as if a family member has achieved total control over you. Are you 37 and still trying to impress your father or gain your mother's approval? This may seem like that parent is controlling you, but actually, your notion that you need to impress or gain the approval of someone, anyone else, is simply your own idea. You are attached to the desire to have the approval of another person. Why? Because we all want approval, especially from our parents.

But, whether everyone approves of you are not, all you can control are your own feelings, emotions, thoughts, and reactions to your family. And that's plenty to keep you busy. Let Zen help you step back from your family relationships and see them more objectively. Zen can help you stop, breathe, pause, and consciously and deliberately detach from your emotions, allowing you to gain perspective and act with a clear mind and unclouded compassion.

That's being a good family member. And that's also living Zen.



Nirvana Notes

Approval is something we want. It isn't something we can forcibly *acquire*. It may not even be something we need to earn. How someone else feels about you is beyond your control. You are who you are. They are who they are. Family members don't always agree, and often don't approve of each other. That's life. It's not good or bad. It just is.

When You're the Parent

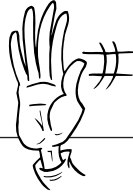
Remember that word, "now"? When it comes to parenting, this word is (if possible) even more important than before.

Eve's two sons, Angus and Emmett, are four (going on 14) and two (oh, he's two all right!). Polite strangers call them "spirited." The rest just glare or leave the room. Back when Eve still attempted to take her children to restaurants, she would get seated by the kitchen, or in the unused banquet room. Now she thanks the universe for drive-throughs. It isn't that her children don't have rules or discipline. But they are four and two, and, as the nice stranger said, spirited.

On the other hand, Eve's kids are also at that charming age where they throw their arms around her with abandon and shower her with "I love you Mommy" kisses. They haven't yet learned to be embarrassed by shows of affection, and as far as they are concerned, the more Mommy they get, the better.

Leaving parenting to Zen doesn't mean focusing only on the good stuff, just as it doesn't mean focusing only on the challenges. The Zen of parenting just means focus, period. Being there for your kids. Living through the chaos and the joy, instead of worrying through it about what chaos might be next—kindergarten, soccer games, learning to (gulp) drive!—or what joys are left behind—that sweet infant smell, those first baby steps, that total adoration.

While people assure Eve that things will get easier, what Eve tries to remember every day is that things don't get any better than this: Parenting right now means being right here, right now for your kids and your family. How could it get better? There is no future to compare with the wonder of now, of focusing on your family in the moment.



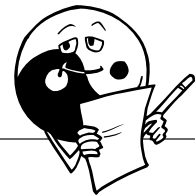
One Hand Clapping

A Tibetan story tells of two brothers, one with one yak, and one with 99 yaks. The brother with one yak was happy. All he needed was one yak. The brother with 99 yaks always worried about keeping track of and managing his yaks, yet was obsessed with wanting more. One day he asked his brother, "One yak isn't much different than none. I have 99 yaks, but 100 yaks are really something. Will you give me your yak?" The brother easily gave the yak away, illustrating that the more you have, the more you want, and the less you have, the more easily you can give. What a great lesson for kids.

Right now, it doesn't matter what Angus will be like when he really is 14, or what Emmett will be like when he is Angus's age. How will this or that affect them later? How might Eve subtly shape and mold each child's personality for greater future success? The best way to help kids reach their potential is to show them you are with them when you are with them, listening, caring, being together, spending time, respecting what they say and do. Concentrate on the now, and the future will take care of itself.

That doesn't mean letting your kids monopolize your time or control you. Kids have duties, too, like going to school or the baby-sitter, cleaning up their messes, learning to get along with others. You get to teach your children these things. The point is that when you spend time with your children (and we hope you spend a lot of time with them), spend time with your children, not doing something else at the same time, looking over their heads at the television, or worrying about other things. How often do you catch yourself in the presence of your children but not really there at all, caught up in some long, complex series of adult worries and plans?

Being present with your family may sound easy. It isn't. We have so much to do and, it seems, so little time. That's why regular zazen is so important, to help keep our minds cleared and in good working



Nirvana Notes

Being present for your kids teaches them to be present for others. If you aren't there for them, well, that old Harry Chapin song, "Cat's in the Cradle," comes to mind, in which the distant father is eventually ignored by his own grown son. His boy was just like him.

order. Just try to remember that time keeps passing, you can plan, you can even imagine, but there is much (and we mean *much*) that you can't control about the future. Don't waste your present moment. You know that corny old saying, "Now is a gift, that's why it's called the 'present'"?

As with any relationship, if we aren't present for those we love, if we don't wake up and experience our family, we will miss it, and them. The years will fly by and we'll wonder what happened. How did the kids get so big, so old, so mature? How did the family drift apart?

Being a Family

Families are simply a relationship cluster. Whether you live with your entire immediate family in one place, or two places, or whether you are spread out over the world, families have to relate to each other, and often they don't do it all that well. Family counselors get plenty of work these days, and even the most well adjusted of families can get into trouble, in much the same way other relationships get into trouble: We expect.

We expect our children to do what we never did, to make the most of their talents and skills, to follow the rules, to stay safe. They don't always do any of it. We expect our spouses to agree with us when disciplining, enforcing rules, and making rules. We expect them to help us present a united front in the face of conflict. They don't always do any of it, either. We expect ourselves to be good spouses, good parents, good providers, good nurturers. Sometimes we fail.

What would happen if parents stopped worrying, obsessing, anticipating, and expecting, and just started living? Being present with your family is an amazing feeling. You might find that when you put down the magazine or the book, turn off the television or the stereo, or stop making dinner for a minute and really pay attention to your kids, they stop acting up. Wow, I think Mom or Dad is really listening to me!



Monkey Mind!

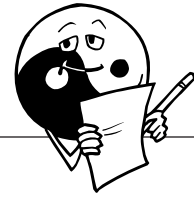
Teenagers need lots of attention, too, even if they act like they don't want it. While teens develop their identities, figure out the world, and struggle with issues of self-esteem and peer pressure, they require security, consistency, and support. Don't neglect your teen just because it is easy to do! Be present, even in silence, ready to listen without judgment and with an open mind.

Or maybe they won't stop acting up, but you won't feel you are missing your precious time together. Someday you really will miss that boundless energy, enthusiasm, that know-it-all attitude, even the tantrums.

These days, parents often work long hours and time with kids is short. "Quality time" often consists of a group television-watching session, which is certainly the least taxing thing to do together after a long day of work and school. But going the easy route with your kids is not being present with them. Being mindful takes effort, but it is an effort richly rewarded.

Being present with your kids can have a miraculous effect on a stressed-out parent. Your irritation, anger, or frustration can melt away in the delight of a precocious comment or the demonstration of a developmental leap, or a sudden opening-up from a child who hasn't shared much lately.

Even if your irritation remains, you can step back and get a perspective on it. "Wow, I'm feeling really irritated. I think I'll let that go for now so I can concentrate on helping build this block tower." "I still don't like that back-talk much, but I think I'll just wait and see what happens if I keep listening."



Nirvana Notes

While parents can try to stop expecting things from their children, young children must expect certain things from their parents: food, shelter, protection, and love. Taking on the job of a parent means accepting the task of providing for and supporting the physical, emotional, and spiritual development of another human being. Leave your expectations behind, but let your young children have theirs.

A Zen Approach to Parenting

Living with others is difficult, any way you look at it. You can't do whatever you want to do whenever you want to do it. Living with kids means you won't often have peace and quiet, or much time alone, even to take shower. (Thank goodness for the transparent shower curtain, a great help to moms who know they'd better not take their eyes off a mischievous two-year-old.)

Living with school-aged kids can mean they may not be around a lot, but if they are, attempts at communication can be frustrating. Or you may feel you spend your entire life transporting kids from activity to activity. Friends become more influential on your child and you may feel you exercise little control over your child's behavior (although you probably influence your child's behavior more than you think).

Being a single parent, Eve sometimes feels like life is a whirlwind and she spends most of her time trying to dodge the debris. But when she tries to see the debris, she can't pin any of it down. Little of it is solid. There goes a worry flying by, there goes an expectation. Here comes a flurry of anxieties, and now a downpour of assumptions.

What if everything that wasn't concrete just blew away? What would be left? A squabble now and then, a few bills to pay, a teacher conference. Just things to do. Nothing to cause any suffering.

And that's what it means to parent the Zen way. Parents worry. We can't help it. We are responsible for these small (or not-so-small) humans and we know the world can be a dangerous place. To keep it all together, we have to be organized, we have to plan, we have to have lists, we have to make rules.



Monkey Mind!

Even if Zen has done great things for you, forcing it on your kids could turn them away from a potentially valuable tool for living. Let Zen appeal to your kids through your own example, and by answering their questions when they ask.

But all these responsibilities of parenting are jobs, the work of life. Everyone has jobs and duties. What makes it hard is all the worry we tend to drape over and around jobs. What if people don't like my child? What if my child gets hurt? What if I can't support my child? What if his grades are bad? What if she doesn't make the team? What if my child can't learn to control himself? What if she gets in trouble at school? What if I'm a bad parent? What are other people thinking of me and my children?

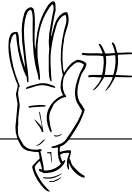
Anxiety, worry, and even (this is a hard one) attachment to our children are the things we can let go of, to be better parents. We are the stewards of our children, but we don't own them. We can teach them how to live, what rules will be most beneficial to follow, how to behave, how to make good decisions. Then we have to let them be people (they'll be their own people anyway, whether we think we are letting them or not).

Zen doesn't give you a magic method for discipline or any other tricks to turn you into Parent of the Year. But it can help you to put the whole business in perspective so you can enjoy the complex and amazing task you are accomplishing right now.

You can get to that place where worries and anxieties are nothing more than things you notice, not giant monsters that control you like a puppet. You can stay focused and centered while raising children, but the best (some would say the only) way to get there is to practice zazen every day, even if you think you don't have time (see Chapter 10, "Breath, and Other Paths to Mindfulness," for tips on scheduling your zazen).

Even if you fall asleep 10 minutes after the kids do, that's 10 minutes for zazen. Do it before the dishes, before the laundry, before the vacuuming. Do it before climbing into bed with that overdue report or that book you haven't finished for book club tomorrow. Make zazen a priority, a time to practice just being, and you can step into the middle of that whirlwind where everything is calm.

You can watch the debris circling and see it for what it is: debris. You'll be a better parent.



One Hand Clapping

"... I'll tell you what it's like if I go to the movies with my daughter: 'Mom, you know your taste in movies is just impossible!' And I say, 'Well, you're not remembering the one we went to that you wanted to see! What about that?' So, squabble, squabble, squabble, and we end up going to see a movie which may be ... whatever it is We do not lose all our particular, little neurotic quirks from practice. Neither my daughter nor I really cares about the movie; but these little squabbling interchanges are what life is all about. That's just the fun of it We don't have to analyze it, pick it apart, or 'communicate' about it It's perfect in being as it is."

—From *Everyday Zen*, by Charlotte Joko Beck

Zen Values

Do parents practicing Zen set a good example for their kids? Of course! The practice of Zen establishes important values and virtues for children. Teaching kids the Buddha's Five Precepts (from Chapter 8, "You've Already Started") is a great way to establish values in your household, but even more important than teaching them is living them.

Let's look at them again, with an eye for how parents can live these precepts to set a worthy example for their children:

- The destruction of life causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate compassion and learn how to protect the lives of people, animals, and plants, refusing to kill, to let others kill, or to condone any act of killing in action, thought, and lifestyle. Parents can make nonviolence a household rule. No weapon play, no hitting, and plenty of activities that promote life. If you choose to be vegetarian, you can also explain your views about eating meat as they relate to this precept.
- Social injustice causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate loving kindness and work for the well-being of people, animals, and plants, refusing to steal and vowing to share my material resources. Parents can involve the whole family in activities that help animals, the environment, and our fellow human beings. Parents who display compassion and who work for social justice will make a strong impression on their kids.

- Sexual misconduct causes suffering, so I vow to respect my commitments and not to engage in sexual misconduct, and to work to protect others from sexual abuse and the effects of sexual misconduct. An important lesson for older kids! Parents who follow this precept—which includes degrading language about sex and about people—set excellent standards for their children.
- Words can cause suffering, so I vow to speak only with kindness and love and to listen deeply, never speaking words that could cause division and discord but working to avoid or resolve conflict. Parents who lie, speak in anger, criticize, or belittle others in front of their children (or who do these things to their children) teach their kids that words are weapons to be used against others. Parents who use words carefully, deliberately, and in a way that supports and upholds life and happiness teach kids that language can be a powerful instrument of compassion and strength.
- Unmindful consumption causes suffering, so I vow to cultivate good physical and mental health in myself and in society by only eating, drinking, consuming, and paying attention to things that result in physical, mental, and societal peace and harmony. You've probably heard that alcoholics tend to have children who abuse alcohol. Likewise, parents who consume mindfully, who tread the middle way, and who refrain from unhealthy excess will encourage their children to learn and exercise similar self-control.

Raising a family and nurturing children with these values is an excellent way to give kids a value system to hold onto when faced with peer pressure and other challenges of growing up. Couple that with plenty of open, honest, supportive talk about the importance of mindfulness and being true to yourself, and your kids will have powerful tools for living.

Teaching Kids How to Sit in Zazen

As kids get older and aren't completely reliant on their parents to fulfill all their needs, zazen can be a valuable practice. Kids can learn to recognize and discard expectations and assumptions in favor of living in the present moment.

What do kids expect from us? Some things that are reasonable, such as consistency and fairness, and other things that may seem less reasonable, like being just like someone else's parents, being "cool," or at the very least, that we won't embarrass them in front of their friends (which we will, whether we mean to or not).

But parents aren't always consistent. They won't necessarily be who kids wish they were. They certainly won't morph into someone else's parents. Parents, too, are who they are, and kids can't control them. Sometimes they make mistakes. Sometimes they can be a big help because they have a lot of life experience. If kids can recognize this fact, life will be a lot easier.

Practicing zazen and a Zen attitude can help kids develop a better relationship with their parents. They can learn to listen, to communicate honestly, and to work on discovering who they are and who their parents are, what those differences are and where the similarities lie. This work of self-discovery is interesting work for teens and preteens, and a lot more fun than wasting energy being irritated or angry at parents.

Sitting in zazen is just as challenging for kids as it is for adults, and zazen is probably too much to expect for most kids younger than grade school age. Short periods of zazen each day for school-aged kids and longer sessions for teens can provide an oasis of calm, quiet, peace, and independence for kids. If zazen develops into a lifelong habit, your child will cultivate presence of mind, mental discipline, perspective on emotions, and mastery of the self. We're guessing your child will thank you later.

Of course, if your child resists sitting in zazen, this is no time to force the issue. Zazen should be something your child chooses to do, not something you force on him or her. The best way to get your child to want to practice zazen is to let your child see you practicing. (Because that grown-up stuff adults do *must* be something special—and in this case, it is!)



Nirvana Notes

Hey kids, a Zen approach to family means learning to be there in the moment with the people you love, listening, communicating honestly, and experiencing your time together rather than wishing you were somewhere else. Your parents will be so surprised when you actually answer the, "How was your day?" question that it will be worth it just to see the looks on their faces!

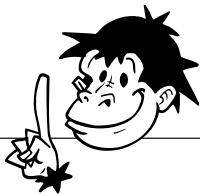
Zen for Adult Children

Those of you who are parents are also somebody's child. It isn't easy being an adult, a parent, and a child, too. Aren't you supposed to be all grown up? Where do those feelings come from, the ones that arise whenever you spend time with your parents? Why do you start acting like a child again, full of expectations, resentments, or just silliness?

Eve's parents are card-carrying members of the sandwich generation, caring for their own aging parents, providing much-needed support to their three children, and logging in plenty of hours baby-sitting their grandchildren, too. Sometimes Eve feels like she must still be a little girl. Look how much they can handle, compared to her! What would she do without them?

Being an adult child, many of us frequently encounter the child within ourselves. No matter how mature we are, no matter how many of our own children we have, no matter how educated or successful we are in our professions, somewhere deep down is a child who still expects things from Mom and/or Dad. Parents make it all better. Don't they?

Gary's parents are older, and Gary finds it very difficult to watch his parents age. What a reminder of his own aging. And shouldn't he always be able to rely on them? What business do they have, relying on him? Whenever he spends time with his parents, he finds himself encountering all kinds of mixed emotions: compassion and resentment, a fear of aging, of death, and of doing without his parents someday.



Monkey Mind!

When you find your parents, your children, or anyone else in your family utterly exasperating, remember that upon his enlightenment, Siddhartha suddenly recognized that everyone has Buddha nature within. In other words, as different as we all are, we are all part of a larger whole. We are all deserving of compassion, and more alike than we seem.

As we age, our parents age, too. This can be difficult and can bring up all kinds of unresolved childhood issues. While some of us lost our parents at a younger age and have already worked through much of this, many of the rest of us are just now encountering the first glimmers of recognition: Wait a minute. When did Dad go completely gray? Why is Mom shuffling like that? Retirement, so soon? What do you mean you joined AARP? What do you mean you are too old for that? You aren't old! If you're old, that means I have to be a grown-up!

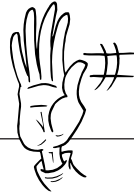
Somewhere deep down, did we really think our parents would never get old, or that we ourselves would never age? Aren't our parents supposed to be eternally supportive, unerringly protective? How can we be expected to take care of them? Worse yet, how can we be expected to live on without them?

Even as we know such feelings are selfish, childish, even irrational, they are also natural and common human feelings. And they also have another side. After taking so much from our parents, we may also feel such gratitude that we feel great about being able

to give something back, taking care of certain things and caring for our parents as they age. We may also come to recognize that they are handling aging and the new relationship with us in a way that is surprising, baffling, impressive, instructive, or all of the above.

In dealing with our parents, we probably all feel a mixture of emotions—some that make us proud, others that make us ashamed. But a Zen attitude toward life as an adult child with aging parents means to recognize, acknowledge, and feel the whole range of emotions that will naturally arise as these issues arise.

Acknowledge, but don't attach. There's a thought about what I might have to give up to care for my parents. Now here's a strong feeling of love for them and a desire to take care of them. And now a feeling a fear—if they age and eventually die, I will, too. Now a feeling of resentment that they are abandoning me. Now I'm thinking that I can't imagine being without the feeling of security they provide. And now I think of myself as strong and able to help them. They deserve it.



One Hand Clapping

Our book producer, Lee Ann Chearney, is caregiver for her 91-year-old grandmother. Lee Ann tells us that, when taking her Gram for a recent battery of tests, the technician informed Gram after the EKG: "You're done." "I'm dying?" asked Gram, surprised but matter-of-factly (she's hard of hearing). "No, no, no, we're finished here," the technician assured her. Lee Ann braced herself. What a horrible miscommunication! But Gram just laughed—not with relief, but with a genuine amusement. What a great Zen attitude to cultivate: a pragmatic refusal to assume anything (that she might or might not be at death's door), or to ignore the humor in life, which is everywhere if we are in the right mind to see it.

You can work through a lot of these feelings during zazen, practicing to recognize them without letting them engulf you. See them, define them if you can, sit with them a while, then when they are ready to pass, let them pass. Don't force yourself to think only the "good" thoughts. Family life in all its manifestations is complex, full of the pleasant and the unpleasant, courage and fear, love and resentment. That's life. Zen helps you live it.

If you can accept the fact that your parents are aging, that you may have certain responsibilities toward them, and that they are still your parents but that you are now an adult, something wonderful is possible. You can open yourself to the amazing opportunities for growth and self-awareness inherent in the evolving parent/child relationship. And remember—you're not the only one growing and evolving: your parents are, too! We all have issues. We all age. It's scary to face it. It can make us angry. Relationships are complex. Death is a big unknown. Let yourself experience it, living moment in moment, with Zen fullness.

The more you work with your feelings having to do with being the adult child of aging parents, the more you can learn to flow with whatever life brings you, finding an acceptance, even a surrender, to the rhythm of life, including the facts of birth, love, aging, and death. Siddhartha accepted it. You can, too!

The Least You Need to Know

- A Zen approach to family means remembering you can't control what your family members do or say, no matter how much you want to try!
- A Zen approach to parenting means being present for your children rather than letting worries and anxieties consume your energy.
- You can't control what life will bring you and you don't own your children.
- The daily practice of zazen will help you to maintain a clear head so you can best keep your family running smoothly.
- Kids who practice a Zen attitude can learn to be present with their families and even communicate more effectively with their parents.
- Adult children of aging parents can learn to recognize and experience mixed emotions of love, compassion, resentment, and fear as their own parents age and require more care.



Desire, Fear, Worry: Tackling Your Personal *Dukkha*

In This Chapter

- ▶ You may not really want what you think you want
- ▶ How to master your desires through Zen
- ▶ Pull the mask off your greatest fears
- ▶ When worry consumes you
- ▶ Determining your personal *dukkha* profile

What do you want? What do you desire? What do you feel you absolutely *have to have*? What about your fears? What scares you? What worries you? What keeps you awake at night? This chapter is all about these questions. In other words, this chapter is all about *dukkha*, the stuff of human unhappiness, and how Zen can help you to dispel the *dukkha* you call your own.

Consumed by Desire

Desire is a pretty broad term, and it can apply to many areas of our lives. We desire people. We desire happiness. We desire a half-pound bag of M&Ms or a giant plate of nachos. We desire a hot cup of coffee or a cold beer. Or we desire stuff.

Desire can be an incredibly strong, overriding emotion. You see something, and you *have to have it!* Oh, that black dress is perfect. *I have to have it!* Oh, that double pepperoni pizza dripping with cheese on that TV commercial looks incredible. *I have to have it!* Oh, that incredibly sexy and engaging person at work is irresistible. *I have to have that person!*

We are a consumerist society in many senses of the word. One might argue that life has, to a high degree, become largely about what we have, what we don't have, and what we are trying to get.

Some would say we are an insidiously consumerist society. What's so bad about having lots of nice stuff available at reasonable prices? What's so bad about wanting things, even wanting people? Wanting happiness?

The problem with consumerism is that its appeal is compelling, and its effects on consciousness are subtle. Since the 1950s, society has gradually become all about advertising and about getting stuff, whether material goods—a classier suit, a cooler car, a larger home, a fancier electronic gadget—or things less tangible but no less real—power, a good feeling, a good buzz, prestige, respect. You could call it lust. We lust for things, people, feelings. We lust because we think that if we only have this or that, things will be better. We desire something better than what we have.

The Materialism Monster

One of the results of desire and consumerism is materialism. Television commercials, radio commercials, billboards, and the salespeople who call us on the phone during dinner are all trying to convince us we need more stuff.

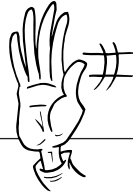
And it works! Sure, you may hang up on that telemarketer, but then you gaze at that new car in your neighbor's driveway or the remodeling job on the house across the street, or you watch with envy as your work colleagues show up in what you perceive to be nicer or more fashionable clothing. What is more seductive than a fat roll of cash, not for what it is, but for what it represents: the ability to get more stuff!

People are far less inclined to buy high quality and fix things when they break. We are a use-it-and-toss-it society, and all kinds of external sources tell us that such an attitude is good. The more we spend, the better the economy, right?

Whose economy? Certainly not our own. Think how much money you spend on "stuff." How much of the hard-earned money you make gets thrown away on the temporary pleasure of buying something that immediately becomes assimilated into your ever-growing collection of "stuff"? Is this why you make a living? To have more "stuff"?

Consumerism has adjusted our attitudes so that what was once a desire for enough has become an unquenchable thirst for more. What is quality? Who cares? Use it, toss it, buy a new one.

Many have had their financial welfare severely compromised by this attitude. According to the American Bankruptcy Institute, in 1980 there were 331,264 total bankruptcies filed in the United States. Almost 87 percent of these were consumer (nonbusiness) filings. In 1999, total bankruptcies equaled a frightening 1,319,465, with over 97 percent consumer filings. What has happened to our financial lives? What about living within our means? Society doesn't encourage it.



One Hand Clapping

The following statistics, compiled by the New Road Map Foundation, a group dedicated to reducing consumerism in North America, offer a sobering picture of changing attitudes about consumption in the United States: Despite astounding economic growth between 1958 and 1980, Americans reported feeling significantly less well-off in 1980 than they had 22 years before. In 1992 people were, on average, four and a half times richer than their great-grandparents, and compared to their parents in 1950, people in the United States in 1991 owned twice as many cars and drove two and a half times as far. Yet college students reported feeling much less sure they would be able to be successful or acquire the “American dream,” American parents spent 40 percent less time with their children in 1991 than they did in 1965, and reports of personal happiness were no higher in the 1990s than in the 1950s.

But you can still do it. Many excellent books and Web sites, as well as free consumer information and help, can offer support for those who want to simplify, avoid materialism, and live within their means (see Appendix A, “Further Reading”). Learning how to control, not be controlled by, your material desires is a giant step in getting control over your life and letting go of your attachments to things that don’t last.

What We Want and What We Think We Want

What exactly is it that you want? More money? More stuff? Well, we’ve covered that already. More prestige? More power? More attention? More time?

Or maybe you want less. Less stress, less anger, less anxiety, less rushing around, less wondering what it all means.

Maybe what you want is noble. World peace. A clean environment. A better future for your kids. A life of dignity. A peaceful passing.



Nirvana Notes

For even more help on conquering desires of all kinds, check out *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Breaking Bad Habits, Second Edition*, co-authored by Gary and Suzanne LeVert. This book covers finances, clutter, addictions, compulsions, fears, lust, and even those little habits like knuckle-cracking and nail-biting that seem incidental but to which some of us get very, very attached.

We'd bet just about everybody wants at least some of these things. Is that okay? Is it "attachment" and "desire" to want world peace or a good life for your kids? Sort of.

Being human, we will want things, and we will strive to make things better, whether for noble or ignoble reasons. And wanting things as a part of your life plan is natural. Even bodhisattvas *want* all humans to experience enlightenment, so they devote their lives to working for that end.

Wanting itself isn't bad. But the degree of want can make all the difference. If you are controlled by your desire, then you will suffer. If you put your desires in perspective, if you aren't too attached to them, then you are living Zen. It is unrealistic to expect humans not to want anything. We want, and we want even beyond what we need.

But how badly do you want? How strong are your desires? If you see a brownie in the dessert case and you realize you want it, who's in control? The brownie or you? Are you able to make a controlled decision about whether you will eat that brownie at that moment or not? If you can decide that yes, it's a long way until dinner, you didn't have much lunch, you can afford the extra calories and fat, and that's okay, this time you'll have the brownie. You can also decide that no, it's almost time for dinner, you had that big mocha latte for breakfast, and you don't really want to take in all those extra calories and fat *even though the brownie looks really delicious and you want it*, then you are the one in control.

If you see that brownie and, mocha latte or no mocha latte, dinner or no dinner, you just absolutely have to have it, then the brownie is in control. Or, more accurately, your desires are in control.

For those of you not prone to a sweet tooth, here's another example. When Gary was about five years old, he used to go with his mother to her bowling league. Another member of the league had a little four-year-old girl named Shirley and in his five-year-old way, Gary was smitten.



Monkey Mind!

People have become a commodity. Advertisers dress them up and photograph them to sell stuff. The images become a sort of window on greener pastures (at least the advertisers hope so, and, somehow, perhaps so do we!). Buy this, and you'll be beautiful, rich, accomplished, cool, ahead of the pack—just like the person in the picture. Beware of this attitude! People are people, no matter their circumstance, shape, size, or appearance. Forgetting this is a quick route to a loss of compassion.

But Shirley didn't want anything to do with Gary. As their mothers bowled, Gary would follow Shirley around the bowling alley, and Shirley would do everything she could to avoid him. He would scoot closer to her, and she would scoot away. He would talk to her, and she would ignore him. Poor Gary's heart was broken. He wanted Shirley's attention. He wanted her adoration.

But he was getting nothin'!

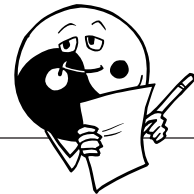
Sometimes you can want something so badly that you can feel yourself becoming somewhat of a stalker. Or at least obsessed. Have you ever expected an important phone call or e-mail message, and called home to check your messages or hit that "check mail" button on your computer again and again and again, oblivious to that old adage that "a watched pot never boils"? We know we have. Maybe it's a job you want, a person you hope is interested in you, or some news about someone you love. When you can't control your impulse to keep checking that e-mail or driving by that person's house "just to see if anybody's home," when you just can't help pulling out your credit card, when you can't control your urge to keep following little Shirley around the bowling alley despite her obvious lack of interest, your desires are in control.

If you want something, you can steer your boat in that direction. You can lay the groundwork for a promotion or a new relationship or the good fortune of a loved one. You can save up your money for a purchase, or you can have a light salad for lunch in expectation of the chocolate brownie. Then you have to relax and remember what you do and don't control.

Remember that job Gary didn't get after bugging the person who was hiring with too many phone calls? Let the seeds you've planted come to fruition. Maybe they will; maybe they won't. If you are too attached to the end result and too obsessed with the object of your desire, you just might destroy your chances. Or, if things just don't happen to work out the way you had planned, you'll be in for an awful disappointment.

Or, if things do work out the way you planned, you may find things aren't as good as you thought they would be (Shirley might have been cute, but who knows whether she would have been a good friend to young Gary). Maybe you'll find you didn't really want what you thought you wanted because you were seduced into thinking you wanted it through cultural pressure or the efforts of others (such as clever advertisers with multimillion-dollar budgets).

Or maybe you'll be so obsessed with the *next* thing you think you want that you won't be able to enjoy the *last* thing you wanted when you finally get it.



Nirvana Notes

A simple mindfulness trick that works wonders for Eve is to write down 1) every penny you spend and 2) every single bite you eat. The awareness this inspires can bring amazing control and clarity to your life. You may find you decide not to buy that gadget, *because you'll have to write it down*, or not to eat that extra helping, *because you'll have to write it down*.

See how desire leads only to suffering? Nothing is ever as good as intense obsession leads us to believe it will be. But if you wait patiently, go with the flow, do your best, and let things happen the way they will, when good things happen, you'll be in for a lovely time.

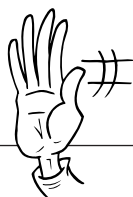
A Zazen Cold Shower

Oh, but it is so hard not to desire in a society like this, with so much available, with chocolate brownies and sexy people and lovely clothes and cool cars and spacious houses and amazing gadgets everywhere! How does a desire addict get through the day with so much temptation around?

Think of zazen as your cold shower. Sitting in zazen every day can help break the spell of desire. By training your mind to sit and focus, not on stuff, not on what you want, but on the unadorned you, on the blank wall in front of you, on the breath (which doesn't cost a thing), on your own perfect self that doesn't need anything else, you can beat desire.

Remember the Buddha's third noble truth? Suffering can be eliminated by eliminating desire. It's true. Let go of the stuff. Let go of the grasping and the wanting and the *absolutely-have-to-having*, and you'll feel an amazing, uplifting sense of freedom.

But you have to do it every day! Otherwise, your desires can get a stronger foothold. Remind yourself through your daily zazen how fulfilled you already are, and you'll have a clearer, easier perspective about all that stuff out there you think you want. You'll see how much you don't really need it. You'll learn to feel good about what you have, even to enjoy finding ways to get by on less. And we're guessing you'll start feeling much more content. (We certainly do!)



One Hand Clapping

In Eve's favorite simplicity book, *The Simplicity Reader*, Elaine St. James suggests a great technique for stopping indiscriminate buying: the 30-day list. If you find yourself experiencing that irresistible urge to buy something, pull out your list (keep it in your wallet) and write down the date and the item you think you want. Put it away. Walk out of the store. One month later, take the list out and look at the item. Do you still want it? Do you still think you need it? If you do, consider buying it. Chances are, you'll wonder why you ever thought you needed that whatcha-ma-giggy, and you won't have wasted your hard-earned cash.

Things That Go Bump in the Night

Desires aren't the only things we attach to. Many of us also attach—cling with white knuckles—to our fears. We don't just mean phobias. Plenty of people have a slight fear of heights or spiders or small spaces or public speaking, but these fears usually don't interfere with their lives.

Other fears may be easily repressed or hidden, or even socially acceptable, but are more insidious: fear of failure, fear of success, fear of embarrassment, fear of losing a loved one. If you've ever sabotaged your own success without exactly knowing why, avoided a social event you know would probably be fun, or found yourself wide-eyed in bed at night at 3:00 A.M. imagining all the horrible things that could possibly happen to your children or your partner or your parents or friends or even yourself, you know what we mean.

Fear is a natural instinct that, like the craving for high-fat foods, has always played an important role in survival for humans (and for any animals). If none of our ancestors were afraid of saber-toothed tigers or grizzly bears or their large, angry, cave-dwelling neighbors with clubs, humans probably wouldn't have survived into the twenty-first century. But here we are, due in part to a healthy dose of fear instinct.

We teach our kids to fear things at an early age: cars, strangers, drugs, guns. We do this to protect them. Children also have plenty of fears of their own. Remember your nightmares from childhood? Children typically have more nightmares than adults do, and these scary dreams are often very intense and memorable into adulthood: falling, being chased, or being attacked by wild animals, monsters, boogeymen, and ghosts. Eve's son, Angus, used to have vivid, terrifying nightmares about an evil blue mouse named Hickory Dock who would scuttle from a loudly ticking clock and bite him on the hand—inspired, apparently, from the seemingly benign nursery rhyme. Even at the ripe age of five, Angus can't sleep with a ticking clock in the room.

Instinct aside, why do we fear things that have no apparent benefit to our survival? Sure, the world is full of danger. But we aren't going to die if we have to stand up in front of a group of people and say a few words. We aren't going to be injured by a promotion or even by getting fired. Chances are good that none of the bizarre things you imagine might happen to your children or grandchildren or parents will actually happen.

And as far as natural disasters and random violence, sure, these things do happen sometimes, but there isn't much you can do about them, so beyond playing it reasonably safe, why worry? Maybe you fear death. Death is an unknown, of course, but you certainly can't prevent it.

Yet, we persist in our fears and sometimes they can actually impede our functioning.

The Source of Fear

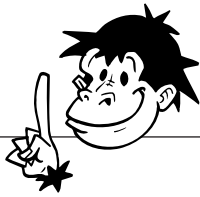
Fears can come from many places. Perhaps a traumatic childhood event has sparked certain fears. Maybe knowing you are responsible for others makes you afraid. Maybe those who were once responsible for you failed in their job to keep you safe, and now you fear you will make the same mistake. The failure or success with negative consequences of a parent or friend may influence your fears about your own career or life.

But Zen can also offer you a helping hand. You may not like the Zen method for fear management, but it works: You need to feel your fear.

Just as you need to sit and experience other strong feelings that come your way, so, too, you need to sit and experience your fear. Step into it instead of running away from it. It just might deflate and reveal itself for exactly what it is.

Sometimes fears are really excuses for not facing other issues. Maybe you get caught up in some intrigue at work, such as a terrible fear that others are plotting against you. Maybe you are obsessed with the safety of your children and are filled with fear because you are convinced they won't be safe unless you are with them all the time. Maybe you are terrified that the person you love will cheat on you or won't love you back.

What is really going on? You can gain insight by sitting and experiencing your feelings. Maybe you want more responsibility at work but are afraid to face success so you distract yourself with fear. Maybe you are afraid you aren't an adequate parent, so you obsess about your fears for your children. Maybe you are afraid to face the fact that you are no longer in love with your partner, so you concentrate instead on fears that your partner is no longer in love with you. Or maybe you never faced the breakup of your own parents, so instead, you fear the imagined breakup of your own relationship.



Monkey Mind!

Only you can uncover the source of your fears, and you may not be able to do it alone. If your fears are seriously hindering your happiness, success, or daily existence, we strongly encourage you to talk to your primary care physician, or seek out a licensed mental health professional. Fears can be overcome.

The possibilities, of course, are as limitless as there are fears on the face of the earth. But considering that your fear might be masking something that is emotionally risky for you can open up doors to self-realization. It means facing the unfamiliar, the repressed, the stuff you really, really don't want to face.

But choosing to sink into unwarranted fear rather than face truth is like paddling against the flow. You're stuck midstream, when the current could be taking you to a new and better destination. Sit with your fear. Look at it. Stand back from it. Think about it. Imagine you are a bystander. Analyze it. Where might it come from? Then open yourself to the greater lesson, the truth about yourself. If you stop clinging so tightly to your fears, they might just float away. If you look your fear in the eye, you may find there isn't much to it.

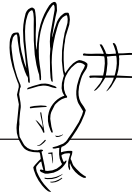
Pull Off the Mask

In other words, the key to a Zen approach to fear is to step into your fear and sit with it until you reveal it for what it really is. Most things aren't quite as scary as you imagine they will be when they are unmasked. Like Fred or Velma at the end of a *Scooby Doo* episode, you can pull the mask off what scares you, and see it for what it really is.

Eve remembers several recurring nightmares in childhood when she was suddenly able to turn around, look the monster in the eye and say, "Hey! You're just a dream!" Naturally, the monster, so recently fearsome, slunk away, utterly abashed. Eve also had a recurring dream about being stuck in a car that was rolling down a hill. One day (when she wasn't dreaming), six-year-old Eve asked her father where the brake pedal was. He showed her. The next time she had the dream, she knew just what to do. She pressed the brake pedal, the car stopped, and the dream never returned.

Remember, you are the master of yourself. Your fears are just thoughts and feelings. They aren't you. They don't define you. Just like all your other thoughts and feelings, they are simply something you have. Possessions. You don't have to let them own you. You can put them in their place. You can recognize them, and with a calm but firm demeanor, tell them they are no longer allowed to disrupt your inner household. Eventually, unfed by your energy, your fears will leave you. What will be left? You, unafraid.

That's not so scary.



One Hand Clapping

According to James Austin, M.D., in his book *Zen and the Brain*, feelings of fear are based in the brain's almond-shaped amygdala, located near the inside tip of the temporal lobe. This area of the brain influences learning based on negative results such as behavior resulting in physical or verbal punishment, and to a lesser extent, learning from positive experiences such as behavior rewarded with a treat. In other words, dramatic, stressful events and negative experiences generate fear because of the amygdala. Injuries to or injections of drugs into this area of the brain can result in a total loss of fear.

Worry: The Real Ball and Chain

That leaves us with worry. Worry, worry, worry. We all do it. We have so much to do, but like a car stuck in the mud, we spin our wheels with worry. Worry is the real ball and chain we drag around with us, all the while wondering why we aren't moving very fast or getting anywhere.

Why do we worry? Maybe we think that if we worry about something, it proves we care. Or, maybe we think if we worry about things, we can somehow prevent them from happening. How? By the little vibrations our worries surely make in the atmosphere? Of course not.

Worry may be an intense and prevalent part of your life, but the Zen approach to worry is simple: Just don't do it.

That's easier said than done, of course. What, not worry? Not worry that I won't have enough money to pay the bills this month? Not worry that my child might get a D in social studies? Not worry that my boss might not like my latest analysis? Not worry that I might not get accepted to the college of my choice? Not worry that my car might break down on the trip to Disney World? Not worry that I might get a nasty cold just before the holidays and be unable to keep up with all the necessary hoopla? Not worry that my mother is starting to forget things, that my father is losing interest in his job after 40 years, that my grandmother isn't feeling well, that my dog is scratching her ear a little too often and might have fleas that will infest the whole house and then I'll have to call the exterminator and they'll spray pesticides everywhere and we'll all die of some horrible chemical-induced disease nobody has discovered yet?

Stop the madness! Worry might be worth the effort—and that's a big *might*—if worry actually helped. But listen very, very carefully:

Worry doesn't help.

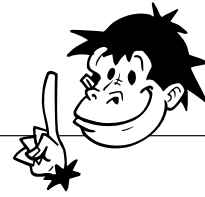
Worry will have no effect on the outcome. Worry won't bring in more money this month. It won't keep the car from breaking down. It won't keep you from getting a cold. (In fact, the immune-suppressing effect of worry may actually make you more susceptible to cold germs.) It won't be therapeutic for your aging parents. And it certainly won't prevent a flea infestation.

So cut it out! You may not even realize how often you worry, but if you practice zazen every day, you'll be able to see your worries more clearly. You'll get to watch them rattle and bounce around inside your head. This is the time to step back and really watch them. How kinetic they are! Like little bugs buzzing around in your head and bumping into each other. What a frenzied chaos. Why would anybody want to go in there?

When you begin to see your worries from a more objective place, and also to see that they don't actually help, you can learn to let them go. But it takes time. Chronic worrying is an addictive habit.

One way to quit worrying is to work on things you can actually do to resolve situations that worry you. Get your finances organized. Have the car serviced. Go to bed earlier and eat better so you will be less likely to catch a cold. Use preventive pest control on your dog.

Of course, you can't control most of it, and letting go is the hard part. But we've talked a lot about how little we control. Remember your river. Go with the flow, and leave your worries behind, like one of those little clouds of bugs that buzz around together in one spot during the summer. That cloud won't follow you down the river. Leave your worries back there over the rapids. Just steer your boat in the right direction and pay attention. It's really all you can do.



Monkey Mind!

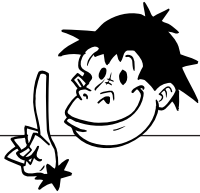
Worry raises your blood pressure, induces the production of stress hormones, knots up your muscles, and makes you feel lousy in general. Chronic worry is stressful. It depresses your immune system, which could have a wide range of negative effects on your physical, emotional, and mental health. In other words, it isn't good for you.

Worry Myths

We can tell you to stop worrying all day long, but again, we recognize how difficult it is. So let's look at some worry myths, to help inspire you to break your worry habit. You might consider putting this list on your refrigerator or bathroom mirror:

- If I worry about something, it won't happen.
- If I worry about something, I'll cause it to happen.
- Worry shows I care.
- Worry helps.
- Worry is productive.
- Worry equals love.
- Worry will keep me better organized.
- Worry will increase my awareness of danger.
- Worry makes me a conscientious person.
- Worry makes me a person.
- If I don't worry, I'm heartless.
- If I don't worry, I'm not a good parent/child/sibling/friend.
- If I don't worry, bad things will automatically happen.

- If I don't worry, others will have to worry.
- If I don't worry, I won't get the job done.
- If I don't worry, I'll be out of the loop.
- If I don't worry, my whole life will fall apart.



Monkey Mind!

Do you worry obsessively about something you actually *could* do something about—disorganized finances, an extra five pounds, a failure to exercise, a disobedient toddler—but don't do anything about it because you are too exhausted from worrying? If so, you are letting your worries control you. Take the reins. Don't waste your energy on worrying. Spend it on things you can actually do something about.

Believe it or not, none of the myths in the preceding list are true. Maybe you know perfectly well that none are true, but do you act like you know it? Does your behavior reflect your knowledge? If worry is ruling you, then the answer is probably no. If you rule your worry—if you recognize it for what it is, acknowledge it, put it in perspective, and refuse to let it control you—then you are cultivating a Zen perspective on worry.

Your Zen Bolt-Cutter, Bug-Swatter, Worry-Buster

The regular practice of zazen and the mindful cultivation of a Zen attitude are all you need to cut yourself free from the ball and chain, swat that cloud of worry bugs, and deflate the worry monster. You may need to do it time and time again, but that's the business of being human. When worry overcomes you, learn to recognize the signs: distraction, obsession, repetitive thoughts, insomnia, compulsive eating, nervous behavior. That's the time to step back, sit down, and watch what is going on inside your own head.

Like materialism and compulsive buying, worry is a habit. You can break the habit, even if it seems that today, worry largely defines who you are. It isn't true. You are uniquely you, and worry has nothing to do with who you are. Worry is distracting you from your true self. Your true self is much more worthy of your energy than a lot of little worry bugs. You can master your worries, it just takes practice. Let zazen rid you of that ball and chain. Life will be much easier.

Name Your *Dukkha*

Everyone has an individual *dukkha* profile. Some people don't worry much, but they have a nasty habit of spending, buying, and acquiring stuff they don't really need but think they want. Others are good at avoiding materialism, but they are plagued by fear. Others seem patently unafraid, but are ruled by lust—for power, for sex, for wealth.

What are your particular attachments? You can tackle your *dukkha* more easily if you know where it hides. Answer the following questions to determine your personal *dukkha* profile. Each question asks about certain triggers for desire, fear, and worry. Explore your own personal feelings about each issue. Some you may not care about. You may find yourself writing furiously about others. Look for where your passions lie. Therein, chances are, your *dukkha* lies, too:

1. This is how I feel about money:

2. This is how I feel about my partner:

3. This is how I feel about sex:

4. This is how I feel about having nice things:

5. This is how I feel about power and influence:

6. This is how I feel about my social status:

7. This is how I feel about my friends:

8. This is how I feel about my children:

9. This is how I feel about food:

10. Everybody knows I am afraid of ...

11. I don't like to admit it, but I am also afraid of ...

12. My biggest sources of worry are ...

Enlightening? We hope so. Now, go back over your list and circle the keywords—the words that spark your most intense feelings of desire, fear, or worry. Where does your *dukkha* lie? Make a short list, and keep it for reference. Eve keeps a *dukkha* list on her computer and updates it often. If you know where your *dukkha* lies, if you have named it, you can be on the lookout for it. This is what stands between you and a happier, more serene, more fulfilling life. Now you can be ready to foil your *dukkha* with your Zen attitude.

By now, you should have a more personal picture of how Zen can work in your life. In the next part of the book, we'll start to apply Zen to an area of life that is important for most of us: Whether we call it a job, a career, a profession, a trade, or a great big burden, it is that thing we do during the day to earn a living.

The Least You Need to Know

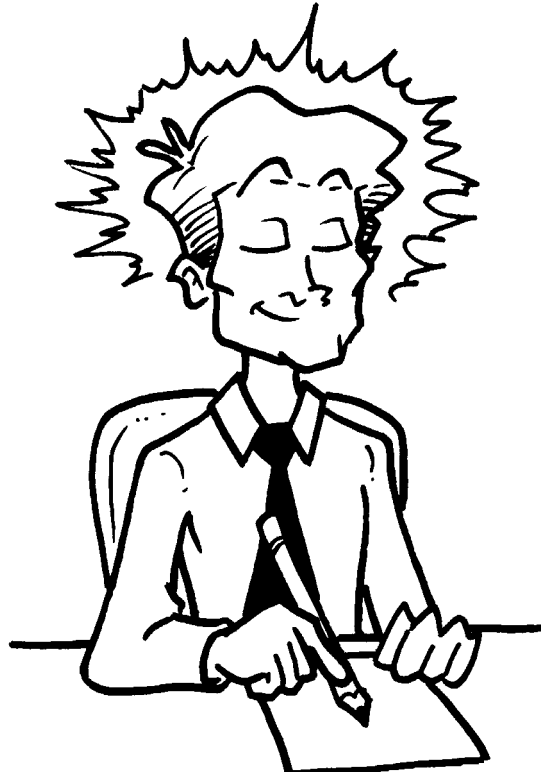
- Desire is the source of suffering, but Zen can deflate your desires.
- Desire can make us want things, even when we know we don't really want them!
- Fear can debilitate our functioning, but Zen can help to pull the mask off the things that scare you most.
- We are a society of worriers, but worry is an unproductive expenditure of energy.
- Once you determine your personal sources of *dukkha*, you can master your desires, fears, and worries with the regular practice of zazen and a Zen attitude.

Part 5

Zen in the Workplace

Who are you at work? Are you the same person you are at home with your family, or alone in meditation? Work is a major part of most of our lives, and in this section, we'll help you to make your job your own with a Zen approach. Make your work meaningful, or find work that is meaningful. Learn how to be a great employee and/or a great boss. Zen can help you to maintain effective work relationships, too.

Even for those who adore their jobs, most work is stressful, at least some of the time. A Zen approach to job stress, time management, and putting your work life in perspective can make all the difference. We'll end by discussing your career path. Can you be ambitious and still practice Zen? Are you doomed to a static career path, or can you be a mover and shaker between zazen sessions?





Buddha in Your Cubicle

In This Chapter

- You aren't your job
- Lose your mind (and your ego) for career success
- Detach and see more clearly
- Desk zazen

Americans tend to define themselves by what they do. This used to be true mostly of men, while women defined themselves largely by their domestic skills (or appearance). With the advent of large numbers of women in the workforce, the attitude that parenting is also a job for men, and the steady increase in stay-at-home dads, employment (whether in or out of the home) seems the primary way we all define ourselves, no matter our gender. "What do you do?" is still the first question we ask people.

What can Zen do for us on the job? Zen can help us make the most of our skills, get the deepest level of satisfaction from our work life, and perhaps most important, put our chosen employment in perspective. We do our jobs. We aren't defined by them.

Get Out of the Box

Whether we love our jobs or complain about them constantly (or both), work is a big part of life for many of us. Some of us have jobs that keep us busy, fulfilled, and satisfied, whether we intended to end up in them or not. Some of us don't care much for our jobs but hold them because we need to make a living. Some of us have multiple jobs: jobs at an office or at a home computer coupled with a job as a parent, caregiver, volunteer, writer, artist, consultant, or any number of other duties.

But no matter how much we immerse ourselves in our jobs, defining ourselves by our jobs puts us in a box. It sets up preconceived notions about personality, values, interests, social status, financial status, and level of education. A doctor? Oh, she must be smart. A lawyer? He must be rich! A kindergarten teacher? She probably doesn't make much money, but I bet she is patient. A construction worker? He must not be educated, but he is probably pretty strong.

As much as we try not to assume things about people, based on their jobs or anything else, the cultural pressure to make such assumptions is compelling. One way to foil your own tendencies to make assumptions is to recognize them. Dissect them.

To help you uncover your own tendencies to assume, try the following exercise. After each profession, write a few lines about what you would assume about someone were you to meet them and find out they had each of the following jobs. Be honest!

Doctor:

Lawyer:

Teacher:

Secretary:

CEO:

Daycare provider:

Insurance agent:

Artist:

Car salesperson:

Fast-food restaurant manager:

Scientist:

Veterinarian:

Writer:

Telemarketer:

Accountant:

Factory worker:

Stockbroker:

Waitperson:

Bartender:

Minister, priest, or rabbi:

Stay-at-home mom:

Stay-at-home dad:

Entrepreneur:

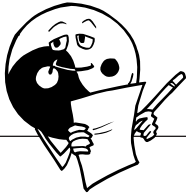
Cab driver:

Unemployed person:

Now, look carefully at each of your assumptions. Don't skip a single one. Where do your preconceptions come from? Someone you knew who had that particular job? Stereotypes you've seen on television or in the movies? Things you've heard other people say?

Think about what each of your assumptions about the chosen professions listed above says about you, and also think about what effect your assumptions will have on how you treat someone who has any of those jobs. Are you more dismissive to a waitress than to a CEO? Is that the right way to act? Are you more willing to strike up

a conversation with an entrepreneur than with an accountant? Think about the ways your preconceptions could limit your relationships with others, and also how your assumptions could limit your perception of truth in your daily life.



Nirvana Notes

Do you judge people according to their profession? Most of us do, at least to some extent. Next time you meet someone, try not to ask what he or she does for a living, so you can remain unbiased. Find out other things about the person first—if you can. You might find the person is so surprised you haven't asked about his or her occupation that he or she feels compelled to tell you!

Whether any of these assumptions turn out to be correct or not is irrelevant. The point is that they are assumptions and they lump everyone who has a certain job into one category, as if they are all clones. "I'm going to assume you are this or that because of your job, until you prove me wrong." Knowing what someone does for a living can prompt these assumptions, causing us to miss opportunities to connect with our fellow humans on a deeper level. It can also help us to excuse behavior that is less than kind, attitudes that are narrow and limiting, and a lack of compassion. "I can be rude to that person because he is a telemarketer." "Lawyers are all out to get you, anyway." "Doctors can afford more than I can."

Everyone is an individual, and we are all human. Why disregard someone because of a profession, or give them a particular reverence because of a profession? Think outside the box. Let each individual be new to you. And also, let each individual be familiar—a fellow spirit, another sentient being, each equally worthy of respect, reverence, compassion; each a little like you in some way.

Perhaps a person you meet will turn out to match certain cultural stereotypes, and perhaps he won't. But every individual is more complex than just a stereotype. It may be easier to put someone into a convenient category, but it certainly isn't mindful. And it isn't Zen.

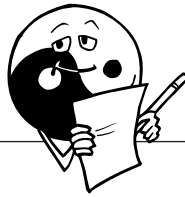
Don't Fence Me In!

Just as you may tend to put other people in a box according to their jobs or professions, you may do the same thing to yourself. But you know yourself much better than you know the person you just met this afternoon. How can you make stereotypes about yourself? It may seem silly, but we all do it.

Have you ever heard someone say something self-deprecating like "I'm only a receptionist" or ego-ful like "I'm the city's top orthopedic surgeon"? One job may make more money than the other, but what does that have to do with the internal worth of each individual holding those respective jobs?

Nothing, that's what. Perhaps the receptionist is a warm, caring, compassionate human being who spends her time away from work caring for her family and volunteering her time to help others. Perhaps the orthopedic surgeon spends his spare time on his yacht refusing to make eye contact with the hired help.

On the other hand, perhaps the receptionist is the one who refuses to be compassionate, helpful, or giving, and the orthopedic surgeon spends his spare time volunteering at the free clinic and donating money to worthy causes. You never know. Who each person is has to do with who they are. That's all. A job may reflect the inner person, and the way each person does his or her job probably reflects the inner person, too, but the job doesn't create the inner person. It is the other way around. The inner person manifests itself on the job.



Nirvana Notes

According to the MeaningfulWorkplace.com Workplace 2000 Employee Insight survey of 1,105 people in a variety of professions around the country, 89 percent of those surveyed are proud of their jobs and 72 percent say they do important work most or all the time. Only 5 percent report that their jobs are mostly or entirely busywork.

What do you assume about yourself because of your job? Take a few minutes to consider this question, then write your answers on the lines provided. Think about what positive things you assume about yourself because of your job, and what negative qualities you think you must have because of your job.

To use the receptionist example, perhaps you think you are personable, have a great phone voice, and make people feel at ease *because you are a receptionist*. But what about your job makes you say "I'm just a receptionist?" Do you consider yourself on a lower social strata *because you are a receptionist*?

If you are the orthopedic surgeon, do you consider yourself brilliant *because you are a surgeon*, superior to others *because you are a surgeon*, or perhaps unable to relate to others well *because you are a surgeon*?

My assumptions about myself based on my job are ...

Now, examine your answers closely and look for the specific assumptions, positive and negative. How well do they match your own vision of yourself apart from your job? If your job is a big part of your life, you may have trouble answering this question. You may think, "But I *am* my job. My job is *me!*"

Nonsense. Perhaps you are able to express your inner self particularly well when doing your job, but that doesn't make you your job. You are *you*, and you also happen to be good at your job.

Imagine someone met you and didn't know what your job was. Do you think they would describe you as you describe yourself above? If knowing your job would first be necessary in order to get to the above assumptions, then look at those assumptions even more closely. They may be false.

Now, write down how you think someone would describe you if they didn't know what your job was. If you can't begin to imagine, ask a friend to imagine he didn't know your job. How would he describe you, totally apart from what he knows about your work life?

How do your two answers compare? If they are very different, only you can decide what that means. It might mean you have assumed a job-based identity that is far from who you really are. If your lists are the same, it might mean you don't assume anything about yourself based on your job. Or, it could mean you have let your "job persona" take over.

We won't dispute that what we do does have a major impact on our lives, and whether we like it or not, our jobs can impact our personal lives as much as, if not more than, our home life does. But an important first step in embracing a Zen approach to our work lives is to see beyond the job, beyond the label, beyond the preconceptions you put on the people to whom you ask the question, "What do you do?"

And, of course, seeing beyond the preconceptions you put on yourself is equally crucial for an accurate and fulfilling sense of self. "I'm a so-and-so, so I guess that makes me this-or-that." No, you are just you, who happens to have this or that job. Perhaps you are exceptionally devoted to this or that profession. But that is because of who you are, not what the job is. Don't put yourself in a box or think you are something you wouldn't otherwise be just because you have a certain job.

Having a job doesn't make you anything except employed.

But once again, Zen can help us in two ways when it comes to our lives as employed people. It can help us do our jobs better, and it can help us keep our jobs in perspective. Let's look first at how Zen can help us do a better job at our jobs.

No-Mind Your Own Business

In books on Zen Buddhism, "no-mind" is a term often applied to an appropriately Zen-like mental state. To have no-mind is to see past the limitations of thinking and feeling. As Dr. James Austin observed in his book *Zen and the Brain*, where we Westerners tend to believe (thanks to the French philosopher René Descartes) I think, therefore I am, or to think is to be, Zen proclaims: To stop thinking is to be.

What good will that do you from eight to five each day? A lot of good. If you have no-mind, all that thinking and feeling won't get in between you and the work you have to do. If you have no-mind, you lose your ego, that part of you that says "I'm this, therefore" You can't hold on to all those ideas you have about yourself if you are completely focused on what you are doing. You become your doing, escaping that fixed picture you have of yourself as a "somebody."

And when you let go of your preconceptions about yourself, your life, your work, you'll find that your



Nirvana Notes

Have you heard the phrase "in the zone," referring to that state of mind when challenging tasks—running a sprint, playing the piano, delivering a speech, sailing through the air to dunk that basketball—appear effortless, even though onlookers know what they witnessed was anything but easy? In these moments, the athlete, the artist, the worker, the person becomes one with the work. Without distinction, there is no difficulty.

mind expands. Suddenly you have a lot more room in there! That room is very helpful when it comes to concentrating and really immersing yourself in your work.

Say you've got a project you are working on. How many ways is your brain moving? As you work on your project, are you thinking about the other projects you haven't finished, the projects you will start next week, and all those other personal projects you have to work on? Or are you completely at one with the task at hand, so much that everything else goes away for a while?

Learning to focus on your work (whether dishwashing or brain surgery) is the best way to do your work better. Learning to focus to the extent that self dissolves and you and the work become one—now that's where Zen comes in.

In the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, by Robert Pirsig, the main character describes how much harder it is to do a job (in this case, climbing a mountain—an apt metaphor for any number of challenging tasks) when your work is based on ego, as opposed to losing yourself to the job. Ego-climbing, as Pirsig calls it, is not only less efficient but far less rewarding:

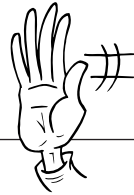
“The ego-climber is like an instrument that's out of adjustment. He puts his foot down an instant too soon or too late. He's likely to miss a beautiful passage of sunlight through the trees. He goes on when the sloppiness of his step shows he's tired. He rests at odd times. He looks up the trail to see what's ahead even when he knows what's ahead because he just looked a second before. He goes too fast or too slow for the conditions and when he talks his talk is forever about somewhere else, something else. He's here but he's not here. He rejects the here, is unhappy with it, wants to be farther up the trail but when he gets there will be just as unhappy because then it will be “here.” What he's looking for, what he wants, is all around him, but he doesn't want that because it is all around him. Every step's an effort, both physically and spiritually, because he imagines his goal to be external and distant.”

To learn to focus so completely that you and your work are the same thing erases innumerable barriers and difficulties. If you and your work are one, if you become the work and the work becomes you, there is no conflict, no difficulty.

“Hold on a minute,” you might be saying to yourself. “That's all fine for something grand like mountain climbing, but I'm a just a _____ (you fill in the blank).” Becoming absorbed in your work isn't contingent upon the nature of your work. In Zen, any work is worth total absorption, even tying your shoe or reorganizing the filing system. But we know what you mean.

In some jobs, it can be hard to feel like what you do is worth total absorption. You may find parts of your job tedious, meaningless, or just not all that important. Rather than focusing on what a small cog you are in such a big wheel (or what a small cog you are in such a small wheel), you might shift your perspective and consider your

contribution to the whole—not just a whole office or company, but the whole inter-related world. If you invest yourself in every moment and aspect of your work, even if you don't always think the work worthy of your time or even if you don't exactly know or understand the details of your contribution, you are moving to a more Zen-like space.

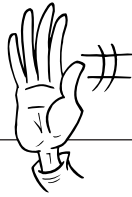


One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of a butcher cutting up an ox. People watched in awe as the butcher's knife flashed quickly and effortlessly, never hitting bone or sinew but gliding through the ox easily. The ox seemed to fall apart. An admirer once asked, "How can you cut up the ox so easily? Most butchers expend great effort hacking and sawing the thing apart." The butcher replied, "I have used this same knife since the beginning and it remains sharper today than ever because it moves only through the spaces of no resistance." Find the flow inherent in the work and follow it, rather than imposing your own order upon it.

In Gary's job, he doesn't always understand why clients, for example, sometimes want a report edited and re-edited, or why they want something done a certain way when he doesn't see how it could possibly be important. Part of "no-minding your own business" is to accept your responsibilities just exactly as they exist, without second-guessing, feeling critical, or living in some future "whenever I'm done with this I'm going to" It doesn't mean accepting things you know are wrong, being complacent, or being an automaton. But it does mean doing your job without letting all that extra stuff go—oh this is so stupid I can't believe I'm going to waste 45 minutes on this.

Of course, getting to that place where you can become totally absorbed in your work doesn't just happen on command. The more you discipline and train your mind through zazen, the more easily you will be able to access that place where your focus becomes so complete that you and all your "characteristics" and "skills" and "tendencies" and "qualities" and "problems" dissolve. Zazen is crucial training for the kind of absorption that can really make the difference between job apathy and job satisfaction, as well as the difference between a so-so employee and a really important, talented, valuable employee. Zazen trains your brain, making concentration and focus easier. In this way, zazen is serious training for your work life, no matter what your job. Zazen is the ultimate in job training!



One Hand Clapping

A title may not always give you the respect you think it will. A Zen story (paraphrased from *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki) tells of a Zen teacher who was once visited by the governor of Kyoto. The teacher's attendant presented the Zen teacher with the governor's card, which read: Kitagaki, Governor of Kyoto. The Zen teacher pushed the card aside: "I have no business with such a fellow. Tell him to get out." The attendant returned the card to the governor, who apologized. "My mistake!" said the governor, crossing out the words "Governor of Kyoto" on the card and asking the attendant to try again. This time, the Zen teacher eyed the card and exclaimed, "Oh, my old friend Kitagaki? I want to see that fellow!"

Making Your Job Your Own

Many jobs are designed according to specific requirements. You have a job description, and it is the same or similar to the job descriptions of others with the same title as yours. Each person in each "slot" of a company, whether a factory, a hospital, a law firm, a real estate brokerage, or a publishing company, does a certain thing. In some professions, like accounting, there exists a high level of uniformity.

But here's something to consider: Learning how to step back and view our work with a certain level of detachment, in terms of its requirements, its various opportunities for expression, its rules, its overall "shape," can actually help us to make our jobs uniquely suited to ourselves.

It sounds contradictory, doesn't it? If we detach from our jobs, won't they become less personal? Actually, getting caught up in the day-to-day details of a job can, as they say, keep us from seeing the forest for the trees. If you become your job description, you'll probably be a satisfactory employee. But a great employee? A deeply satisfied employee? Probably not.

Detachment means taking the long view, the big view, the view from the top floor. Look at your job from afar. How does it fit into the company as a whole? How do your responsibilities relate to the rest of the company? What are requirements, and where are the spaces for individual expression? In other words, what do you have to do, and where do you have some wiggle room?

From this detached vantage point, you can learn how to approach your job in a new way, as if for the first time, but with a more realistic perspective. You can discover

places for creativity, and you can determine where creativity might be inappropriate. You can better understand your relationships with co-workers. You can even see into the past and future of your job—without attaching to them, of course.

You may also be able to see, from this elevated place, how you don't necessarily fit into your job. Maybe your dissatisfaction with your job is based on a bad fit. You didn't realize it when you were too busy to think. But when you sit back and let go of your attachments to your daily tasks—getting those memos out, meeting with those clients, transcribing those tapes or notes, hammering out those press releases or advertising copy—you see how this particular job doesn't give you the space for the creativity you need, or doesn't use your intellectual capacity the way you would like, or doesn't let you move around enough.

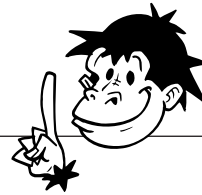
Maybe the solution is right in front of you: a promotion or a move to a different area. Maybe the answer is a job change. It took Eve a long time to recognize that she really couldn't stand working in an office, and it was scary and difficult switching to the uncertain life of a freelance writer. But this switch was much more appropriate for her individual tendencies. As a freelancer, Eve is in a better position to get to that place of total absorption where she can lose that individual self for a while.

Of course, ideally, any job you do, whether you "like it" or "hate it," can simply be performed for the sake of the job itself, beyond likes and dislikes, preferences and tendencies. But just as zazen provides an easier forum for learning to clear the mind and simply observe, minimizing distractions and providing an ideal environment, so finding a job that makes sense to you and matches your individual personality can make job success (meaning the expression of skill through becoming one with your work) much easier to come by. Finding a job that contributes in a positive way to the world is also more in conjunction with the Buddhist idea of "Right Living."



Nirvana Notes

How do you become detached from your job? Imagine someone else has your job. See it from an outside perspective. What kind of a job does this other person have? Does it seem like a worthy job? Is it interesting? Does it have opportunities for creativity, expansion? How is that person (you) performing the job? Is that person (you) a good employee? A great employee?



Monkey Mind!

You may be worried that career dissatisfaction isn't "Zen-like." Shouldn't you be happy with whatever work you do? Mindfulness in any activity is great, but that doesn't mean you can't decide what your activities are. Finding a job you feel good about and in which you can make a difference is worth the effort.

To help you get a handle on how to make your job more *yours*, let's look at your job description. Maybe your job matches a printed job description you have in your personnel file. Maybe what you do and what that piece of paper says you do are worlds apart. Or maybe you don't have a written job description. No matter which situation matches yours, forget that pre-printed job description or your preconceptions about what you do, and spend a few minutes considering what you *really* do. Answering the following questions will help you to get a focus on your true job description:

1. The first thing I do each day at my job is ...

2. The last thing I do each day at my job is ...

3. I spend more time than anything else on ...

4. The duties or tasks I enjoy most are ...

5. The percentage of time I spend on the tasks I enjoy most each day is ...

6. The duties or tasks I enjoy the least are ...

7. The percentage of time I spend on the tasks I enjoy least each day is ...

8. The part of my job that seems to be best suited to my particular talents is ...

9. The percentage of time I spend on the part of my job best suited to my particular talents is ...

10. The part of my job that seems to be least suited to my particular talents is ...

11. The percentage of time I spend on the part of my job least suited to my particular talents is ...

12. If I could change things about my job, they would include ...

13. The things I wouldn't want to change about my job include ...

14. This is how I feel about my relationships with my co-workers:

15. This is how I feel about my relationships to my supervisors (if applicable):

16. This is how I feel about being a supervisor (if applicable):

17. This is how I would describe my level of job satisfaction, and the reasons why:

18. In one year, I hope my job situation is different in the following ways:

19. In five years, I hope my job situation is different in the following ways:

20. These are the steps I am taking to improve my job situation or to move toward my goals:

The last question is really the key to the whole puzzle. While Zen is about living in the moment, it is also about living actively and mindfully in the moment, not nursing grudges and hating life because you don't feel able to make yourself happy. Go back over your list now and look for clues to the ways you can make your job more your own. Circle them. Then, go back again and look for the ways your job is already quite satisfactorily your own. Highlight them.

Now you are beginning to get a realistic picture of where you stand. And only in seeing the truth can you make your job your own. Maybe you have realized how happy you are in your job. Maybe you are beginning to suspect you are ready for a move. In either case, keep your eye on the truth, free from assumptions. Happiness will appear more easily within your grasp if you aren't grasping for things you don't really need or don't really want. Maybe happiness is right there in front of you.

Meditating at Your Desk

Speaking of happiness right there in front of you, how better to maintain it, remember it, keep hold of it, bask in it, than meditating on the job? We aren't saying you should ignore your work and meditate all day. Your supervisors probably won't appreciate that particular effort toward job satisfaction.

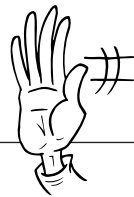
But even in a cubicle, there are moments during the day—even if only two or three—to stop what you are doing and focus inwardly. These little breaks can make you more productive and more content.

Gary likes to eat lunch at his desk, especially when he used to work in a cubicle and everyone else around him went out for lunch. A few quiet moments alone—what an excellent break in a busy day!

You might consider coming in a few minutes early in the morning, if you won't be tempted to jump into work early. Sit and take a few deep breaths at your desk. Relax, sit with your spine straight, and quietly focus on your breath moving in and out, in and out. Count your breaths if you find it hard to focus in the office environment. Focus on a single item on your desk and contemplate it to the exclusion of all else. Or listen to the sounds of the room around you. Work on being acutely aware, totally mindful, without judging, attaching, or mentally wandering away. Desk zazen!

While there are plenty of meditation techniques you could try at your desk during short breaks throughout the day, we find the most effective is simple zazen. Awareness of the right now, not of your overflowing in-basket, the blinking message light on your phone, the “you've got mail” icon on your computer, which all signal the future or the past. See the basket, the blinking light, the computer icon, but don't engage them. Be in the building. Be at your desk. Be in yourself. Be.

Then, it's back to work with a fresher, newer, recharged mind.



One Hand Clapping

“Ordinarily, it's hard to forget that we exist. We constantly reinforce this sense of self. We answer the ever-ringing telephone, hear ourselves speak, see how other people react to us socially, keep looking at the clock Each like and dislike generates a sticky web of thoughts. As renunciation and zazen cut back on these desires and aversions, the meditator is less often entrapped in their net. Zazen now becomes less distracted, plumbing deeper levels of no-thought, remaining there longer and more effectively.”

—From *Zen and the Brain*, by James H. Austin, M.D.

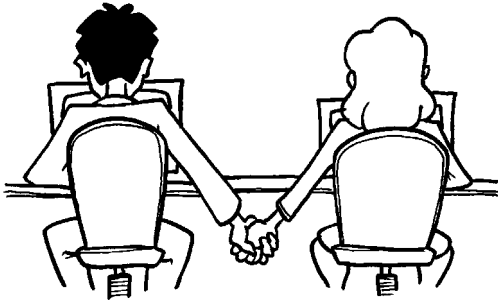
The Daily Work of Letting Go

Zazen can feel great the first few times you do it at your desk. Then the novelty wears off. It can be a revelation to remind yourself to step back and approach your position in a more detached manner, or to learn how to become totally absorbed in a project. Then the novelty wears off. Zen isn't about a one-time experience after which you can go back to your old habits. It is about a gradual evolution of consciousness from here-there-everywhere, from I-me-mine, from help-I'm-drowning-in-stress, to the great, daily, universal, personal, eternal pulse of now, now, now.

Bringing Zen into your work life is daily work. It isn't a magic bullet and it isn't easy. But it can change your attitude about your job, about yourself, and about the way you choose to spend your days and earn your living. That daily work, unglamorous as it is, is the stuff that can change your life.

The Least You Need to Know

- Assuming you know about a person because of that person's job is limiting and can result in unfair stereotypes about fellow human beings.
- Assuming you are a product of your job, rather than that your job is something you, the individual, choose to do, limits your own perceptions of yourself.
- You can excel at your job without letting your job define who you are by putting your work into perspective: The work isn't you, it is just something you do.
- Cultivating a degree of detachment and perspective on your job can help you to find ways to perform your job better; it can also make it clear when it is time to move on.
- Make your job your own by gaining a more realistic perspective about what you do and how fulfilling it is.
- Zazen breaks at your desk during the day can help to keep the day and your duties in perspective.



Relationships on the Job

In This Chapter

- ▶ “Plays well with others,” or ...
- ▶ Are you the big-company type, the small-company type, or the freelancer type?
- ▶ Are they all out to get you? It doesn’t matter
- ▶ How to handle your boss
- ▶ How to handle being the boss
- ▶ How to handle working alone

No job exists in a vacuum. If you work and somebody pays you for your work or the product of your work, you have a relationship. Most people have work colleagues, office mates, managers, or employees. Gary has many work colleagues as well as clients, but even Eve, who works in a home office by herself, is in constant contact with all the editors, publishers, interview subjects, co-authors, other writers, and everyone else involved in her work.

That means if you work, you have a whole set of work-based relationships with which to contend. While work relationships are simpler than personal relationships in some ways, in other ways they are more complicated.

How Working Relationships Work

Working relationships have certain unique qualities. In a work environment, there usually exists a much more clearly defined hierarchy than in personal relationships.

Everyone who has worked in a group environment knows about office politics, something that exists whether you work in an actual office or somewhere else. People may take out their job dissatisfaction on their colleagues or behave in a way that is based not on the other person but on any number of complex motivations having to do with the competition, jealousy, resentment, and stress that often come with a job.



Nirvana Notes

What happens when a work relationship becomes personal (such as with an on-the-job romance) or a personal relationship becomes a working one (such as when a husband and wife start a company)? The rules still apply. Make no assumptions, focus on your job, and treat each other with compassion. You'll avoid all kinds of problems.

In small companies or subgroups of large companies, offices can turn into dysfunctional families. The owner or manager becomes like a parent figure. Employees may engage in behavior that looks a whole lot like sibling rivalry. Sooner or later, employees begin to play out the roles they held in their own families: the domineering older sibling, the indulged younger sibling, the rebellious middle child, and so on.

Sometimes the line between work relationship and personal relationship blurs or disappears completely.

But we aren't saying you should quit your job and go live in a cave. Working for a living provides many opportunities for growth, not to mention that steady paycheck. Large and small companies have their various benefits, beyond health insurance and a 401(k), and those who learn how to approach employment with a Zen attitude will find a way to avoid getting caught in the middle of the politics, nastiness, and fierce competition that exist in many work environments.

What Working Environment Works for You?

The first step in taking a Zen approach to work relationships is to optimize your work situation. Are you in the kind of working environment that works for you? Job dissatisfaction may be based more on where you work and with whom you work than on the work itself.

Gary has a bright, hard-working, incredibly conscientious friend who ceases to function in an office setting. She gets bored to the point of falling asleep at her desk. She doesn't interact well with her co-workers. She finds office rules so ridiculous that she can't hide her disdain. Clearly, this woman needs to work alone. Alone, she thrives.

For Eve, working alone is also more productive, but for different reasons. Eve loves to gab, loves to interact with people, and gets fascinated with what everyone else is doing. So tell me about your job. And what is your job? And what do you do? (It's the writer inside.) In an office setting, she finds it very hard to focus because there is so much around her that is so interesting. So much to know! At home, she can sit down in her familiar office and get to work. She gets plenty of time on the phone

with people, but when it comes time to work, she can hang up and get it done. For Eve, freelancing from home is a little like zazen: an environment that makes work easier because it contains fewer distractions.

Gary tried the freelancing thing and it didn't work for him at all. He was unmotivated and lonely. What should have taken him an hour took three. He worried all the time about work not coming in. Yet, when he worked for larger companies, he was equally unhappy. Office politics bored him. The largeness felt stifling. He felt like he was on a treadmill.

Gary works best in a small office environment. He likes the energy, even though the responsibilities and pressures are spread out among a smaller group and can therefore be more intense. The hours can be longer and there are fewer opportunities for changing career paths. He certainly can't move to a different department, but he is energized by the same things that might impede someone else. Gary thrives on being a part of a small, focused group with a shared goal.

Where does your path lie? Consider some of the following questions to help focus on your own personal preferences. Perhaps you will discover a job change is in order. Or perhaps you will discover that you are right where you belong after all.

1. How do you feel about large companies? If you work in one (or if you think you would like to), do you enjoy the excitement of a large company with many levels, opportunities to advance or change responsibilities, and all the accompanying hierarchy and levels of relationships?

If yes, what in your personality do you think responds so well to this environment? If no, what about you doesn't enjoy this environment? What specifically don't you like? Does a large company make you feel overwhelmed, frustrated, or unchallenged? Is it too impersonal? Comment below about your specific feelings toward large companies:

2. How do you feel about smaller companies? If you work in one (or if you think you would like to), do you enjoy the family-like relationship where everyone does a little of everything and everyone grows together? Do you feel a small company is better suited to your personal and career growth?

If yes, what in your personality do you think responds so well to this environment? If no, what about you doesn't enjoy this environment? What specifically don't you like? Does a small company make you feel bored, edgy, or unchallenged, as if you have limited options for growth or change?

3. How do you feel about working alone, either telecommuting from your job or freelancing? If you work alone (or if you think you would like to), do you find it stimulating, freeing, and exhilarating? Do you love being your own boss without having to worry about anyone else?

If yes, what in your personality do you think responds so well to this environment? If no, what about you doesn't enjoy this environment? What specifically don't you like? Do you feel unmotivated, bored, and unstimulated without other people in your working environment? Do you think it isn't worth it to be your own boss if you don't have anybody to manage?

No matter your situation, these questions may shed some light on your feelings about your current employment situation, even if they are only feelings you have right now. Remember, too, that every job is a mixed bag. You'll like some things about it, and you probably won't like other things about it. The question is, do your likes outweigh your dislikes?

Also consider how realistic your perceptions are if you are dissatisfied with your current situation and think a different working environment would be better for you. You know the old cliché about the grass always being greener on the other side of the fence? It is easy to complain about a job and think you know a different working environment would be better, but are you seriously considering your own temperament?

Some people think they would love to freelance, when in reality, they find it incredibly difficult to motivate themselves without colleagues and supervisors around. Others long for the excitement of a large corporate environment, but in reality have difficulty dealing with authority and having to be a team player. What you think you want may not be suited to your individual personality.

On the other hand, maybe a move will be the key to finding employment happiness. Eve thought she might like freelancing better than working for a “boss,” but for years she was afraid to make the leap. When she did, she finally found job satisfaction. Only you can answer the question for yourself, and it may take a few job changes before you know the answer.

The Sharks You Think You’re Swimming with Are Only in Your Head

The world has an uncanny way of reflecting back what we believe it to be. Of course, all that reflecting happens in our own heads.

If we see corporate intrigue all around us, that is probably the environment we will find ourselves in. If we are more likely to assume a spirit of openness and cooperation, our environment is more likely to take on that shape. The latter is preferable, of course (unless you are researching your screenplay for the next big blockbuster movie about corporate corruption!).

If your world is what you make it, a positive attitude and compassion toward co-workers will surely optimize your environment, won’t it? But Zen has an even more preferable option: See the world for what it is.

For what it is? If the world is what you make it, is there an objective reality to see? Of course. Just don’t make the world anything. Just be. Objective reality is out there, but we tend to cover it up, dress it up, disguise it with our own ideas of what reality should be or must be or probably is.

Not trying, striving, straining to alter your job situation in favor of simply seeing it may not be the method promoted in books about career achievement or personal happiness, but it is certainly the Zen way, and we think it is even more conducive to both job success and personal satisfaction.

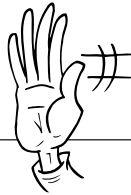
Think about it: If you aren’t responsible for “making” your world into something that works for you, but are only responsible for getting out of the way of the world, stepping back and seeing it for what it is, you’ll find your perception increases dramatically. How un-seeing you were! How deluded! So *this* is how things really are!

Refusing to force your job environment into some preconceived mold you’ve made in your head can open up dramatic new possibilities. You may feel you are seeing your work environment clearly for the first time. You’ll see how one person can influence an entire work environment with a positive, focused, nonjudgmental spirit, while another can be just as influential radiating negativity, pessimism, and suspicion. You’ll also see that while people influence each other, no one can force others to be happy or productive or content.

You'll also see what can happen when you stop assuming the worst—or even the best—about your co-workers and supervisors. Everyone pops into focus as exactly who they are, doing exactly what they do. And where does that leave you? With your own job to do. Your job will certainly include interactions with people, but these interactions can become entirely free of assumptions. When they do break free of the heavy load you've been attaching to them, you may be surprised at how easy they become. You aren't responsible for that comment someone made. You don't have to fume about your supervisor's botched handling of a situation or the bid your team didn't get. All you have to do is your best possible job at whatever you are doing. All you have to do is interact honestly and productively with others, without resentment, anger, or even awe. Just be, and allow others to be, too. If they don't, if they insist on assuming things about you, carrying grudges, acting dishonestly, getting angry, or holding you up on a pedestal—well, notice it, but don't attach to it. And never forget the cardinal rule:

You can't control what anyone else thinks or does.

You only control the job you do, the reactions you have, the thoughts you think, the emotions you feel. And that's plenty.



One Hand Clapping

“Because we are human, we judge one another. Someone does something that seems to us rude or unkind or thoughtless, and we can't help noticing it. Many times a day, we see people doing things that seem lacking in some way. It's not that everyone always acts appropriately. People often do just what we are objecting to. When they do what they do, however, it's not necessary for us to judge them No person should be reduced to a label.”

—From *Nothing Special: Living Zen*, by Charlotte Joko Beck

In other words, to get back to the metaphor we used in the title of this section, those sharks circling your desk waiting to snap up your job might just swim away. Maybe they never had an eye on your job at all. Maybe they were interested in something else. Or they might keep circling, but if you don't assume they are sharks, or anything at all—if you don't give them your attention, your attachment—then you will probably find they don't bite. Maybe you'll even find that what you thought were sharks are a bunch of friendly dolphins helping to guide your ship back to port!

Of course, remaining detached in the face of office politics is far from easy. How many of us go home at night and re-create scenes from the office? We remember an incident where we were “disrespected” or when we failed to gain the upper hand in an exchange when we feel we should have prevailed. What do we do with these thoughts?

Many of us continue to invent. We carry the scenario further. What might we have done differently? What might others have said about us afterward? We envision answering differently, reacting differently. If only we could have foreseen the situation, we could have been prepared. Have we lost all respect among our colleagues? Was the whole thing planned, a coup to bring us down?

These are sharks, all right, but they are sharks of our own making. Mind sharks.

Perhaps we work with other mind-shark-makers. Eve used to work in an office full of them. Everyone loved to guess and second-guess what everyone else was doing and thinking and saying behind each other’s backs. Warfare developed. Enemy camps formed. Rumors ran rampant. Nobody knew what was true and what wasn’t. Everyone suspected everyone else. People started getting fired. It was all very dramatic (and, Eve found, rather amusing). But not much work got done.

What a waste of energy. Because our livelihood often depends on making money, our jobs are critical to us, so it is easy to read too much into them. We are attached to our jobs, we make them so important, and then they cause us to suffer. It’s the same old story of *dukkha*. We attach. And then we suffer.

Even assuming good things about people can get you into trouble. What if someone really is trying to unseat you? Assuming everyone is sweet and nice and friendly can be naive. The Pollyanna approach isn’t any more realistic than imagining you are surrounded by sharks.

Choosing not to assume at all, but taking everything for what it is—and being so mindful that you don’t miss anything—is the best way to know what is really going on, to react appropriately, and to be in the best position to stay uninvolved with the things that go on in any work environment that squander life energy.

Just don’t assume at all. Just don’t do it. Or, when you catch yourself doing it, recognize it, notice it, and then let the assumption go. Go by what you know right now, not what you expect. And don’t worry about the rest. Besides, aren’t you too busy doing your job to waste all that time?



Nirvana Notes

To quote ourselves from Chapter 2, “A Brief History of Zen Buddhism”: “Right thought means thinking kindly and refusing to engage in cruel, mean, covetous, or otherwise nasty thoughts. What you think is what you are.” Living by the precept of right thought and refusing to assume anything about anyone are the keys to heading off relationship trouble on the job.

That's not to say you won't have productive, successful, or antagonistic relationships with the people who share an office, a floor, or a company with you. You certainly can't just ignore your co-workers. Some of these people may turn out to be important on your life path. Others may not. Fine. Living Zen means relating to the world—a world full of people you do not own or control.

People are who they are, and will do what they will do. Like it or suffer. End of story.

The Zen Approach to Having a Boss

Your relationship with your boss is unique, unlike your relationship with anyone else at work or at home (although it may be a little like a relationship to a parent). It is human nature to turn a boss into an authority figure. Depending on our individual background, emotional baggage, and past experience with employers, we may automatically fear our bosses and/or want to please them no matter what, even at the expense of our co-workers—even at the expense of ourselves!

Or we may automatically resent our bosses, assuming they are out to hurt us or at least keep us under their thumbs. Maybe we resist authority in all its guises. Or, maybe we are naturally independent and simply don't like somebody else telling us what to do.



Nirvana Notes

The Zen approach to having a boss means recognizing rather than resisting your feelings and assumptions about authority.

What is your knee-jerk reaction to your boss? Does it injure your ego to have someone in charge of you? Do you wish you were the boss? Are you afraid your boss won't like you? Are you afraid you'll be unfairly treated because you were in the past? Engage in a little self-examination.

Having a boss is a particular challenge to those of us with ready-made authority issues. We might end up behaving confrontationally, or passive-aggressively, for no reason our bosses can discern.

Are you letting feelings and thoughts that come out of the past control your behavior in the present? Your initial reaction to an authority figure generally has nothing to do with who the person is. Instead, your ideas about authority are coming into play. If you resist the feelings and don't acknowledge them, the tension will build. You will become more and more convinced of their reality. You will start to act on them.

Don't let your feelings fool you! Look at them. Examine them. See them for what they are. Don't hide them or hide from them. That's how they get control over you. Look them straight in the eye and call them "feelings," and you'll deflate them. "Hey, I'm resisting the very existence of the boss's nicer office, in full view from my measly little cubicle. How interesting. Let me try to figure out why. Am I envious? Am I being greedy? Am I longing for more material wealth? Am I reminded of my authoritarian parent's luxurious office?"

Working with a boss means taking time to understand your boss as an individual. How might things look from your boss's perspective? What does your boss have at stake? What authority issues might your boss have to contend with?

The Zen concept of losing your ego is relevant here. Working relationships aren't all about you. The corporation doesn't revolve around your feelings and behaviors. Even if you are self-employed, you aren't working in a vacuum. Everybody you interact with has their own job to do, their own preconceptions and assumptions they may or may not fight to quell, their own agendas, plans, career paths, and relationship issues. Even bosses. Transcending your own ego to see your work relationships from a more detached place can illuminate what is really happening, and can snap you back to reality. "Oh, I guess my boss didn't say anything about my presentation being below standard. In fact, he said it was great. I just didn't believe him. I convinced myself he was against me."

So your boss prefers e-mail to a phone call, or would rather have you stop in her office to talk things out in person. So your boss likes reports done a certain way, or doesn't want employees to make personal calls, or rambles in staff meetings. So you don't agree with everything your boss says or does.

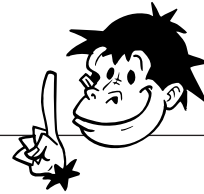
So what? It doesn't have anything to do with you. It doesn't have anything to do with anything. It just is. You work in a place that has these certain rules. Follow them and get on with it. Having a boss sometimes requires adjusting to someone else's rhythms, doing something in a way you might not normally do it, and not resisting every little wave that rocks your boat a little. Get over it! None of it matters. If it matters to you, that's your ego talking.

When you can find a way to make peace with that, you will be living—and working—your Zen.



Nirvana Notes

Maybe all those work issues aren't about you. Maybe they are what they are. Your boss is just a person. In your job, in this place, that person called your boss makes certain rules. It doesn't mean anybody is better than anybody else. It just means that's the way things are set up right now. It isn't a reflection on you, so don't let it be. Just do your work.



Monkey Mind!

Accepting the behavior of others and the rules of the office doesn't mean being a passive employee or submitting to the abuse of others. Living Zen doesn't mean being a mindful doormat. If someone is abusing his or her power, you can and should do what you can to stop it. Buddhism promotes not only nonviolence but also the active protection of all sentient beings (yourself included).

The Zen Approach to Being the Boss

If you are the boss, you have a whole different set of authority issues to deal with. How do you feel about being an authority figure? Because like it or not, that's exactly what you are.

Some people have a difficult time being the authority, but for one reason or another, end up in a supervisory position. Others relish the job but can be too quick to assume that a supervisory position means superiority as a person.

Remember, supervisor or employee under a supervisor, *having a job doesn't make you anything but employed.*

According to Zen, every individual has Buddha nature and perfection within. Lots of stuff gets in the way of the perception of this perfection, but deep down, we are all human beings worthy of respect. To live in a society, we need to organize certain systems, and for those systems to work, certain people need to be in charge. That's all.

But being the boss does give you a wonderful opportunity to treat people the way you would want to be treated (or the way you wish you had been treated during that journey to the top). It's the old golden rule about doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, an idea that surfaces in different guises in just about every major world religion.

Of course, things don't always work out that way. Being the boss can bring out all kinds of insecurities, self-doubt, and emotional baggage from the past. Will you turn out to be just like that domineering parent, that pushover older sibling, that brilliant but naive teacher, that horribly materialistic boss you once had?

Gary manages a small group of people at his job, and has personally had to contend with a basic Zen concept we've mentioned time and again: You can't control other people. Even if you are the boss, even if your job description says you have authority, you can't control what other people do. Not really. You can make and enforce rules, sure. But everyone is responsible for his or her own actions. Recognizing this can take a large burden off a supervisor.

Gary has always been just a little uncomfortable with authority because he doesn't like other people trying to control him. That sometimes boomerangs back to him in his job as a manager. Gary used to give orders, and then obsess about whether he was being respected and whether his employees were doing his bidding in exactly the way he had directed. Maybe Gary was afraid his staff was as resistant to control as he was. The whole group ended up pushing against each other, rather than pushing together toward a common goal.



Nirvana Notes

A boss who doesn't control the employees? Isn't that a sign of weakness? On the contrary, understanding what we actually do and don't control will make us more effective managers.

Gary also has a tendency to be impatient and overly demanding with himself. And guess what? He can get equally impatient and demanding with his staff if he thinks they haven't done their best.

If they didn't do something perfectly, they must not have listened, or they are being lazy and disrespectful, right?

Sometimes Gary has to catch himself and remember that he is creating scenarios again.

At other times, Gary feels the urge to play caregiver to his staff, doing their jobs for them, or doing something himself rather than delegating, even if he doesn't have the time. "If you want something done right, you'd better do it yourself!" Then he remembers that he is adding undue stress to his own job, denying his employees the opportunity for learning, and ultimately making himself feel resentful because he is doing all the work.

In other words, being the boss ain't easy.

Every individual will have a unique management style, and if you don't take the time to have your feelings, recognize them as feelings, take a few deep breaths, and get some distance from your situation, you may not be the best boss you can be. If you manage other people, just remind yourself:

You are not there to control other people. You are there to be part of a team.

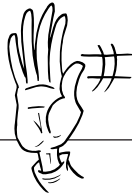
Every employee has an individual work style, just as each manager has a management style. It isn't your job to make value judgments about others. If the work is being compromised, it is your job to take action by making everyone's job clear. It comes down to making sure jobs get done, not that people get controlled.

Take the time to recognize, accept, even appreciate each individual employee's talents and work style. Let your ego get out of the way. If you are mistreated by someone, have to listen to complaints and ranting, or generally have people behaving in a troublesome way, listen. Just listen. See what happens. Don't react immediately. Get that ego out of the way first.

Find ways to make work a positive experience for everyone, rather than trying to force all your employees into the mold of an ideal employee you have in your mind. Work with your team to use their inherent talents, so each person is a distinctive member of the group.

If you force your authority, you'll meet with resistance, which leads to more forcing and more resistance. This creates an unproductive working environment, one ripe for inertia, instability, and office politics run amok.

To be a great manager, a great team player, a Zen boss, facilitate a working environment where everyone's skills are optimized and everyone can do the best possible job.



One Hand Clapping

"From a spiritual perspective, we are all ego addicts. We all want to be right, all the time Egotism is a weed run wild. Those of us with power, even when we have our physical needs provided for, continue to be driven by an insatiable ego-hunger for more of everything Our egos lead to war and the harshest forms of downsizing Compassion, loving kindness, and even justice are swallowed up in our collective need to be the one who is right, to have more, be recognized more, own more When ego drives our life decisions, we are doomed to suffering."

—From *Stumbling Toward Enlightenment*, by Geri Larkin

If You Work Alone

Eve has a friend who is a home day-care provider, which makes her a sort of employee (to the parents), a boss (to the kids), and self-employed, too. She is around people all day, but they are very short (being children) and not much like colleagues.

Eve's friend has children of her own and loves kids. She is great with kids. The parents and the kids love her. But after about nine months at the job, she began to bristle. Day in, day out with little adult contact was tough. The daily chores with children had their moments of fun but also of monotony. She couldn't leave the house, ever, from 7:30 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., unless it was to go to the park across the street.

Then one day, quite out of nowhere, she stumbled upon a sort of employment-related enlightenment. Suddenly, it all became easy. She stopped resisting and found that by accepting her job for exactly what it is, she could appreciate it from moment to moment. She learned to live in the now of her daily life, and she is a more satisfied and satisfactory day-care provider than ever before.

Eve, too, has had a mixed experience with working at home. While she can be more productive at home, sometimes she feels a longing for those days of office politics, work chums she could touch base with every morning, after-work get-togethers at a local restaurant, a set of ready-made friends. She communicates with all her colleagues now through phone and e-mail. She has never met many of her closest colleagues in person.

But the stress and the loneliness of working alone disappear when Eve gets absorbed in her work, and in this she has found the key to work-alone success. Success is in the doing, right now. Sitting down and doing it with such focus and concentration that nothing else exists.

When the work and the worker are one, none of the other stuff matters.

Not the politics, the relationships (in person or electronic), the hierarchy, the rules, the resistance to the rules, not even those checks that were supposed to be in the mail three weeks ago and still haven't come (the bane of a freelancer's financial life!). Immersion in the doing is what keeps Eve in love with her job.

No matter where you work, in how big an office, and with how many other people, it all comes down to the work, right here, right now. Focus on the present moment and do your job. Let your relationships be what they are, not what you think they are or think they should be. Let the rest go.

You may find you are a lot better at your job than you ever thought you could be. You may find that your work has value, not only to yourself, but to your co-workers and all the people in the bigger world who benefit from the product or service you and your company create together.

The Least You Need to Know

- Our work relationships may have a more clear-cut hierarchy and less personal involvement than other relationships, but we bring just as much baggage to them.
- Different people are more suited for work in different types of environments: large corporations, small companies, or freelancing. Finding the right environment for you can improve your working relationships.
- People tend to assume a lot about their work colleagues. Letting go of your assumptions deflates their power over you.
- Having a boss means recognizing your feelings about authority and refusing to let them compromise your performance.
- Being the boss means recognizing your feelings about having authority and refusing to let them compromise your performance.
- The key to work, whether alone or in a group, is to focus on the work itself.



Managing Stress on the Job

In This Chapter

- ▶ Are you always employee of the month?
- ▶ Go with the flow and let stress go
- ▶ Pay attention to you
- ▶ Your job or your life: Can you have them both?

You've got your job. You've got the people with whom you work. And then you've got that dark cloud hovering over the whole thing. You can't put your finger on it, but there it is. What is it?

Stress.

We all experience stress now and then. Some of us experience it every day. Every minute, you say? You've got company.

Sometimes stress is good. It revs us up, readies us for action, helps us respond more quickly. But we aren't built to withstand chronic stress, and when we are under stress all the time, our physical, mental, and emotional sides suffer, too.

So how can Zen help you manage stress on the job? As you might expect, the Zen approach to stress is characteristically both simple and complex: Let it go.

Even Superman Gets Knocked Down by Kryptonite

Do you expect a lot from yourself? We know we do. Gary and Eve both tend to expect more from themselves than any human could realistically deliver. We both take on way too much work, partly because we secretly (or not so secretly) think that if we don't overperform, we will fail, be unpopular, suffer a diminished reputation, and so on, and so on.

But there is a darker side. We both get a lot of ego gratification from what we do. Being the expert, the hero, the one who can do it all, hearing people say, "I just don't know how you do it!" with admiration and respect, well, that's pretty gratifying.

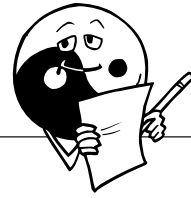
And with a lot of that kind of attitude, our work changes. It isn't about service, even if it looks that way on the surface. It's about being the best, about getting more accolades than anyone else. It becomes about distinguishing oneself. It becomes ego. And we both have to work on that. Maybe you do, too.

Let's look at Superman. Superman looks invincible. He has x-ray vision. Bullets bounce off his chest. He's the Man of Steel. He can even turn back time by spinning the whole planet backward. Now that's pretty powerful. Talk about an overachiever! But Superman has his Achilles heel, too. Think of your ego as kryptonite, that extra-terrestrial substance that neutralizes Superman. Just when you think you've got it all under control, along comes Lex Luthor with a handful of the toxic stuff just for you. Suddenly, it isn't so much about saving the world. It's more about the acclaim. Or how you look in that superhero cape. Working out of a desire to stroke the ego is stressful and exhausting. We all have our Achilles' heel and eventually we all make mistakes, fall down, and suffer. But the bigger you are, as they say, the harder you fall. When Superman (or Superwoman!) gets knocked down, everybody knows it.

When we get knocked down, due to the stress and exhaustion of overcommitment followed by the angry outbursts or even compromised job performance, it's a long way down. What if we hadn't let our egos inflate us so much? A balloon that is over-inflated zips crazily around the room when you let it go. A balloon that is filled up just a little will flutter gently to the floor.

That's not to say you shouldn't try to succeed and do well in your job. You shouldn't try not to be the best at what you do just to appear modest (that's about appearances, too). But if you let your ego set the rules of the game, you're going to lose. You will. If you let your duty set the rules, then when something "bad" happens, it will just be something that happened. It won't be all about you, and it won't cause you so much suffering and humiliation.

This isn't a way to shirk blame, either. It is simply a way to stop attaching to the things that cause you stress. Do your job. Do what needs to be done. If your job isn't you, then job failures won't be personal failures. They'll be job failures. Job successes won't be personal successes either, but by now you've got plenty of personal gratification to keep you going. You're getting in touch with the inner you, and that's a lot more rewarding than channeling all your energy into saying the right thing in front of your supervisor so you can get a pat on the back. Do your job without letting your ego interfere, and you'll probably get more than a pat on the back, anyway. You'll be a valuable employee.



Nirvana Notes

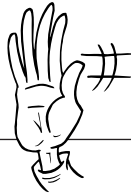
In your own mind, if it wasn't all about you when the job was done well, it won't be all about you when something goes wrong. It won't be personal. It will just be another experience.

Expectations: Yours, Theirs, and the Ones That Don't Exist

You aren't doing your job alone, and you aren't doing your job without expectations. They exist, there is no denying that. Other people expect certain things of you, and you expect certain things of yourself.

But expectations aren't always clearly communicated in the workplace, and when something isn't clear, our human tendency is to fill in the blanks. Have some of the following thoughts buzzed through your head when thinking about your job?

- What did she mean by that?
- Is he trying to suggest something about my performance?
- Is that a threat about what will happen if I don't do this right?
- Is she partnering me with someone because she thinks I can't do it alone?
- How can he expect me to do all that?
- How can she suggest I should work on this one alone?
- The last time I did this alone, I messed it up.
- The last time I did this with someone, I messed it up.
- What if I don't do what my boss expects?
- What if I don't live up to what my employees expect?
- What if I don't live up to what I expect?



One Hand Clapping

"... It is sometimes the case that beings with actively hostile intentions can help us to the highest realizations. Enemies are very important, because it is only in relation to them that we can develop patience. Only they give us the opportunity to test and practice our patience. Not your spiritual master, your friends, or your relatives give you such a great opportunity. The enemy's antagonism would normally arouse your anger, but by changing your attitude you can transform it into an opportunity This is why the enemy is sometimes described as the greatest spiritual friend, because he affords us not only the opportunity to practice patience, but also to develop compassion."

—From *Awakening the Mind, Lightening the Heart*, by His Holiness the Dalai Lama

It isn't easy to simply see your current duties and job situation for what they are. Gary has been in situations with abusive managers who either didn't communicate their expectations and then punished him for not fulfilling them, or who told Gary one thing and then, when they had clearly made a bad decision, blamed Gary as a way to save face. It's one thing to work on eliminating your own expectations, but what about when you become the victim of the expectations of others? You can't control others. So what do you do?

Gary often finds himself recounting situations in which he has been treated unfairly, then expecting them to happen again, and that is an expectation he can control. We set traps for ourselves and others this way, by overinterpreting any sign that might point to something that reminds us of a negative past experience, or by creating scenarios of things that haven't happened and convincing ourselves they are reality, or at least, imminent reality. It happened before. Surely it will happen this time! It must be me, doomed to repeat the same mistakes. Uh-oh, my supervisor hesitated before he answered. It's happening all over again! He must hate my idea. He's probably thinking of replacing me!

Gary admits that one of his greatest fears is not being perfect. To complicate matters, Gary tends to be an introvert, and his own high standards necessitate (or so he thinks) that he be perfect not only on the outside, but in his own eyes. Gary doesn't always care what anyone else thinks, even if they tell him he is doing a great job. At the least indication that he has let himself down, Gary falls on his own sword.

Gary used to think the internal need to exceed all human expectations was a guy thing, but has since learned that it is just as common with women in the workplace. So, here is what Gary (and so many others of us) used to do: Say “yes” to everything.

Gary would take on more than he knew he should. Then he would race around trying to get it all done. At the first whisper that something might possibly work better a different way, Gary panicked, interpreted the comment as criticism, and decided he had messed up completely. He would announce his screw-up. He would fall on that old sword again.

This kind of behavior ultimately leads to two feelings: resentment at being underappreciated or misunderstood (even when nobody has suggested any such thing), and self-flagellation for letting the proverbial ball drop.

You might be amazed at how much Gary used to suffer going through this process. Or, maybe it sounds all too familiar.

Gary could carry these feelings around for days, reliving them, agonizing over how he might have handled things differently. “If only I hadn’t” “If only I would have”

And then, at last, and luckily before he exploded, Gary began to discover a better way to handle these feelings. He learned to sit with them.

Sitting with your work stress, allowing yourself to experience it completely, can be incredibly enlightening. Gary began to ask himself, “When have I felt this feeling before? It is strangely familiar.”

Inevitably, Gary’s mind would drift to childhood situations during which he felt a similar kind of stress. Gary remembered times when he disappointed his parents or teachers. These feelings weren’t so new, and perhaps not so immediately linked to the present, as Gary had thought!

Feelings of stress can be primitive feelings from childhood that we continue to conjure up and relive well into adulthood. Unfortunately, this baggage, although heavy and burdensome, is also familiar and, therefore, to some degree comfortable—or at least, more comfortable than dealing with the unfamiliar.

Letting ourselves feel our feelings and recognizing the connections inherent in them—connections to childhood or to other times in the past—can help to deflate the frightening appearance of stress. Once you deflate your stress, you can become open to alternative ways of dealing with it.

When you are sitting with your stress, you may find that just sitting is pretty difficult at first. Focus on, even visualize, that river we’ve mentioned so often earlier in this book. Imagine going with the flow, living in the moment, being just exactly where you are right now in life. You are a grown-up now. You live in a fast-paced work world. You have responsibilities. But you also have experience under your belt, and lots of resources to help you. You are never alone, even when you are by yourself. You have a universe of resources within.

Also recognize that you may not always make decisions that work out the way you want them to work out. Other times, things will go just the way you envision. But envisioning outcomes is a matter of expectations again, so don't attach to what you envision. Go with the flow. Let yourself merge with the river. Let it steer your boat.

Reliving something over and over, regretting, or wallowing in disappointment or anger, is like trying to stand still in the middle of a river. It certainly isn't easy, and eventually the water is going to win. Standing still in the middle of the river takes a lot of effort, fighting and kicking, paddling upstream while going nowhere. And eventually, chances are good you'll sink. Remember Jay Gatsby in F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel, *The Great Gatsby*? In the last sentence of the novel, Fitzgerald encapsulates Gatsby's passion to control the course of his destiny (and his failure to achieve it) with these words: "So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past."

Why not go with the flow of our lives? Work *with* the river and not against it. Look for the big lesson: Where is the bank? Where are the boulders to avoid? Don't waste your energy in futile struggling or controlling efforts.

It all comes down to balance in life. Gary finds he is most susceptible to overwork and overreacting on the job when he has allowed his life to get out of balance. For Gary, that means not spending enough quality time with friends, not getting to the gym, not reading a good novel, not spending time with his personal writing on the weekend, not meditating.

Remember the big picture. Look at the whole scope of yourself and your life. You'll begin to have the power to put your stress in perspective.

Zap Your Stress with Zen

A Zen attitude toward job stress means giving up your expectations, no matter what anyone else does. Acknowledge your fears, your anger, whatever. But if you can learn not to let these feelings affect what you actually do and say to others, you have learned an important Zen lesson. If someone expects something of you, acknowledge it. Do your job to the best of your ability, with total concentration and attention. If someone gets mad at you, fairly or unfairly, recognize it: "My boss is really angry. She doesn't like the way I did this project."

But don't let it affect your feelings about yourself, because the anger of another person, or the irritation or criticism, is not a reflection of you. It is a reflection of that person, and to a greater or lesser degree, of the situation itself.

Interactions are complicated, but when it comes right down to it, we all act and react out of our own heads. To recognize this is to be set free from the bondage of other people's attitudes and reactions.

That doesn't mean you should ignore other people, of course. That will really make them mad. But react from a place that is untouched by emotion, that relies only on the situation itself and nothing else. This isn't easy, but it's extremely important for managing stress. This is now, not the last time, not the next time, not the same as always. Only now.

If you don't expect, assume, project, or attach to your emotions, you will see the situation more clearly, and chances are, you'll react appropriately. It may not fix the problem, but it is all you can do.

Did you hear that?

If you don't expect, assume, or attach to your emotions on the job, you are doing all you can do to act and react appropriately.

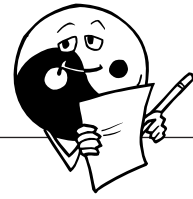
Bad things still might happen. Your boss might get really angry. You might even get fired. But you can't control that. All you can control is the way you do your job, and the way you act and react to the way people act and react to you. Even if you made a mistake, it is made now and all you can control is the way you act and react. Right now.

And that's plenty to do. You are only human, and you have physical, emotional, and intellectual limitations as well as abilities. You aren't perfect, and neither are the people around you.

You are only responsible for yourself. That's one expectation you can have: "I can be responsible for my own attitude."

Of course, like everything else in this book, telling you not to attach to your expectations is a lot easier to say than it is to do. And how do you train your brain to do it? You guessed it. Stick with that zazen. Practice, practice, practice. Sit with your feelings, your stress, your dilemmas, your problems. Look at them. Feel them. Examine them. Then practice, practice, practice letting them go. See them for what they are—ideas, feelings, thoughts that are not you.

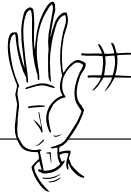
You don't have to be subject to these things. You created them in your own head. No, you didn't create the situations, but you did create the stress that arises from the situations. Why be a slave to something you created in your own brain? See it for what it is. You own the thought. You own the feeling. The thoughts and feelings are products of your mind. That's all. If you can make them up, you can decide to let them go. Zazen will teach you how, if you let it. Give yourself the time you need to see things the way they are. You can do it. You have it in you. But if you don't take the time to sit down and look for it, you won't find it.



Nirvana Notes

Much research points to the stress-relieving and mood-boosting qualities of regular exercise. Exercise is physical maintenance, just like zazen is maintenance for your mind. The repetition of regular exercise can be soothing, and total focus and concentration on your exercise is zazen-in-motion. Even if you think you are too tired, 30 minutes of daily exercise will energize you.

In other words, if you do nothing else for stress management, practice zazen. Allow zazen to let the air out of that giant balloon you've made. You'll find there isn't much to it, once it is deflated. And you'll find you've zapped your stress with Zen.



One Hand Clapping

"The essence of mindfulness in daily life is to make every moment you have your own. Even if you are hurrying, which is sometimes necessary, then at least hurry mindfully. Be aware of your breathing, of the need to move fast, and do it with awareness If you find your mind compelling you to get every last thing done, then bring awareness to your body and the mental and physical tension that may be mounting and remind yourself that some of it can probably wait. If you get really close to the edge, stop completely and ask yourself, 'Is it worth dying for?'"

—From *Full Catastrophe Living* by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Ph.D.

A Zen Approach to Time Management

"I don't have time! I don't have time! I don't have time!" How much time do we spend each day procrastinating or wasting time? How many times do we waste time telling ourselves we don't have time? Eve's father always used to say, "Not having time is always an excuse, never a reason." Eve has yet to really examine a situation and find this to be untrue. We say we have no time to exercise, yet we find time to watch television at night. We say we have no time to balance the checkbook, but we have plenty of time to spend at the mall, writing checks out of that same checkbook. We say we don't have time to keep the house cleaned up or the bills paid, or that we don't have time to coach the fourth-grade soccer team or bake cookies for the charity bake sale or do any number of things, worthy or unworthy of our time. What we really mean is *we don't want to take the time away from something else*.

Dad was right. Time is relative.

Gary is amazed by how much time he can waste simply resisting doing something he doesn't want to do. Maybe he finds out he has two hours worth of work he will need to do over the weekend. He can spend Friday evening being angry about it. He can spend Saturday trying to start it but not feeling like it. He won't do anything else, since he is supposed to be doing the work. But he can't get himself to do it.

Gary can spend the whole day on Sunday going through the same thing:

Should do it.

Don't wanna do it.

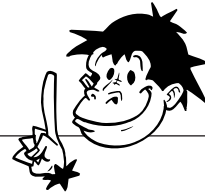
Sound familiar? Gary inevitably spends the tail end of his Sunday evening resentfully completing the work, which inevitably takes four hours instead of the two it should have taken if he hadn't wasted so much time resisting. Why does the job take longer now? Frustrated sighs, eye rolling, pencil tapping, pacing, and getting up for a snack, to stretch, to get some fresh air—that all takes time.

Resistance Is Futile (So Just Do It)

Resistance is insidious. It is self-indulgent because it is letting your inner child (the bratty one) whine and mope and complain. It is also self-destructive because all that negativity takes its toll, unbalancing your life. Hey, when did you turn into such a pessimist?

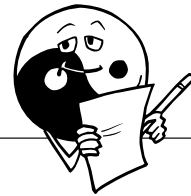
The more Gary works with a Zen attitude, the more he learns to view all his responsibilities as opportunities. Sometimes he even gets that weekend project finished on Friday! It's a process, of course. That inner child doesn't mature in a day or a week or even a month. But a weekend project, or any other chore you think you don't want to do, is just what you make it: something interesting to spend a little time on, in addition to the other interesting things on the agenda, or a great big horrible annoying pain in the *derrière*. Your pick.

If you dive in without paying attention to all those reasons floating around in your head that tell you why you don't want to do something, you'll get it done. That is the Zen approach. Go with the flow and do your job. Resisting life's currents is a lot more exhausting.



Monkey Mind!

You just can't get yourself to do something? That article or report or presentation or chore is just too daunting, too horrible, too much? Sometimes recognizing the exact origin of your resistance can diffuse its power. Are you trying to be a hero or a martyr again? Are you resentful because you think someone else should be doing this work? Is your lethargy related to something else entirely?



Nirvana Notes

If you've ever visited the ocean, you may know what it is like to stand in knee- or shoulder-deep water that has waves. It isn't easy to stand when the waves are high, but to float or swim is easy because you aren't resisting the water. You are working with it.

Knowing When and How to Relax and Rejuvenate

We all have our own rhythms. If we are paying attention, we know when we are tired, when we are frustrated, when we feel overworked. If you learn to recognize your own rhythms and respect them, you'll find that taking work for what it is will be much easier. You'll be better able to sidestep stress, rather than tripping all over it.

Gary knows mornings aren't his best time, so he doesn't volunteer for morning meetings. He also knows that when he is on the road too much or has booked too many meetings, he will feel exhausted. With exhaustion comes unclear thinking, feelings of resentment, anger, depression, loneliness, and so on.

We all go through this. We all know that when stress gets to us, everything seems worse, less manageable, more dramatic and out of control. When you've gotten enough sleep (if you can remember what that feels like), enough exercise, when you have been eating healthy foods, and when you have been practicing zazen, when you have made an effort to approach your life with a Zen attitude, things seem a lot easier.

Gary has learned exactly how much he can tolerate and knows the signs of impending overload. He also knows how to head off the overload, even if it conflicts with his "need" to be a hero, save the world, do it all. The only way to get to this place is to pay attention. Mindfulness will give you the key to your own limits, and the clear-headed state to be able to respect them.



Nirvana Notes

Yoga is a great way to keep your physical body healthy, flexible, and strong, as it keeps your mind clear and focused. If you know all about yoga, consider taking a class or working regular practice into your schedule. If you don't know much about yoga, you might read *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga, Second Edition* (Alpha, 2001), by Joan Budilovsky and Eve Adamson.

You won't always be able to stay within your own limits, of course. Sometimes work or your personal life will make demands you have to meet. You may have to push yourself a little harder than you would like to be a part of the team, contribute to the goal, maintain your own performance.

But take care of yourself as you do it all. Pay attention. Listen to your inner rhythms and needs. Go to bed early that night, or the next night. Let the household chores go until tomorrow. Eat a really healthy meal (no, not a cup of coffee and a doughnut; no, not a diet soda and a bag of chips). Balance, weigh your options, make your list of priorities. With this kind of self-care comes a heightened ability to stay grounded in reality, free from all the extra stuff that stress eventually generates: hysterical scenario creating, total exhaustion, an inability to be productive at all.

Even as our culture reminds us that it is surely self-indulgent and unnecessary to take vacations, take an afternoon off, or miss that all-important television show's season finale in favor of a hot bath and an

early bedtime, a Zen approach to stress can supercede those cultural influences. Just as it is your responsibility to do your job well, it is also your responsibility to take care of yourself. Buddha's Middle Way means refusing to let work take over your life.

To Be or Not To Be ... Your Job

It's one thing to become totally absorbed with a given task. It is quite another to let your job take over your life. A Zen attitude toward work means both doing your job as completely and "rightly" as possible, and balancing your work life with the rest of your life.

We have a Western interpretation of Buddha's Middle Way, something Eve's wise father (who still doesn't know he is really a Zennist) has repeated like a mantra for years: "Moderation in all things!"

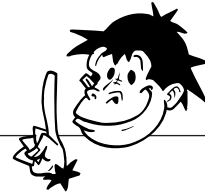
Moderation, or treading the Middle Way, means keeping your life in balance. If you become too consumed with your job at the expense of your personal life, home life, social life, and so on, your life will be out of balance. You won't be able to see as clearly. The influence of work will distort your perspective.

Our culture has many reasons to encourage us to be workaholics. Such an attitude is convenient because if we are completely immersed in our jobs, we can avoid uncomfortable feelings of loneliness, anger, boredom, unhappiness. If you stay in a constant state of overdrive, you can bury those feelings so far under a load of paperwork that they may never see the light of day.

Strong emotions are seldom considered appropriate in the workplace, something that further encourages us to ignore them or push them down. Stress is often considered a sign of dedication, aggressive behavior a sign of drive and commitment. But outright weeping? Out-of-control frustration? Pure joy? Hardly. These look much more like signs of weakness—or so we are conditioned to believe.

Work also feels like a safe place to squelch feelings because work relationships are often transitory, and even if they are relatively permanent, we know we can go home at the end of the day, and the people we don't always get along with will go somewhere else. The people at home, on the other hand, will be there waiting for us. If we have trouble sustaining or managing relationships with them, we are under greater pressure to deal with it.

Don't feel. Grit your teeth and keep working. So goes the unspoken law.



Monkey Mind!

You can have a job and a life, too! To help put your job in perspective, work to cultivate your life outside of work. Set limits for your job. If you have a job that necessarily exceeds the limits you feel are necessary, perhaps your path and your employer's path no longer converge. Relationships come to an end. Consider whether you are in a position to shake hands and move on.

We have all worked with people who are job-obsessed. (Maybe it's you.) These people live and breathe their work, leave work at night with a full briefcase, send e-mails at midnight or 5 A.M. so everyone knows they are still focused on their jobs, even at home. Gary once had a co-worker who had sustained two major losses in her life, one right after the other. She wouldn't talk about it at work, nor even acknowledge it. Instead, her involvement in her job went through the ceiling.

Gary's co-worker didn't necessarily become any more productive, but she certainly generated a lot more e-mail and memos for her fellow employees, and tried to involve everyone in more make-work activities that would keep everyone else ultrabusy right along with her. Although every workaholic doesn't have as obvious a link to repressed feelings, telling yourself how very, very busy you are sure can feel safe. Boy, I'm up to my ears in work tonight! Don't have time for anything else! I guess I'll be burning the midnight oil! How dedicated that sounds. How committed.



Monkey Mind!

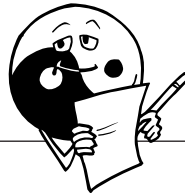
Are you overworked? Overwhelmed? Feeling like you can't control it? Step up your time in zazen. The discipline, perspective, and clarity zazen brings to your life can help you get your life under control and your work in balance. Yes, you do have time for it.

And we do want to be committed to our jobs, don't we? An attitude of nonresistance to responsibilities, integrity, absorption, meeting our promises, fulfilling our obligations, these are all demonstrations of a Zen attitude, aren't they? If we want to keep our jobs, we can't sit and meditate at our desks all day or be completely oblivious to office emergencies because we are too absorbed in typing a memo. We have to live in the world. Where is the balance?

The balance comes back to this: mindfulness. When Gary is at work, he focuses on the work that exists and tries his best to get things done right. He tries to make his various responsibilities labors of love. That means not trying to turn work into an escape from life, a substitute for love, a way to make himself more important than other people, but simply a way to focus on the job at hand. Not resisting, questioning, or focusing on the negative, but completing the task in the full awareness of the present moment.

Sure, this is the ideal. Gary doesn't manage it every single minute of every workday. None of us do. But thinking in these terms is a way to work toward right livelihood, which means working in a job that is right for you, that you feel good about, a job that does some good and in which you can do some good. It took Gary years to get to the job he has today, and now that he is there, he does his best to be his best. Not *the* best. No one else is relevant in those terms. Competition isn't a factor. *His* best.

The key to balance is to look at your job for what it is—a way to make a living, contribute to the world, and express yourself creatively. A job is not a way to get a personality or an identity, it is not a way of life, and your whole being, your very self, does not depend on your job (even if it feels that way sometimes). If you think you are defined by your job, you will begin to lose your focus.



Nirvana Notes

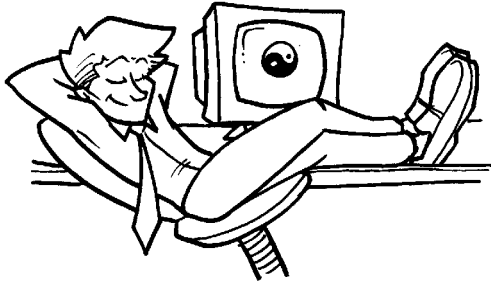
The Buddhist concept of right livelihood means working in a job that is nonviolent and doesn't compromise the life or quality of life of other sentient beings. Does your job qualify? Could you alter your job to make it more in line with right livelihood? If not, does this bother you? Is it worth working toward a different line of work? These are questions only you can answer for yourself.

Maybe you have noticed that those employees who are able to concentrate and focus but who nevertheless remain somewhat detached tend to be more successful. They approach their work with dedication, even passion, but they don't let their work define them. A job crisis isn't an identity crisis for people who have things in perspective.

Make other commitments. Cultivate friends other than work colleagues. Schedule "unbreakable appointments" for weekend activities that have nothing to do with your job. You can build balance into your life through proactive discipline and a commitment to yourself first, your work self second.

The Least You Need to Know

- If you think you have to be Superman, you have a lot to lose.
- Separating your job from your ego is difficult but crucial for stress management.
- Letting go of your expectations can put stress into perspective, even when you are the victim of other people's expectations (which you can't control).
- Learning to go with the flow rather than resist what you have to do can help you be more productive and enjoy your work more.
- Take care of yourself and pay attention to your own needs for less stress and better job performance.
- You don't have to choose between your job and your life. Both will be more enjoyable and productive if they are balanced.



Manage Your Career by Not Managing Your Career

In This Chapter

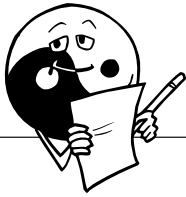
- ▶ Your career path: yours or someone else's?
- ▶ Stop grasping and start working
- ▶ Setting the course with an open mind
- ▶ Your money or your life ... or can you have both?
- ▶ You've already made it!

Some of you may still be struggling with the seemingly contradictory ideas of living in the present and planning ahead for the future. Maybe you've been planning your career since your teenage years. Maybe you love your job, but you'd like to go further with it. Maybe you feel you can't help being the ambitious type, or you know a bigger and better position would make the best use of your talents and skills.

Can you manage your career and still have a Zen attitude? Can you plan for the future in a Zen-like way? Can you live Zen and be ambitious at the same time? That depends on what you mean by being ambitious

What Do You Want to Be When You Grow Up?

Our society expects us to start making career decisions at a very young age. That's a shame, in a way. Before we even know who we are, we find we are making decisions that, while not necessarily irreversible, will certainly affect the course of our lives.



Nirvana Notes

Being a lawyer isn't much like those shows on television. It involves much more desk work than edge-of-your-seat trial time. The same goes for any job: police officer, doctor, supermodel, psychologist, and so on. Television isn't usually an accurate representation of anything, especially daily life, which just doesn't make a good show (unless you strand a bunch of people on a desert island and dangle a big pot of money in front of them).

The question "What do you want to be when you grow up?" is fun in childhood, but gets serious as high school comes to a conclusion. By early college, our parents want to know their money is being well spent. "Son, what are you plans? Don't tell me you changed majors again! You have to focus!"

Universities and colleges, and especially graduate schools, want evidence that we are preparing for our chosen course of study in whatever way is appropriate. Are you taking the right courses? Doing the relevant extracurricular activities? How is your community service record? Many of us fall into the idea that everything we do, we do primarily so our resumé's look better.

And how do we make our career decisions in this culture? Not always rationally. Sometimes we get an image of what certain professions are like from watching television. Maybe *The Practice*, or *Ally McBeal*, or *LA Law* reruns convince us we would be great lawyers. We would fit right in with that quirky bunch of lawyers at Cage and Fish. Or, if all lawyers look like Dylan McDermott or Portia de Rossi, then, hey! We're in! (If you don't watch these shows, please forgive us the references.)

Some of us base our career decisions on what our friends do, for camaraderie, maybe out of competition. Some of us choose careers to please our parents, even if we don't realize that's what we are doing. Are you living out a family dream, or following in a family business, just because it is what is expected of you?

Some of us have internal needs we might not recognize that drive our career decisions. Gary went into psychology partly because he was looking for his own answers and thought that helping people would make him a more valuable person. When he recognized these motivations, he moved more into the business side of psychology, which is better suited to his abilities. His career is now driven by his personal skill, not some personal void he is trying to fill.

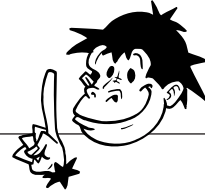
Eve worked in offices for years because, with a Master's degree in poetry writing, the job scene looked desolate, and she knew that if nothing else, she could type really fast. Writing as a career seemed too out-of-reach, too hard to break into, and the irregular pay would certainly be too stressful. But when she was motivated to stay home with her son, she was able to make the leap past her fears and worries to a career that was a much better fit.

Whatever has influenced your career decisions, you obviously make career decisions, and that means you manage your career. But are you under the impression you control the course of your career? We've got some news for you.

Nothing is permanent. Just as relationships grow and change, relationships with our careers grow and change. Sometimes we lose interest in a chosen path, or outgrow it, or feel we have accomplished what we wanted to accomplish and need a new challenge. Maybe, like Gary, we recognize a misguided vision that has led us into a path that isn't right for us anymore.

These days, careers come and go faster than you can say "What's your Web address?" Who knew 10 years ago that people would be building careers around the Internet? Job-hopping is even considered by some to be a valid approach to high-speed advancement.

What does all this have to do with Zen? To be Zen in your career doesn't mean to stop planning or managing your career. It doesn't mean to stand still. Zen is fully compatible with go-go-go. But it also requires another important principle: Let go.



Monkey Mind!

Randomly changing jobs or quitting a job you dislike probably won't do you any good. If you feel your job isn't right for you, examine why and make steps in a new direction that makes more sense before quitting your old job. Living Zen means cultivating awareness of your inner self. It means transcending materialism. But it doesn't mean financial irresponsibility. You have to live in the world.

Let Go? I'll Fall Off the Ladder!

If you work for a living, it is easy to slip into a mode centered around getting ahead. Climb the ladder, get paid more, get a better title, and so on. The thought of actually letting go of that effort, that striving, is pretty intimidating. Won't you fall right off the corporate ladder and land back in the mailroom? To do your job is to get ahead, right?

Not if you want to live (and work) Zen. Letting go of your striving, your constant, frantic forward-looking, doesn't mean compromising your job performance in any way. It doesn't mean you'll stop succeeding. When you stop focusing on what comes next, you can focus more completely on what you are doing right now. What you are doing right now might be planning next week's project, collaborating on next year's big deal, or drafting the company's 10-year plan.

Focusing on right now means taking the necessary measures to do your job well, which often involves a broader view. Where do you want to be in 10 years? What steps can you take right now to make it happen? That is Zen. But living 10 years from now, mindlessly rushing through the now so you can get to the then, that is a waste of a life.

What do you think gets a person promoted? What gets people better titles? What engenders job satisfaction? We'll tell you: doing a job really, really well.

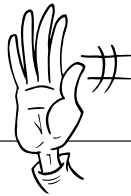
The cynical among you may be snickering. “Oh, poor naive Gary and Eve, thinking that doing a good job gets you ahead. How simplistic. Don’t they realize it’s all about who you know, who you schmooze, being in the right place at the right time, getting the competitive edge?”

The edge of what? The edge of your sanity? The edge over your friends and loved ones? Right up close to the edge of a heart attack? And what are you getting ahead to? What is up there that you don’t have back here? More money? More stuff? Friends with more expensive clothes? Anything that really matters, or lasts?

We aren’t saying people don’t get ahead (in a materialistic sense) through less than noble means. But is that what you want for yourself? If it is, you probably wouldn’t be reading this book. The employee with the good work ethic, the employee with the ability to take responsibility for his or her actions, the employee with the focus to get a job done in all its complexity with thoroughness, the employee with integrity and a good attitude is a valuable employee. If you can do that and be those things, you’ll float right up to the top without that ladder.

Focusing on being your best you in the present moment of your career keeps you from splitting your energy, fragmenting your attention, and torturing yourself about what kind of comment or move you should have made and how you can best butter up your superiors so you’ll be first in line for the next quarter-step up the ladder.

It may be hard to let go. It will be hard, if you are used to clinging tightly to that ladder. The important thing to remember is that you don’t control others. You don’t control life. You can only control what you do. You might as well spend your energy where it will make a difference.



One Hand Clapping

In an old Zen story, a student approached a Zen master and asked him, “Master, how long will it take me to achieve enlightenment?” The master looked the student up and down, then pronounced, “I’d say 15 years.” “Fifteen years!” the student protested. “I’m sorry, I’m mistaken. It will take 20 years,” the Zen master replied. “Twenty? Surely not 20!” the student protested again. “Oh my, you are right. Not 20. It will take 30 years,” the Zen master answered. “Thirty?” the student cried in horror. “No, no, I am wrong again. It will probably take 50 years.” You get the picture. The more you strive, the more you keep your eye on the future, the further from “now” that future becomes. The student present in the now gives no thought to some future state.

A Time for Effort, a Time to Sit Back and Wait

This whole “focus on the now” thing seems simple, but when it comes to work, we understand how complicated things can get. How do you know when to do your job, oblivious to the corporate machinations around you, and how do you know when to put in your bid, suggest that raise, present that proposal, or pitch your great idea to your boss?

Few jobs are simple, and we can’t give you a simple way to succeed. No one can. However, it helps to remember that sometimes in your work life, a focused and concerted effort is the best thing you can do. And sometimes, you are best off sitting back and waiting.

Waiting for what? For the right moment. For the ebb and flow, those currents and rapids and dol-drums of life to become apparent. How will you know when your right moment is before you, for making any kind of move in your job, for presenting something, asking for something, even quitting? There is only one way to know: by being mindful.

Mindfulness can take you far in your career, and it means more than focusing on the task at hand. It means remaining fully aware of everything going on around you, all the time. Mindfulness requires a certain detachment, and it is this very detachment that can lift you just slightly above the chaos so you can get a perspective.

Without that perspective, you’ll be stumbling blindly around the forest, hopelessly lost, with no knowledge that you keep passing and missing the path straight out into the sunlight. From above, you can see the forest, not just the tall trees. (You know the saying about not seeing the forest) You can see the size of the forest, and the paths in and out. You can see what you need to do to get to where you want to go.

We can’t tell you “If you have this job, you need to do X or Y,” but you can tell yourself exactly what you need to do and when you need to do it if you practice mindfulness. Regular zazen each morning and evening will cultivate that mindful attitude in a way that will hone and refine your ability to have a perspective at work, to know when to dive in, and when to sit back and let the currents of life go where they will.

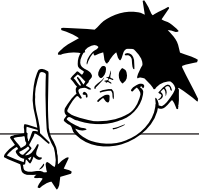


Nirvana Notes

Every day while you are at work, take a breathing break. Stop what you are doing, sit back, and breathe. Listen to the environment around you. Look. Feel. Smell. Sense what is going on, but without getting sucked in. Let yourself see the work environment around you as if you didn’t work there. You may find you gain some interesting insights.

What You Control, What You Don't

It is so hard to believe that you don't really control others, even just a little bit. If you schmooze your boss, he might be more inclined to give that account to you. Maybe that's true in your workplace. Maybe treating people in a certain way will help them be more favorably inclined toward you. So taking that client out for dinner and being extra complimentary lands you the account. So helping your co-worker with a tedious job will get you some future help.



Monkey Mind!

As you consider ways in which you try to control others, also consider ways in which you might be swayed by a compliment, a gift, a favor, or conversely, by rudeness, disrespect, or an insult. How often do you let yourself be affected by the behavior of others so dramatically that you do things you wouldn't do had you maintained a clearer perspective?

On a recent episode of Michael Moore's television show *The Awful Truth*, Moore was unable to get anyone at a major corporation to talk to him or meet with him. When he sent three supermodels in their lingerie to do the job, the CEO of the company wound up in the lobby and happily promised the girls a meeting. Unfair? Sure. Real life? Of course.

We aren't so out of touch with reality as to think what you do doesn't have an effect on others. Our work lives are filled with relationships, and with relationships comes the dynamics of interaction. What's the difference between interacting with a specific result in mind, and controlling other people?

Interacting with a specific result in mind is doing your job. Working with a Zen attitude means having the results in mind, but not being attached to them. You can only do what you can do: your best work, right effort, preparation, a good attitude, and honest, friendly interaction with others. You can do things that will probably have a certain result. But they might not. Remember chaos theory? There is much we can't predict. Maybe things will go the way you would like, maybe not. All you can do is what you can do.

And sometimes, when you think you are controlling people, you are having the opposite effect. Once, in college, Gary applied for a job he really wanted. He had a good interview. The guy said he would call Gary back in a few days. When Gary thought a sufficient number of days had passed, he called the man, making an excuse to "check in." The man said he was "still talking to people." Gary waited a couple more days, then called again. And again. Finally, the potential employer got irritated, and Gary knew he had destroyed his opportunity.

Gary's father used to call this "casting bread upon the water." You do what you think is right, what you think will work, then you let it go. If Gary had just given the best job interview he could give, then left the situation alone, he might have won the job. Or he might not have. Either way, it was beyond his control. If you obsess over what you can't control, at best you will drive yourself to distraction, and at worst you could

shoot yourself in the foot and mess up a great opportunity. At some point, your effort is over and all you have left is your patience. Zen is about being patient. It is also about learning to lose.

Learning to Lose

Sometimes things won't go the way you want. You might lose the account. You might not get the job. You might get a reprimand. You might get embarrassed. You might even lose your job.

What will you do? Rage? Scream? Sob? Quit? Fire somebody? Or will you move on to the next thing?

Long ago, Gary was working for a substance abuse program and was ready, for a number of reasons, to move on to something else. He interviewed with a hospital in-patient program. They liked him. They called him back for a second interview. They liked him even more. He waited two more weeks for that final letter, the letter he knew would begin, "Congratulations ..." or, "Welcome ..." or, "We can't wait to begin working with you"

Then Gary got the letter. You guessed it. No job.

Gary was incredibly disappointed. It was a tragedy. He thought it was the only job opportunity he would ever have. At the tender age of 27, Gary thought it was all over. He was a failure, at everything. Nothing good would ever come his way. He was doomed to suffer.

Gary sat with his feelings for another two weeks, sulking, and grieving his loss of face. He had told everyone within earshot that he was going to get that job. How humiliating, that he might have been wrong in his belief that hard work and being a good person—a good person by his own standards—would get him whatever he wanted. How could this have happened?

Finally, Gary got tired of sitting around and moping. The sadness was out of his system. He had acknowledged the feelings, and he was ready to let them go. He went to the gym. He went out with friends. He looked around to see what else was interesting, out in the world. He began to consider that maybe the job wasn't the right one for him. Maybe someone else deserved it more, or fit the position better. Maybe it was just something that happened.

Gary began to broaden his job search past substance abuse programs. Could it possibly be time to think beyond the box he had put himself in? He looked at educational settings. He looked at business. Ah, business. Now that was something fascinating he hadn't even considered.

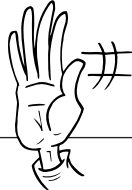


Nirvana Notes

When the Buddha attained enlightenment, he is said to have proclaimed his wonder at the sudden recognition that all living beings are Buddhas, but don't recognize their perfection because of delusion. Remember this when dealing with others along your career path. Everyone (the competitor, the irritable co-worker, the guy who just fired you) has perfection within and deserves compassion, respect, even reverence.

Gary began contacting people in the business world to see what was out there. His resumé reached someone who was looking for people just like Gary to teach people from Third World countries how to use software. This employer just happened to open his search when Gary's resumé fell into his hands.

A few weeks later, Gary moved to a new state and started a new career. He had moved on, and to something that would throw his life in a new, exciting direction. But it only happened after he let go of his expectations and allowed himself to move on.



One Hand Clapping

"... They call this making a living? How many people have you seen who are more alive at the end of the workday than they were at the beginning? Do we come home from our 'making a living' activity with more life? Do we bound through the door, refreshed and energized, ready for a great evening with the family? Where's all the life we supposedly made at work? For many of us, isn't the truth of it closer to 'making a dying'? Aren't we killing ourselves—our health, our relationships, our sense of joy and wonder—for our jobs? We are sacrificing our lives for money—but it's happening so slowly that we barely notice."

—From *Your Money or Your Life*, by Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin

In your job, in any job, things happen for a range of reasons. When Gary used to work in advertising, his team might stay up all night doing great creative work on a new account they were trying to win. They would give it their all, do their best. And sometimes they would lose the account.

How could it happen? Sometimes another agency had a presentation the prospective client liked better. Sometimes the personal chemistry between the agency and the client was stronger with one of the competitors. Sometimes somebody knew somebody who knew somebody else, a call was made, a favor was called in. And sometimes, of course, Gary's team got the job.

But Gary and his colleagues couldn't possibly control all the variables. They could only do their best job. They could hope to win, they could even expect to win, but hoping and expecting won't affect the outcome.

We all have our expectations, some of them unrealistic or unreasonable. Sometimes we fail to remain detached, to step back and put things in perspective. It is a long

process. After years of steady work, we are getting there, and you can, too. If you do your job with all possible skill and focus, without focusing on expectations that may or may not happen, you'll be a better employee, and better able to take full advantage of the way your career path unfolds.

Where Is It Getting You?

We have all heard that cliché about what we would want our tombstones to say. Would yours say "Worked him/herself to death"? Although in Zen we don't focus on a goal beyond the present moment, let's just look ahead for a moment. We all have one final ending, don't we? Our lives all have one thing in common: They will end.

So if that's the goal, the real goal, then why are we in such a hurry to get there? Why are we killing ourselves doing things we don't enjoy, things we don't find fulfilling or worthwhile, things that don't improve life on this earth while we've got it?

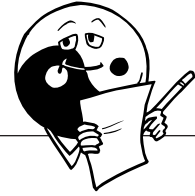
Wouldn't it make more sense to spend our precious present moments balanced, interested, productive, relaxed, loving, and joyful? Of course. So, what can you do right now to be that way in your present moment?

Being Zen means finding the balance that will make right now worth our total attention. As many of us have learned the hard way, working smartly and productively doesn't necessarily mean working the longest hours of anyone in the office, jockeying yourself from promotion to promotion, or stabbing other people in the back (metaphorically or otherwise). Working in a spirit of openness, joy, integrity, commitment, concentration, and focus, while keeping other areas of our life in balance with our work, is a much more pleasant path to career satisfaction.

What we learn and create in our lives outside work can certainly influence what we bring to the job. It is, after all, all connected. Balance means letting those connections happen organically, rather than forcing this much work, this much play, this much sleep into our days.

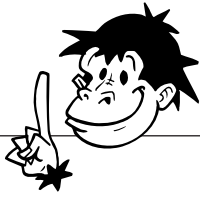
A life dedicated to work isn't a recipe for career success. It is a recipe for burnout. We prefer a Zen recipe:

A life dedicated to life.



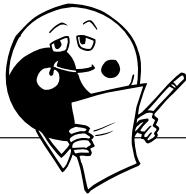
Nirvana Notes

If you are a manager, you have to set certain standards, rules, and goals for those you supervise. You expect certain things. But the best managers aren't attached to those expectations. They can take anything that happens and make the best of it, even when it foils all expectations. Rather than wasting energy on blame, anger, or punishment, Zen-like managers focus only on what they can actually control.



Monkey Mind!

If you don't enjoy your work as much as doing other things, you are either in the wrong line of work, or you are forgetting how important it is to be present and make the most of every moment, whether you are working or playing or eating or relaxing. It all counts. It is all your life.



Nirvana Notes

Being your career goals doesn't mean pretending to be the CEO when you aren't. ("What's wrong with Joe? Why is he in the boss's office with his feet on the desk? I think he's finally lost it!") It means being the best you, right now. Expend all your energy projecting yourself into the job, the mansion, the friends you'll have someday, and you'll miss it all.

You've Already Made It!

Remember the line from that old *Mary Tyler Moore* theme song (are we showing our age?): "You might just make it after all!" That's a nice, optimistic sentiment, but Zen has a different version: You've already made it.

If you can't attach yourself to some nebulous end result you can't control, you can only do what you can do, right now. You can only immerse yourself in the process: on a small scale, the process of an individual project; on a larger scale, the process of your entire career.

Do what you enjoy. Think about things that interest you. Be with people you like to work with. Focus your energy on that being, that work, that camaraderie, that effort that grows out of a real love and affinity for what you do. That is your reward. That is your success. If you can be the culmination of your career goals right now, you are a success.

Perhaps you protest that the current moment is mere drudgery—a job you don't like, a stepping stone for something better, all you could get at the moment and you have to make a living, all preparation. How can that be success? If that is how you see the work you do, you will find it drudgery, and full of suffering. Is your goal clear, or are you just grasping at whatever you can to get this month's rent check in the mail?

Let's take a look at your long-range perspective. Remember, this isn't at odds with mindfulness or "nowness." This is being mindful of your big picture. Every moment is worth living, but as they come along, moment by moment, it helps to have a plan—a flexible plan, a plan you are ready to change when necessary, but a plan nevertheless.

If you haven't set out a career plan, or what we like to call a happiness plan, perhaps this is the time to do it. Answer the following questions as completely as possible, giving each some serious thought. You might come up with some surprising answers:

1. Describe your job right now.

2. Is your job right now the job you want to have, a step toward something else, or just whatever you could get?

3. If your job isn't what you want to have, why do you think you have this job?

4. What could you do today to make your work life more satisfying?

5. What could you do tomorrow to make your work life more satisfying?

6. Where do you want to be in your work life one year from today?

7. What can you do this year to move you in the direction of your goal?

8. Where do you want to be in your work life five years from today?

9. What can you do in each of the next five years to move you in the direction of your goal?

10. How would you feel if you knew you would never reach your goal?

11. Consider other interesting career goals. What else might you like to do?

12. List things you might do today or this year to move in a different direction.

13. Describe your personal satisfaction with your work life today.

14. How attached are you to your career plan?

15. What is holding you back from career satisfaction right now?

Giving serious consideration to the above questions means being mindful of your life plan. But remember, attaching to your plan will set you up for disappointment. If your job is truly part of a process, then your success is in the right now, no matter where along the continuum of your career path right now happens to be. So you are “just” a secretary or an assistant or a clerk or an apprentice or the person who runs someone’s errands? If you are on your own path, you can find everything you need in the present.

That doesn’t mean you won’t keep moving. But the moving won’t be toward a future, exactly. It will be a series of nows, each with a plan, each with a direction, but not so attached to a destination that the present moment is lost. Let each moment be as fulfilling and miraculous and ordinary as the next, and you’ll be managing your career in a way that will bring you job satisfaction.

The Least You Need to Know

- Many of us choose career paths based on false assumptions, what other people want, or on our own unfulfilled needs rather than on where our abilities lie.
- Striving to get ahead implies the future is somehow preferable to the now and more worthy of your attention. It also tends to backfire. You'll go farther being the best you can be right now.
- Go with the flow and be open to life's unpredictable changes, and you'll be open to career directions you might not have considered.
- You can only control what you do. You can't control how life might impact your career-related circumstances.
- Examine your career path and establish a plan, but don't be so attached to the plan that you aren't open to life's changes.
- Put your energy where your life is by focusing on your wholeness, no matter where along your career path your present moment happens to be.

Part 6

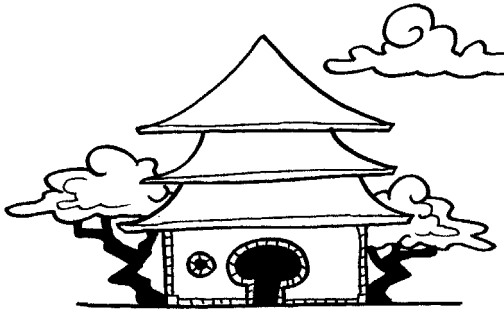
Bringing It All Back Home

In this final part, we'll help you to integrate everything you've discovered into your daily life. Can you make your environment more Zen-like? Sure! Is Zen good feng shui? That depends. Does a Zen-like home mean you're going to have to do some housework? Afraid so!

We'll also talk about Zen and your creativity, whether you express that through drawing, writing, poetry, music, art appreciation, or sports. Zen and art as well as Zen and athletics, such as archery and swordsmanship, have a long history, but Zen is just as relevant to the creation of your own poetry or that weekend flag football game you've got going. It is all in the doing and the being.

We'll finish this book with a discussion about that very doing and being. Zen is what you make it. It is your life, your self-discovery, your present moment. Let it resonate and you'll be living life to your fullest potential. And that feels great. You'll wonder what took you so long!





A Zendo to Call Your Own

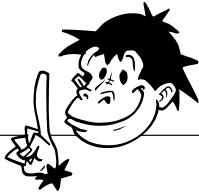
In This Chapter

- ▶ Transforming your home into your own personal zendo
- ▶ Clutter control the Zen way
- ▶ Cleanliness is next to Zen-liness
- ▶ Really living in your house
- ▶ Is Zen good feng shui?

If Zen is about looking within for truth, working to eliminate attachments, and generally being more spiritual, what does Zen have to do with that building in which you live?

We are a culture interested in, even obsessed with, home ownership. We love to buy our homes, fix them up, remodel them, and make them nicer, better, more personalized. Even if we rent, “nesting” is a big trend. We watch, read, and follow Martha Stewart raptly (okay, Eve does, anyway), and we strive to create a living environment that reflects our unique personalities.

That doesn’t sound very Zen-like, does it? Zen monks lived pretty austerely, avoiding possessions. What would they think of a collection of antique rolling pins, of chaise lounges and canopied beds and recliners featuring drink holders, telephones, magazine racks, and built-in remote controls? Of a room devoted to fly-tying or machine knitting or high-tech exercise equipment or a fully loaded home theater?



Monkey Mind!

When your house is messy and cluttered, you have more trouble finding things, and your time spent at home isn't peaceful because you keep worrying about and noticing the clutter. A clean house doesn't create a clear mind automatically, but it can help you to get there more easily.

Yet while a Zen-like attitude would encourage us not to be too attached to the things in our possession, it also encourages us to be fully present in the moment and fully immersed in our duties. Having a home uniquely suited to our lives can help to encourage this effort. We might devote a room to zazen, or to writing or painting. Maybe fly-fishing or knitting or walking on the computerized treadmill are meditative pursuits for you.

Zen means waking up to your daily life, and what is more representative of your daily life than your home? You can make your home more Zen-like, and that doesn't mean selling all your stuff and sitting on a pillow in the middle of an empty apartment chanting in some exotic foreign language. It means adjusting your environment to be more conducive to mindfulness and to the business of your life, whatever that may involve.

Home Is Where the Zen Is

How do you bring Zen into your home? We would suggest a four-pronged approach:

- Keep it simple.
- Keep it clean.
- Keep it useful.
- Keep it in perspective.

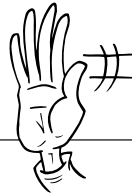
Each of these points isn't important in itself. Cultivating these qualities in your home is simply a way to remind yourself how to be mindful. Living simply helps counteract materialistic impulses. Cleanliness can help you to feel more clearheaded and less overwhelmed, and getting your house clean provides plenty of opportunities for mindfulness practice (remember all that talk about washing the dishes?).

Centering the function of the rooms in your home around that which is useful (as opposed to that which is purely decorative) helps to keep your life centered on what you have to do rather than on what you have. That's not to say a room can't be aesthetically pleasing. The rooms in your home should contribute to your happiness and inner sense of peace. But if the décor is all about materialism, then you may find it has the opposite effect, contributing to your desires, your striving, your worry, and a more complicated life. Rooms decorated with what you need and what you use rather than what you feel is impressive to display will help to cultivate a Zen-like attitude at home.

The point of a Zen home is to help you keep a perspective on what is important in your life: the being and the doing, not the having and the holding.

Transforming Your Space

Looking around at your living space, you might be feeling a little discouraged. What, transform this disorganized mess into an example of Zen simplicity and function? Getting from here to there isn't the point. Don't let some future goal discourage you. Transformation happens moment by moment, now by now. The work of creating and maintaining a home is your work. Right now, let's just look around and see what you can do.



One Hand Clapping

Life is full of so-called conveniences: fax machines, e-mail, caller ID, call waiting; bread machines, food processors, juicers, pasta makers, tortilla presses; minivans, convenience marts, pay-at-the-pump gas stations, ATM and credit cards. Some of these things really will simplify your life, and others will actually complicate it. In *The Simplicity Reader*, Elaine St. James suggests activating a simple and powerful mechanism for determining what to add to your life and what to keep out of it (or what to get rid of): Ask yourself, "Will this really simplify my life?" If the answer is no, forget about it!

Define Your Goals

Re-crafting your household, and by extension, your life, to be simpler can do amazing things for your mental state. In her wonderful and inspiring book, *The Simplicity Reader*, Elaine St. James notes that a TIME/CNN poll once showed that almost 65 percent of us spend our leisure time doing things we really would rather not do. St. James suggests this may be because we don't know what it is we want to do. We think we want to do it all.

Instead, consider making a comprehensive list of everything you think you want to do, then paring it down to your top five. Do you really want to learn to paint, sculpt, master kickboxing, read the complete works of Shakespeare, take a course on public speaking, write more letters, learn French, and take up the saxophone? Maybe you

believe someday you will do all these things, but imagine how much simpler your life would be if you were to narrow your list to your top five priorities? Perhaps they are to spend more time with your family, entertain friends more often, have space and time to meditate, become a really knowledgeable and skilled cook, and work on your own personal writing.

Now that's a workable, and much simpler, list. What might your list look like? Maybe you already have a list of "someday" goals lying around (if you can find it!). Or, maybe you would like to make one now. List as many things as you can think of that you would like to do "someday." These are the things you always thought you would probably do, or really like to imagine you will do. This is the time to let your mind run wild. Let yourself dream.

Now look at your list. Look at it with an open mind and a light heart. What could you cross off?

Crossing something off your list doesn't mean you'll never do it, so don't get so attached to the idea of losing one of your great dreams (hang-gliding, ballet lessons, becoming a master gardener) that you feel you have to leave it here, even if you don't plan to work on it any time in the next five years. Remember: In Zen, even your priorities and goals are held lightly because life is changeable.

Now, get ruthless (lightheartedly ruthless). Cross off everything but five items on the list. These are the five things that are serious priorities in your life today, things on which you really do plan to spend your time, things around which you can adjust your home ...

My five life priorities right now are:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

This top-five list will give you a focus and an anchor point for your home. If meditation or writing are goals, you might transform a guest room or unused office into a meditation room or a workspace for your writing. If you are serious about cooking, you might reorganize your kitchen to match your cooking goals. If entertaining is fulfilling to you, you might add more seating in your family room to accommodate guests.

Your home is yours ... sort of. It isn't yours to cling to, to attach to, to obsess about. But it is yours to live in, and you can make it workable, individual, useful, and conducive to your own personal happiness. Note, we don't say your own personal desires. Happiness, free from desires.

Living in the Doing

Making your house more utilitarian is another way to encourage mindfulness and concentration on the work you do, whether that work is your job, a hobby, or the creation of art. A room devoted to possessions that require maintenance or worry is much less conducive to a Zen attitude than a room devoted to something you have to do. Again, doing is the focus, not having.

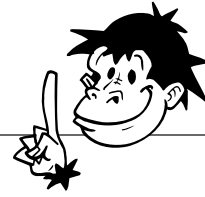
If you are serious about your zazen, you might find that an area devoted to zazen helps you to commit to your practice even more firmly. We hope this is one of your priorities! Although many people don't have the luxury of a spare room anymore, even a bedroom, living room, or office space can include a corner for meditation. Furnish your zazen area with a mat, a cushion or meditation bench, and if you like, other appropriate tools such as an object to focus on or a source for meditative music, a candle, incense—whatever helps you to relax and concentrate on being mindful.

Of course, you don't need any tools for zazen, and you might find you are more successful in your zazen without any "props." It's completely up to you.

Other ways to make your house more focused on usefulness is to make the tools of living organized and easily accessible—cookware, cleaning products and appliances, clothing, as well as tools for your job, your hobby, your art. Remember your five-item list above? Keep it in mind whenever you make a change to your living environment. Live in the doing, and know what you are doing.

How can you immerse yourself in the work of preparing a meal if you can't find that right pan or spatula or measuring cup? How can you focus on building that bird-house in a truly Zen-like manner if you are always misplacing the saw or the hammer? How can you meditate if every room in the house is full of noise, chaos, and clutter? (Theoretically, the advanced student can meditate anywhere, but meditating amidst chaos certainly isn't easy.)

Making your home more conducive to the work of daily living is a highly individual matter, so look back at your five-item list, and let's get personal with some strategies. You won't attach too obsessively to these strategies, of course, but they will give you somewhere to begin:



Monkey Mind!

Are you a pack rat? If you have trouble throwing anything away, you may have a problem with attachment to material things. This can be an area for personal contemplation. Why are you afraid to let go of material possessions? Do they enhance your life or complicate it?

In addition to my five priorities, I would like my home to be a place where I can ...

First, I will need to declutter, clean, and organize these areas ...

Next, I will need to make each area more useful by ...

I can promote my five priorities for living by making these changes in my home ...

Some other ideas I have for creating a more Zen-like home are ...

And remember, Zen is in the doing, the work of getting there, not in the looking ahead to the goal. Your home will never be perfectly clean, perfectly organized, or perfectly focused on what you need. That doesn't matter. The future never happens. Make now count by giving your home attention and care in the same way you give yourself attention and care through the work of zazen.

And where will you get the space for such changes? That's where clutter control comes in.

Clutter control may not be a classic Zen term, but perhaps it should be. Clutter means stuff, and stuff just hangs around encouraging us to get attached to it.

Clutter vs. Simplicity

If your home is cluttered, you are in good company. Very few of us (especially if we live with others) can escape the clutter monster, and hundreds of books, articles, even professional organizers exist to help you conquer it.

But you can do it yourself. Why bother? Because when your home is cluttered, you probably have more trouble finding things, you may be more likely to get frustrated just looking at the disorganization, and clutter means you have a lot of stuff. Do you need a lot of stuff? Probably not.

You might remember us saying earlier in the book that a messy desk may be a nice metaphor for a cluttered mind, but it doesn't actually mean you have a cluttered mind. True. In Zen, things are what they are. They don't represent other things.

However, because your home is so integrated into your life, a very cluttered, disorganized, messy home can actually have a cluttering, disorganizing, messing effect on your life. Every bit of clutter in your house is there because you acquired it, in one way or another, and now you are more or less attached to it. If your house is burgeoning with stuff, that's a lot of attachments to drag around with you. How incredibly freeing it would be to dump some of it!

Streamlining the stuff in your life can help you to focus on more important things, such as people, your own personal development, and the work you do, including your list of your top priorities. Why spend your whole life maintaining and worrying about stuff? Stuff doesn't last. Stuff doesn't contribute to *you*.

You can work toward a simpler existence by getting control of the clutter in your life, and by consuming less so you generate less. Consuming less is a process you can grow into in ways that make sense to you, whether that means growing more of your own food, biking more and driving less, or questioning your own shopping habits to try to buy less stuff by asking yourself what you really need to live comfortably.

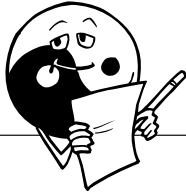
Clutter control is a more immediate process. There's the clutter, all around. Don't you wish you could just zap it away? If you try to conquer your clutter all at once, you'll probably throw in the towel when you realize it's too much. Clutter is best managed

bit by bit. To begin clearing out the clutter in your life, make a list of areas to tackle, maybe something such as: bedroom closet, hall closet, junk drawer, garage, pantry, playroom, desk, files, clothing.

Once you've clarified where your clutter lingers, take each item on the list and give it some time. Spend one afternoon a week on each area. When you've got your time set aside, you can begin to process. Work through your clutter and give each item the test:

- Is this useful to me?
- If not, why do I want to keep it?

If you can't think of a good reason to keep something, give it away or toss it. ("I might need it someday" isn't a good reason. "I just love this" can be a fine reason.) You've probably heard all these suggestions before, but a Zen approach is a little different. The clean house isn't the goal. The process of cleaning is the goal.



Nirvana Notes

A Zen approach to clutter control doesn't focus on the goal of a clutter-free house. While the goal exists, it isn't the impetus because it is in the future. Instead, the work of eliminating the clutter is your work for the moment. As you clean, discard, and organize, concentrate on the task. Experience the process for the sake of the process.

As you move through the process, you might find yourself coming up against attachment barriers, or time barriers, or emotional barriers. You just can't face that messy office. You really aren't ready to go through that box of personal things that belonged to your deceased grandfather. You know you just might wear that pants suit some day.

If you really aren't ready for something, don't force it. As you declutter and simplify, little by little, you'll get to a place where you can conquer the bigger (or emotionally bigger) projects. Start with what is easy: the junk drawer in the kitchen, the hall closet, maybe the toys in the backyard.

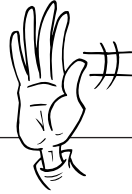
You won't conquer clutter in a day. And you'll probably keep accumulating more. But being mindful of the clutter in your life and working, bit by bit, with concentration and purpose, to simplify your life by minimizing the stuff can be good practice that parallels your work in zazen to eliminate the clutter in your mind.

It's Just Stuff

Throughout all the cleaning, discarding, organizing, and refocusing, remember also to keep it all in perspective. One of the challenges of clutter control is deciding what to discard. Many of our possessions evoke memories or represent future things we want to do: a souvenir from a memorable vacation, a stack of unfilled photo albums, love letters, that rock-polishing kit you haven't opened in 10 years.

We aren't saying you need to get rid of everything that doesn't represent the present moment. But how important is that souvenir? Maybe you decide the love letters are important to you, but you'll remember the trip to Florida without the inflatable pink flamingo you never look at.

Having memories or future plans isn't anti-Zen. Attaching to them, letting them consume you, or living with them at the expense of living in the now is what will impede your efforts to live your Zen. It's all just stuff. Sure, you like some of it. Some of it, you like a whole lot. But it isn't yours. You can like it, but if you can let go of your perception of your need for it, your desire for it, you'll be living Zen.



One Hand Clapping

An old Zen story tells of a traveling monk who came to a monastery one chilly evening. He was cold, so he took one of the wooden statues of the Buddha and used it to make a fire. The head monk caught him in the act and cried out in horror, "What are you doing? Why are you burning the statue?" "To get the holy essence," replied the crafty monk. "Why would you get holy essence from a statue?" asked the head monk. "If it isn't there, then why shouldn't I burn the statue?" replied the monk. The point of this story is that in things, there is no reality or ultimate value. What they represent is nothing. Much more valuable is how things can be used.

This point is perfectly illustrated in a story from the book *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn*, compiled by Stephen Mitchell. In preparation for a ceremony at the International Zen Center of New York, a Korean woman gave an American Zen student a bunch of plastic flowers, which the student tried to hide, but which someone found and put out on the altar:

The student was very upset. He went to Soen-sa and said, "those plastic flowers are awful. Can't I take them off the altar and dump them somewhere?"

Soen-sa said, "It is your mind that is plastic. The whole universe is plastic."

The student said, "What do you mean?"

Soen-sa said, "Buddha said, 'When one mind is pure, the whole universe is pure; when one mind is tainted, the whole universe is tainted.' ... Being attached to a thing means that it becomes a hindrance in your mind. So 'I don't like plastic' is

the same as ‘I like plastic’—both are attachments. You don’t like plastic flowers, so your mind has become plastic, and the whole universe is plastic. Put it all down. Then you won’t be hindered by anything. You won’t care whether the flowers are plastic or real, whether they are on the altar or in the garbage pail. This is true freedom”

Clean Up Your Act

Beyond clutter is cleanliness. Maybe you can keep everything picked up, but you can’t seem to get yourself to mop the floor every weekend, or scrub out the bathtub. Yet, as we’ve mentioned before, household chores are an excellent opportunity to practice mindfulness. Keeping a clean house is also a good way to practice self-discipline, and living in a clean house is not only more sanitary, but much more pleasant. It just feels better.

As long as you are going to be mindful and really notice and experience where you are, isn’t it nicer to experience a clean environment? And like clutter control, working to keep your home clean can serve as an appropriate reminder of the work you are doing in zazen: that spring cleaning of your mind.

For some people, cleaning is therapeutic. If you aren’t one of those people, perhaps you can learn something from them. Consider scrubbing the bathtub your afternoon exercise, or mopping the kitchen floor a time for decompression. Or, picture the scrubbing away of dirt and grime as a scrubbing away of all that mucks up your mental clarity. Yes, we said that in Zen, nothing symbolizes anything else. But seeing your cleaning in a meditative way—almost like a koan—can help you to get into the habit and enjoy it more if cleaning is a particular challenge for you.

Cleaning is rewarding work because your results are immediately obvious. And like anything else (including zazen), cleaning and also clutter control are a matter of habit. These are habits you can cultivate. They’ll make you feel good, and your life really will seem simpler.

Conscious Living

We’d like to stress once again (because this is important) that living Zen is not about fixing up your house. Buying those little Zen gardens or fountains, little Buddha statues made of China, silk kimonos, or other things that suggest Asia or Buddhism, may please you. You may like the Japanese decorating style, or the feeling such objects impart. But that isn’t Zen. That is attachment to an idea about Zen. And once again, it’s more stuff.

The British Zen scholar R. H. Blyth once wrote, “Zen is the unsymbolisation of the world and all the things in it.” No object, no thing in your house makes your house Zen-like. Your experience of living in your home and doing your work there is Zen.

Nothing else. We certainly don't mind if you have an attractive, bubbling desk fountain that says "Zen Fountain" on the box. We just hope you won't mistake that for living Zen.

Living Zen is living consciously, with full awareness, wherever you live and wherever you are—a mansion, a one-room trailer, or under the stars. Zen is the perception of the eternal you and your part in the universe. What does that have to do with a house?

Only this: you, in a house, right now.

Is Zen Good Feng Shui?

Everybody's talking about feng shui these days. This ancient Chinese art of placement is certainly a contemporary fad. In most cities, you can hire a feng shui master to come to your home and tell you how to arrange things according to who you are, where your home is, which direction it faces, and so on. A feng shui master can also tell you where and in what orientation to build a new home, depending on the landscape.

Feng shui as it exists in China is a highly complicated process akin to astrology, and its Western incarnation is often diluted, oversimplified, even completely misinterpreted. But even in its most authentic form, does it have anything to do with Zen? They were both developed in the same place, weren't they?

Feng shui seeks to take full advantage of the flow of life-force energy in an environment to maximize the health, wealth, and potential of the inhabitants of that environment. We would say feng shui contains similar ideas as yoga, tai chi, acupuncture, or Chinese medicine, areas that all seek to facilitate and optimize the flow of life-force energy.

But in Zen, the distinctions between the inhabitants and the environment begin to blur. What is energy, either flowing or stagnant, in Zen? Zen is just awareness. Maybe your awareness will lead you to perceive something that seems to you like life-force energy. Zen doesn't say these other disciplines are wrong or untrue or invalid. Not at all. But in a sense, it transcends them. Zen means awareness to such an extent that all becomes one. When all is one, when you have tapped into the great oneness of all things and perceived it, what does it matter in which corner of the living room you've decided to put your couch?

But many of us won't necessarily get that far with our Zen. We work on mindfulness, awareness,



Nirvana Notes

Zen doesn't mean doing without possessions, knowledge, hobbies, or the daily trappings of life. But it does mean we could do without these things, that we are just as whole without these things, and that we refuse to be trapped by the trappings.

living simply to be more in touch with our inner selves. We may find feng shui interesting and may choose to study it. Great! Why not? We're all for gaining knowledge about anything. But the point of a Zen approach, of course, is not to attach to what you learn.

Learn. Find the world interesting, but don't think it defines you, changes you, or even affects you very much. To live Zen is to experience without holding. Learn and do with complete attention, but without attachment, and that goes for feng shui as much as it does for fly-fishing.

The Least You Need to Know

- You can make your home more conducive to Zen living by refocusing your environment on simplicity, cleanliness, and usefulness.
- A special area for zazen can encourage practice.
- What you do to your house isn't Zen. Experiencing the process of maintaining a house and being aware while in your house is Zen.
- The ancient Chinese art of feng shui seeks to arrange an environment to optimize the flow of life-force energy.
- The ancient Chinese art of Zen transcends environment, inhabitants, and energy channels, with total awareness of the unity of all things.



Zen-Powered Creativity

In This Chapter

- ▶ Your creative side is your only side
- ▶ Drawing the Zen way
- ▶ Zen writing
- ▶ The Zen of poetry
- ▶ Musical Zen
- ▶ The Zen way to experience art

Whether you think you aren't creative at all or are a little too weighted toward the creative side, this chapter could give you new insight into what it means to create, the Zen way.

Historically, creativity has been like a cousin to Zen for centuries. Zen poets, Zen artists, Zen practitioners of the tea ceremony, Zen flower arrangers, all bring Zen and art together into a unified expression of the true self.

Zen can help you bring out your inner creativity as well, whether you like to draw or write or sing or just tell fantastic stories to your kids. The Zen path to your creative side is short and simple. You're already on it. In fact, you already are it.

Creativity for Greater Awareness

The previous few paragraphs of this chapter might make it sound as if creativity is something you have, separate from you, like brown hair or blue eyes. Actually, though, according to Zen, you *are* creativity. There is no difference between you and the creative force. You are a physical incarnation of creative energy.

And you thought you weren't creative!

You may wonder what we mean when we say you are creativity itself. What we mean is that creative expression is natural for all of us. We are all creative. Some of us aren't in the habit of exercising or even acknowledging our creativity, but we can all do it, and getting in the habit is a great way to gain knowledge about yourself.

Perhaps you don't believe us. "But I always wanted to be a great painter, and my pictures look like stick people, so I gave up." "I had such dreams of being a ballerina, but I have two left feet, so I gave up." So you won't ever be a professional painter or a touring ballerina or a best-selling novelist or poet laureate of the United States. So what?

Fame has nothing to do with creativity. Neither does professional success. Fame is a cultural response to the expressed creativity of certain people, that's all.

You being creative means you being you. The more you nurture your creativity, the more you will understand yourself and, by extension, the world around you and the other people in it. How can you best express your creativity? That's up to you, a matter of personal preference, but in this chapter, we'll give you some ideas for creative ways to express your true self.



Nirvana Notes

While sitting meditation provides the fewest distractions during which to practice mindfulness, other forms of meditation can be just as effective for practicing mindfulness. Try zazen through drawing, writing, playing music, crocheting, cooking, refinishing furniture, or tending to your beautiful rose garden. Total absorption in the task is the ticket.

The Zen Drawing Diary

So you think you can't draw? Perhaps you haven't tried drawing the Zen way. Even though she is a writer, Eve has a horrible time keeping a journal. Writing overkill, perhaps. Instead, Eve keeps a drawing diary.

Drawing is an excellent way to train yourself to see without the intermediary of language coming between you and what you observe. Zen drawing trains your eye to meet the subject head-on, merge with it, become it. In his excellent book on the subject, *Zen Seeing, Zen Drawing: Meditation in Action*, Frederick Franck suggests that learning to draw means learning to see:

“When the eye wakes up to see again, it suddenly stops taking anything for granted. The thing I draw, be it leaf, rosebush, woman, or child, is no longer a thing, no longer my “object” over and against which I am the supercilious “subject.” The split is healed. When I am drawing leaf or caterpillar or human face, it is at once de-thingified. I say yes to its existence. By drawing it, I dignify it, I declare it worthy of total attention, as worthy of attention as I am myself, for sheer existence is the awesome mystery and miracle we share.”

What a wonderful expression of the creative process! Zen drawing isn’t about using techniques of perspective or proportion. It is a meditation on life, energy, and love.

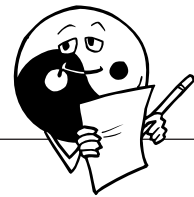
Just because your eighth-grade art teacher made some off-hand comment about how you wouldn’t ever have to endure the burdens of creative genius doesn’t mean you can’t draw. Anyone can draw. *Anyone*. You don’t have to be “good” (whatever that means) because the drawing isn’t for display. Zen drawing is a meditation. “Talent” (whatever that is) has nothing to do with it.

How do you do it? Here is a mini lesson in Zen drawing. You’ll need a piece of paper and a pencil, and an object to draw. Any object will do, but to start out, try something with simple lines. Perhaps, as Franck suggests, a leaf, a piece of fruit, a green pepper cut in half. Or, maybe you have something else in mind.

Once you’ve chosen your object, get comfortable in a quiet place where you won’t be distracted. Put your object in front of you. Gaze at it; focus your total attention on it. Then, take your drawing pencil in hand and move your pencil over the paper to trace what your eye sees.

Imagine your pencil stroking the object’s contours and curves, but keep looking at your subject. Don’t look at your drawing. If you look at your drawing, you might start judging it. Always look at your subject, the focus of your meditation. Look at it deeply and fully until you feel you have become it, or at least know it intimately. Keep tracing it, examining every contour, every change in texture, every surface and angle, line and curve.

A drawing diary lets you practice and practice this kind of seeing. Draw the things in your house, the stuff piled on your bed, family members eating or watching television (if they don’t mind!), friends and neighbors, pets and plants, the beautiful things in your life and the ugly things, too (in Zen, they are all just what they are, neither beautiful nor ugly).



Nirvana Notes

You don’t need fancy art supplies to keep a Zen drawing diary. Paper or a book with unlined pages and a pencil is fine. Resist your urge to use an eraser. Just draw the thing. There is no such thing as a mistake in Zen drawing.

Recording your day through drawings is a profound way to meditate on the life you have and the things around you. It is zazen with a pencil, a response to the experience of mindfulness.

Zen and the Pen

Some people (probably you visual artists and others who don't write all day long for your jobs) prefer writing as a kind of meditation. Like drawing, language can also be a direct response to mindfulness. In Zen writing, rules aren't important—grammar, usage, style. Only a direct response to your experience is a worthy subject for your writing efforts. And of course, that includes anything at all, since your daily life is made of experience.

You might call Zen writing a form of freewriting. Sit down with a paper and pen (or your computer) and begin to follow your breathing, as if beginning zazen (because that is what this is). Then begin to write. Don't plan it. Don't worry about it. Don't attach to your words (This is horrible! Or, Hey, I'm pretty good!). You don't even have to have a subject in mind. Just let the words come out, a direct flow from within, a response to mindfulness.

What does that look like? Here is an example of a passage of Zen freewriting. It doesn't have to be good, or interesting, or meaningful. It just has to come from you, a sort of meditative transcription:

Sun in the window. Air through vents, the carpet rough under my knees. The dog licking her paw, serene, in a square of sun. Hmm hmm la la la. The rectangles of the bookshelf, up and down. Books like soldiers, or not like anything. Books like books. Am I judging my metaphors? So I am. What to write? I don't know. I don't know. True, how true, I really don't know anything! Pictures above and below. Photographs of people I love. Round frames and oval, square, rectangular. A pile of magazines, will I ever read them? What could it be about? Swirls of color, imagined, dust motes floating in the light, I really should vacuum up all that dust. Too quiet. Oh for the phone to ring. Here I sit. Za za za za za za-zenning by hand. Mind standing still, but churning. A car going by. Someone shouting. A dog barks, my dog looks up, ears pricked. Shadows on the walls. My house. Whose house? A house. With doors and windows, air and light, movement and stillness, sound and silence. And me in the middle. Writing. Being. Wishing the phone would ring. Noticing that I'm wishing the phone would ring.

Or maybe you'll choose to pick a subject. You might decide to write about a problem that has been bothering you, to help yourself experience it, feel it, and move through it. Maybe you will choose to describe an object or a scene in front of you. Maybe you will decide to write about a person, or a past event, or a dream you had. You can

write about anything you want to write about! The point is to immerse yourself in the writing process, to let it be an expression of your mindfulness and your focus—or even your lack of mindfulness or focus! In expressing your lack of focus, you may find you gain focus.

What you write won't always be representative of pure mindfulness. Sometimes your attachments, assumptions, worries, fears, thoughts, emotions will come pouring out, too. Writing them is a way to recognize them: A-ha! There's an assumption! Look how attached to it I was, writing about it for two pages! Writing that stuff you are trying to release can help you release it. And when it goes, what is left? Pure mind. Your mind. And its translation onto the page.

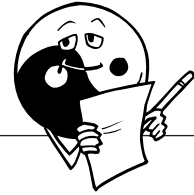
A Zen writing diary is a great way to practice this type of meditation. But a writing diary (like a drawing diary) can also become a source of attachment, worry, even fear if you attach to what you've written, drawn, or otherwise created. While you may often enjoy looking back on what you have written or drawn, resist the urge if you will begin to judge your efforts. Just as you shouldn't judge your own zazen, reprimand yourself for a wandering mind or for having too many chaotic thoughts, you also shouldn't judge your own writing or drawing. Just let it be what it is. There is no good or bad.

You'll be surprised how great it makes you feel if you practice it every day and can learn to let it be.

The Poet Within

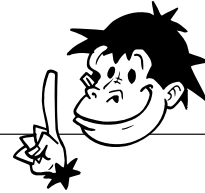
You were probably forced to learn all about poetry in school. Maybe you haven't thought much about it since. But maybe a few terms come to mind: metaphor, simile, rhyme, meter, assonance, alliteration.

Forget it all! Or don't forget it, but don't let it concern you. Zen poetry is an ancient art, and not one that is easy to master, for Zen poetry is a direct expression of the world.



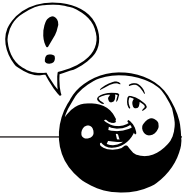
Nirvana Notes

Is it less Zen-like to use a computer than to write by hand? Of course not. Computer, printer, pen, paper, hand—it's all the same thing in Zen. What matters is your true self. The tools you use are irrelevant.



Monkey Mind!

Are you discouraged because you can't think of anything to write? Remember, the key is to stop thinking and just write. What comes out doesn't matter. Focus on the process, the right-now, the pen to paper or the fingers to keyboard. Your mind holds your work at arm's length. Only in releasing your mental hold on the task can you become one with it.



Zen-Speak

A **haiku** is a form of Japanese poetry containing (traditionally) three lines of five, seven, and five syllables each. Haikus are meant to be direct expressions of experience with little, if any, reliance on literary devices such as similes and metaphors (comparing something to something else).

There is an old Zen story about the famous Zen poet Basho. Basho was very learned and a master of the *haiku*, a form of Japanese poetry containing three lines totaling 17 syllables.

Basho was visiting the Zen master Takuan one day, and as they talked, Basho referenced and quoted endlessly from many complex works of Buddhist thought to support his points. At last, the Zen master said to Basho, “You are a great Buddhist with much understanding, but all you have been saying to me are the words of others, the Buddha’s words, the words of scholars and teachers. What are your own words? What are the words of your true self? Give me a sentence that comes from you, that is all your own.”

Basho was stunned into silence. He had no idea what to say. Words from his true self? Words not quoted from some famous, time-tested manuscript? Basho remained silent. He was humiliated. His true self? He felt frozen to the spot. The Zen master commented, “What, you, the great Basho, so learned and you can’t give me one word from your true self?”

Suddenly, Basho heard a sound of water splashing from the garden pond. Without thinking (that’s the important part), Basho turned to the Zen master and said:

Still pond

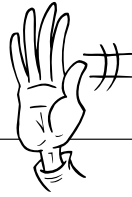
A frog jumps in

Splash!

The Zen master laughed with delight. “Now that is an expression of your true self!

This story shows how we can only respond to mindfulness directly, without ideas, thoughts, the words of others, our preconceived notions getting in the way. If we filter experience through all these other things, we have created something that, while possibly very interesting or beautiful or admirable or impressive, is nevertheless compromised by our delusions.

When Basho heard the sound of the frog, he responded directly. No fancy poetic devices, no quotes, no literary references. Just pure experience. That is Zen poetry.



One Hand Clapping

“When you understand yourself, it is very easy to paint or write poems or do calligraphy or tea ceremony or karate. You paint effortlessly; you write effortlessly. Why? When you are painting or writing or doing any action, you become totally absorbed in that action. You are only painting; you are only writing. No thinking gets between you and the action. There is only not-thinking action. This is freedom.”

—From *Dropping Ashes on the Buddha: The Teaching of Zen Master Seung Sahn*, compiled by Stephen Mitchell

You and Haiku

Anyone can write a haiku, but haiku, although short, are difficult to write well. The rules: three lines containing five, seven, and five syllables respectively, and for subject matter: pure experience.

Haikus are good practice for the work of avoiding comparisons, assumptions, and judgments. Basho’s haiku about the frog wouldn’t be haiku if it went more like:

A still pond
 A frog like a beam of sunlight
 Bothers the surface

In this version, the frog is compared to something, and the judgment is made that the frog’s jumping has compromised or somehow irritated the pond. This last line also personifies the pond, as if it were a person who could be bothered.

This version may sound Zen-like or interesting or even beautiful to some, but a Zen master would see right through it. It may be poetry, but it isn’t Zen. The mind is elsewhere, not with the pond, the frog, the sound of the splash.

Without worrying about how Zen-like or perfect your haiku will be, let’s try a few. Sit in zazen for a few minutes, mindfully. Look around you. Listen. Breathe. Feel with

awareness. What is contributing to the experience of your present moment? An example:

The wristwatch ticking.
Across the street, a mower.
Afternoon sunbeam.

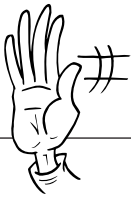
Here's another one:

A man sits alone
On a bench under pale sky
Looking at a cloud.

And one more for good measure:

Gray squirrel, perched, trembling,
Eyeing the striped cat below.
The cat's tail twitches.

Now you try it. Remember, five syllables in the first line, seven syllables in the second line, five syllables in the third line. Stick only with the experience. Don't judge, don't assume, don't compare. Don't create a scenario. Stick with your actual experience. Let your eye, your ear, your mindfulness find worthy haiku subjects (everything real is a worthy haiku subject).



One Hand Clapping

Many ancient haiku are famous in the West as being classic representations of Japanese poetry, but haiku isn't the only form of Japanese poetry, and many other poetic forms exist in other Eastern countries, too.

Musical Zen

Among Eve's other creative pursuits (she is one of those people who may be a little too in touch with her creative side), she is also a jazz singer. Her father is a jazz pianist and she sometimes sings for his band. Singing always came naturally to Eve. She learns songs quickly and remembers lyrics easily. She doesn't usually have to think about it. It just happens. She merges with the song and it sings itself. She considers singing a form of zazen.

But one night she was singing a song by special request, a song a friend had asked that she learn. It was a fast song with a lot of lyrics, and Eve kept forgetting them. All day before the performance, Eve obsessed about the lyrics, singing them until the kids couldn't stand it anymore ("Mommy, will you please stop singing that song!"), going over them silently in her head, worrying, and projecting ahead to what might happen if she forgot them on stage. What would happen? How might she cover it up?

Even as she did this, Eve remembers thinking to herself, "This isn't a very Zen-like approach. I am attaching to the idea of remembering the lyrics of this song." The recognition wasn't enough to stop her, however. She didn't trust the song to sing itself this time. And it didn't.

Sure enough, right around verse two, the lyrics went completely out of her head and Eve had to stutter a little, make something up, then resort to repeating the first verse. Not many people noticed, but Eve noticed, and so did her friend who had asked her to sing the song.

Even during the performance, Eve kept thinking ahead. As she sang each word, she was thinking ahead to the next line. She was not being mindful. She was existing in the future of the song, and she paid for it. Not a high price, but a price.

Of course, the local cable access company was taping the show, and replayed her error over and over on cable access television over the next few months. All her friends *said* they didn't notice. Uh-huh.

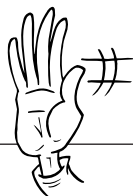
When Eve found herself singing the song at home one day, completely without thought, she got through the whole thing without a hitch. Just one more reminder about how effortless experience can be when thought doesn't get in the way.

The Zen of music is just like the Zen of the other creative pursuits. Whether you are playing, singing, or listening to the music, immersing yourself completely in the music is the Zen way to experience music mindfully. Only then can you fully appreciate the beauty and truth in a great song, whether it is an aria, a sonata, or an Ella Fitzgerald song.



Nirvana Notes

Singing in the shower or the car is often more Zen-like than singing in a performance. In the shower, you aren't thinking. You are singing as a pure expression of your experience (even if you are singing something silly). In a performance, you may be more attached to the result, to the reactions of others, and to a flawless product, rather than on the "now" of your expression.



One Hand Clapping

“What is Zen? Zen is looking at things with the eye of God, that is, becoming the thing’s eyes so that it looks at itself with our eyes. But this is not enough. Impression must always be accompanied by expression. Impression without expression is not yet impression. Expression without impression is impossible. But impression and expression are not enough. Expression without reception is meaningless. It is not expression if it is to nobody. This is why all art, all music, all poetry requires two persons.”

—From *Zen and Zen Classics: Selections from R. H. Blyth*, compiled by Frederick Franck

A Zen Lesson in Art Appreciation

The more you learn to experience art, poetry, and music mindfully, the more you will understand it. Did you ever wonder how some people seem to know when art is good and when it is not as good, when you can’t tell the difference? Some people pretend to know the difference, or just follow what they hear. That’s pretension.

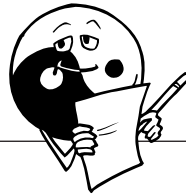
But for others, Zen is a way to understand, firsthand, what makes great art. Whether someone calls it Zen or not, a Zen approach to understanding art means experiencing art, or receiving art, with total mindfulness. Let your preconceptions go. Let your assumptions go. Let go of your urge to compare what you experience to anything else.

Total mindfulness on the part of the listener makes it apparent when art or poetry or music has been created with total mindfulness by the composer or painter or writer or musician. You will feel a connection. You will be in the presence of art, which is to be in the presence of humanity, which is to be in the presence of truth.

It’s a lot of fun to exercise the Zen of art appreciation. Every opportunity becomes a delightful exercise in mindfulness. The possibilities, fortunately, are endless. Here are some ideas:

- Visit an art museum and spend a full ten minutes in front of at least one piece of art. Really look. Focus on it until you feel you are beginning to understand it, even to become one with it.
- Bring your drawing diary to the art museum, to an outdoor sculpture, or even to the pages of a book about art. See what happens when you practice your Zen drawing meditation using a piece of great art as your subject. Draw what you perceive. Take your time.

- As long as you are in that museum, write haiku about different works of art you find particularly inspiring. Let the haiku speak of your direct experience of the art, rather than trying to understand it, analyze it, or compare it to anything.
- Listen to some music you consider truly great, or music known to be great that you've never heard, all alone in a room with the lights off and your eyes closed, sitting in zazen. Let the music be your meditation focus. Listen with complete mindfulness.
- Draw or write in response to a piece of music. Let one art medium inspire your creativity in another medium.
- Go to the theater, the ballet, the opera, or even a great movie alone. Let yourself become completely immersed in the experience. Notice when you feel the need to say something to someone, and direct your thoughts inward instead. Practice mindfulness and concentrated focus. Your experience of the performance needn't be validated by anybody else.



Nirvana Notes

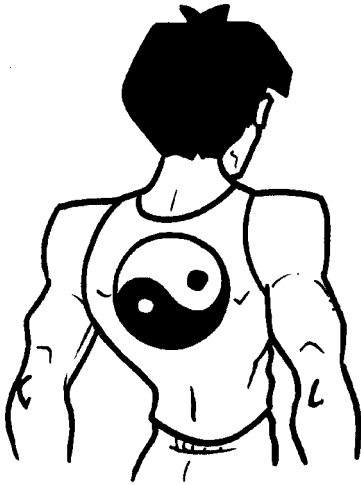
Are you wondering what makes a piece of art, music, or writing “good”? Just experience the art mindfully without judging or labeling it, and you’ll find that eventually, the answer floats to the top of your consciousness. Mindfulness allows you to perceive what is quality and what isn’t. Maybe some won’t agree with your perception, but you will know that it is true for you.

While certain works of art, whether a painting, a poem, or a symphony, are clearly “good,” often what makes art “good” is subjective. Yet, applying the Zen test to a work of art can be a good indicator of quality. Does this piece of art speak directly of the creator’s experience, and does it translate that direct experience to you? Does it speak to you? Does it tell you something about life? If it does, you are in the presence of great art.

Or, instead, you might see yourself in the presence of the expression of creativity that came from a fellow sentient being. Such a success is your success! We are all one, all part of the magnificent flow of creative energy in the universe. We can all tap into it, and we can all rejoice when our fellow humans tap into it, too. That’s art appreciation!

The Least You Need to Know

- Creativity isn't some aspect of you. It *is* you. You are an expression of creative energy.
- Drawing, writing, or playing music as zazen are effective and illuminating forms of meditation.
- Zen poetry is an ancient art in which the poet expresses through language, as directly as possible, the experience of the present moment.
- A Zen approach to art appreciation means experiencing art directly, without thinking about it, comparing it to anything, or judging it. Such experiencing makes the difference between great art and lesser art more apparent.



The Zen Athlete

In This Chapter

- ▶ Zen and the art of the game
- ▶ Traditional Zen archery and swordsmanship
- ▶ A Zen approach to martial arts
- ▶ Watching sports with a Zen-like attitude

The traditional practice of zazen may not look very athletic: sitting on the floor, meditating. But Zen and sports are a good match, and for centuries, people have paired them—or, it might be more accurate to say people have unified them.

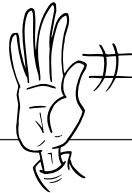
Zen is as natural on the football field, the volleyball court, the track, or the gymnasium as it is in the martial arts dojo or out on the field with a bow and arrow. Zen doesn't just touch the art of sports. It *is* the art of sports.

Zen: Performance Booster?

Can Zen help you play better basketball or golf or run a faster 100-yard dash? The answer is yes, but the question, from a Zen perspective, is silly. Why would you want to be “better” or “faster” or “stronger” than you are?

Instead, the Zen of sports is to become the sport. Athlete and ball and motion and hoop or club or racquet or playing court or track or sword or bow and arrow and target are all the same thing. When the sport is within you, is you, then you can't miss. You will be as fast, as accurate, as perfect as you can be.

With Zen, you've got game.



One Hand Clapping

Once there was a wrestler named Great Waves, so strong and skilled that he could beat even his teacher, but so overcome by anxiety in a wrestling match that his own students could throw him. Great Waves sought a Zen master's help. The Zen master advised him to sit in zazen and consider his name. "You are called Great Waves. Find those great waves within you, and see how they can sweep away anything." Great Waves meditated all night. In the morning, the Zen master found him in zazen with a faint smile on his face. "You have found your great waves. Now no one can beat you," he said. That day, Great Waves won easily and afterward, no one in Japan could beat him. Through zazen, we can see into our own natures, to make the most of our abilities.

The Zen of the Game

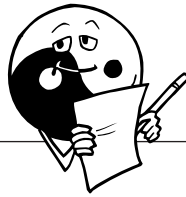
Sports hardly sound like an important activity. It's just a game, right? You toss around a ball, or you hit a ball with something, and you run around some. So what? A way to pass the time, right?

Back in college, Eve had a friend who was mystified by her lack of interest in sports. "How can you not see the artistry of it?" he said. "It's the human spirit pushing itself to its limits. It's beautiful. They are tapping into the energy of life." Eve wasn't so sure, as she eyed the football game on the television set suspiciously. It looked like a bunch of guys in padding crashing into each other and chasing an illogically shaped ball.

But since then, she's begun to look at sports a little differently. Like the arts, sports are an opportunity to practice mindfulness, and with the practice of mindfulness comes a skill, a finesse, and an immersion in what you are doing that can result in a performance you never thought possible.

Nowhere more than in sports do you hear people talking about getting “in the zone,” that place of complete oneness with your activity, where you seem to tap into something higher. Suddenly the team moves as a unit, the ball does what you want it to do, your body moves just as you intend.

Has someone ever told you to “be the ball” on the tennis court or the golf course or the basketball court? The phrase borders on cliché in our culture today, but it is nevertheless rooted in a Zen-like approach to sports. To practice the Zen of your sport, you do have to “be the ball.” But it isn’t a state you have to somehow generate or get to. You already are the ball. You just have to recognize it by cutting through your delusion that you aren’t the ball at all, but something singular, and cut off from the world around you.



Nirvana Notes

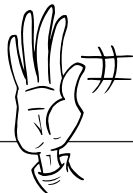
Even if you have never been athletic, you may find satisfaction in a Zen approach to sports. Many people shy away from sports because of the pressure of competition, or even stage fright. With a Zen approach, sports are just another form of *zazen*. Consider starting with a sport that isn’t necessarily competitive, such as *tai chi chuan*, yoga, walking, running, weight lifting, or dancing, to ease your transition from nonathlete to athlete.

“Being the ball” (or the basket or the bow or whatever) may improve your sports performance, but that isn’t the point of a Zen approach to sports. There is no point, other than the process. Winning isn’t the point of the Zen of the game. Like the Zen of anything else, the “point” is the right now, the doing, that matters.

In sports, as in life, if your energy is fragmented, it shows. If you are thinking about the end result, or winning, or what you just did wrong—that fumble, that stumble, that fall—you aren’t present in your action. But when you become fully present in your action, watch out. You are better at this game than you thought you were!

But your skill doesn’t matter any more than winning matters. If it matters to you, you are thinking ahead again and you have lost your mindfulness. Instead, becoming the game—being the ball, the bat, the basket, the goal, the target, the arrow, the bow, the bar, the hurdle, the finish line—is a powerful exercise in simply being. Everything, every tool, every movement of the sport or activity you are doing, is you.

When that fragmented energy—yours, your body's, your mind's, your equipment's, your thoughts and feelings about your activity—comes together, the result is something spectacular, beautiful, and, when you think about it, completely unsurprising. You are existing, as your true self, fulfilling your potential.



One Hand Clapping

"Your arrows do not carry," observed the [archery] Master, "because they do not reach far enough spiritually. You must act as if the goal were infinitely far off. For master archers, it is a fact of common experience that a good archer can shoot further with a medium-strong bow than an uninspired archer can with the strongest. It does not depend on the bow, but on the presence of mind, on the vitality and awareness with which you shoot"

—From *Zen in the Art of Archery*, by Eugene Herrigel (Random House, 1999; originally published in 1971)



Zen-Speak

Kyudo is the ancient Japanese way of the bow and arrow, a spiritual exercise designed to teach the archer that bow, arrow, target, and archer are all one. When this realization is achieved, the arrow will always hit the target.

Zen and the Bow, Zen and the Sword

The Zen of archery and the Zen of swordsmanship are ancient traditions passed on through the centuries in Japan, just as the art of flower arranging, the tea ceremony, poetry, or calligraphy. In Japan, archery and swordsmanship aren't considered "sports," but are spiritual exercises for realizing truth through the discipline, practice, and commitment to the physical activity. They may have originated out of a need for self-defense, but with the Japanese spirit involved, they also evolved as spiritual practice.

In Zen archery (called *kyudo*), the point is not to win, to hit the bull's-eye closer than anyone else, or to engage in any sort of competition. Instead, the process becomes a physical manifestation of your spiritual

state. If your mind, body, and spirit are one with the bow, the arrow, and the target, you will always hit the target.

Of course, you won't always hit the target because you are usually in a dualistic state. It is extremely difficult to get to that place where you can understand that you are the same thing as the target, the arrow, the bow. But when you get there, you can't miss.

And how do you get there? Training. Practice, practice, practice, and we mean both the practice of working with the bow and arrow, and the practice of zazen, so you will comprehend more clearly the truth of your art, your sport, and your spirit—which are, as we said, all the same.

In kyudo, each shot of the bow and arrow is considered the “first shot” or “absolute shot,” and should be taken with complete commitment. You don't take random, half-hearted practice shots hoping to get better. In kyudo, each shot is the only shot, the absolute shot, the last shot you'll ever take.

Zen and swordsmanship are the same. The sword becomes an extension of you, and working with the sword is a way to understand truth, not slaughter your enemy. You and the sword are one, so you will always hit your mark. The point isn't to fight. The point is to use the sword as a way to train yourself about the oneness of all things. What you do is who you are, and who you are is only what you do.

Zen has traditionally been popular with *samurai*, who used it as a training method and a way to perceive truth as well as refine their skills.

To train in classic Japanese archery, swordsmanship, or any of the other martial arts, you will need an experienced teacher to guide you. Check your local Zen center, or search the Internet for martial arts schools near you.



Zen-Speak

The **samurai** were members of the Japanese warrior class and were influential in Japanese culture for more than 1,000 years. The samurai class disappeared in Japan in the nineteenth century. Samurai were famous for their swordsmanship.



Nirvana Notes

The martial arts are a system of techniques dating back thousands of years and coming out of many cultures. Some define the martial arts as mental and physical methods for self-defense and offense, unarmed or with weapons. Others claim martial arts are primarily spiritual exercises that also work for combat if necessary. Martial arts popular today include tae kwon do, karate, judo, aikido, and tai chi chuan.

The Martial Arts–Zen Connection

Martial arts are popular today, in their traditional forms and in their more updated versions (Tae-Bo comes to mind, a combination of tae kwon do and boxing founded by fitness star Billy Blanks). Martial arts as they exist today include “hard” styles such as tae kwon do and karate that direct energy outward to meet the energy of an opponent, and “soft” styles such as aikido and *tai chi chuan* that redirect an opponent’s energy.

Many martial arts are also practiced today purely as exercises, notably tai chi chuan.

What do the martial arts of today have to do with Zen? The practice of any martial art is no different than the practice of any sport or any art, if you are taking a Zen approach. The movements are training and the cultivation of self-discipline for the body and the mind. Mindfulness in the movements cultivates the sense of unity with the movement. You become the movement. And when you become the movement, you understand how to execute the moves flawlessly.

This takes a lot of training, a lot of practice, and (you guessed it) a lot of zazen.

The emphasis of any particular martial arts class may not be particularly Zen-like, however. Talk to the teacher and visit a class before signing up. Tell the teacher you are interested in a Zen approach, and see what he or she has to say. If you feel a teacher’s philosophy is in line with yours and the teaching methods are positive, not punitive, then go for it. You’ll probably learn a lot (and get in better shape, too!).

Just like anything else, the Zen of your sport or your art, whether karate or oil painting, is all about focus, mindfulness, and complete awareness. Remember: You exist in the doing. Do what you do with complete commitment, discipline, and practice, and you’ll find the place where your true self and your activity are one.



Zen-Speak

The ancient art of **tai chi chuan**, which is based in the even more ancient art of chi kung, consists of combat movements that maximize the flow of energy or chi in the body. Today, tai chi chuan (sometimes called tai chi) is widely practiced around the world for its health benefits rather than as a martial art.

Zen and the Armchair Athlete

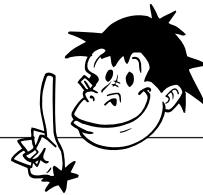
What if you aren't the athletic type? What if you just like to watch sports? Watching sports with a Zen-like attitude is no different than listening to a symphony orchestra or visiting an art museum with a Zen-like attitude. You are still experiencing something. Experience it fully.

To appreciate sports as an observer is an important skill and a great opportunity to practice zazen. Let your zazen involve watching a game. But don't just watch. Watch like you practice zazen.

How do you normally watch your favorite sport? Do you get attached to one team or player? Do you feel emotionally involved in what happens out on the field? Do you explode in anger at what you perceive to be an unfair foul, or leap out of your chair with joy when your team scores?

A more Zen-like approach to watching sports is to become completely mindful of what you are watching without judging and without letting what you see control your emotions. Enjoy, marvel, immerse yourself in the game, but practice watching with a degree of detachment. When you get attached, you aren't being mindful.

So the next time your favorite team has a big game (even if it is your daughter's soccer team or your son's Little League team), think about what drives you to feel such an emotional attachment to the team. Recognize your attachment, but keep it at arm's length. Instead of riding the waves of your emotions during a game, practice simple, pure, and total observation. It might look like a whole new game.

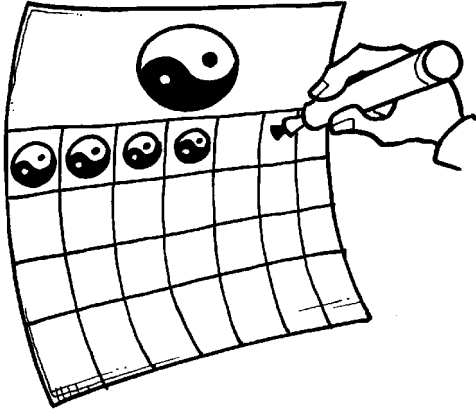


Monkey Mind!

It isn't bad or wrong to get emotionally involved in a game. It can actually be a lot of fun. But just recognize what you are doing, and keep it in perspective. To watch a game like you practice zazen isn't the only "right" way to watch a game, but it is the Zen way, and good practice.

The Least You Need to Know

- A Zen approach to being an athlete is the same as a Zen approach to being an artist. Complete immersion in the present moment of what you are doing brings you to a new level of personal awareness and achievement.
- “Be the ball” and every other part of yourself, your movement, and your equipment, and you will be practicing the Zen of sports.
- The ancient Japanese arts of archery and swordsmanship have Zen roots: archer or swordsman and weapon become a unified whole, and in this oneness, the target is never missed.
- You can practice martial arts with a Zen approach, just as you practice other sports with a Zen approach, although not all martial arts teachers will take a Zen approach to these activities. Watch a class and talk to the teacher before you sign up.
- Watching sports can be just as important a Zen practice as playing them. Practice total mindfulness with detachment when watching your favorite sport for a variation on your regular zazen.



Everyday Zen

In This Chapter

- You don't have to call it Zen
- Making Zen your own
- If you could write your own book about your Zen awakening, what would you include?
- You are the universe, and you have the universe within you
- Your authors bid you farewell

Here we are, at our final chapter. We hope we've made a difference in your life. Even more, we hope Zen has made a difference. We also hope you come away with a few things, such as how to be mindful, how to embrace the present moment, and how memories, plans, feelings, and thoughts are all just fine, an important part of being human, but that attaching to them, obsessing over them, letting them rule you, are the things that cause suffering.

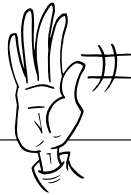
But let's finish things up by talking about Zen in your everyday life. We've discussed the Zen of relationships, the Zen of your job, the Zen of art and sports, how to do zazen, and we've given you lots of philosophy to ruminate upon, including the words of many other Zen masters and teachers throughout history and up to the present moment (where we all live!).

But every day, as you live your life, as you must, where is Zen? What does Zen have to do with you after you've finished this book and put it back on the bookshelf?

How Zen Do I Want to Be?

Zen is just your life, lived fully. But you don't have to call it Zen. Maybe you want to tell people you are "into Zen" or go to a Zen center to practice zazen and talk with other people on a similar path. Or maybe you don't. Maybe you aren't interested in Buddhism, necessarily, or in attaining enlightenment. You just want to make the most of your present moment. You want to find your true self and really live your life. Great. That's Zen, whether you call it that or not.

How you practice Zen, what techniques you choose to follow, which parts of the tradition you choose to embrace, that's all up to you. It's your life. You may not want to go all out with the whole Zen thing, the rituals and koan practice and finding a Zen master. Those things can be very helpful, but they aren't required. And, as we've said, neither is calling it "Zen."



One Hand Clapping

The Zen monk Joshu, character in many Zen koans, is considered one of the greatest Zen masters of the T'ang dynasty in China. When he first began his training, Joshu studied under the Zen master Nansen, and a famous interchange between them goes something like this (paraphrased):

Joshu: What is the Way?

Nansen: Ordinary mind.

Joshu: Should we strive toward it?

Nansen: If you strive toward it, you go away from it.

Joshu: If we don't strive toward it, how can we know it is the Way?

Nansen: The Way does not belong to knowing or not knowing. Knowing is delusion.

Not knowing is blankness. To attain the Way without doubt is to attain the vast and boundless void. How can there be right or wrong in there?

In fact, Zen resists definitions, and true Zen isn't called anything. So don't worry about it. Just concentrate on being you. The other stuff's neither here nor there.

Making Zen Your Own

People who embark on a spiritual path of any kind, including one seeking self-knowledge, go through a process. Sometimes it seems easy. Sometimes you can't remember why you were even doing it, it seems so far from your understanding. Then, all of a sudden, you feel drenched in bliss, like it all makes sense and you can imagine letting all your attachments go without a thought.

This process is yours, and you can drape it over your life in whatever way makes sense to you. No one else can tell you how to find truth, or your true self, or enlightenment. As the Buddha is famous for saying: Be a light unto yourself. Teachers, masters, books can all point the way, but they are all fingers pointing to the moon. You have to lift your own head and look at the moon, and while expert guidance can save you some time, the real work is up to you.

You may not do the work like anyone ever did it before. But what great person's great life was ever just like anyone else's who came before? Not Buddha's. Not Jesus'. Not Muhammad's. Not Moses'. We could name 100 others, and they all found truth in their own way. You can, too. You don't need anyone's permission.

Way back in Chapter 3, "Zen in America," we talked about Zen as the cowboy religion. It's also like the pioneer religion. You are a pioneer, and the vast uncharted terrain of you is the land you are pioneering. Maybe you'll homestead. Maybe you'll be a wanderer. But the land is yours. You can't trespass. You get to make the rules.

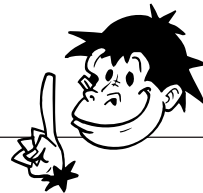
And that is the great thing about Zen. We've given you lots of advice and many suggestions in this book, things that have helped both of us and that we thought might make the journey into your present moment easier for you. But when it comes right down to it, you are ready to write your own book about how you go about living your life. What better subject for a book could there be?

Let's say you do write it. How would you start?



Nirvana Notes

Are you still practicing your zazen every day? Even when it gets boring, zazen is incredibly important for helping to maintain a Zen attitude. And, if your zazen is boring, maybe you aren't really paying attention!



Monkey Mind!

Personal dissatisfaction or unhappiness are reasons many people seek out Zen, but they are not sufficient motivation to continue a practice. Finding wonder, serenity, and self-knowledge through mindfulness is the best motivation for continuing a Zen practice.

How Does Your Life Look?

First you might take an honest look at your life. How is it going so far? How happy are you most of the time? How content, how satisfied? How is your job? How are your relationships? How do you feel about yourself?

Where do you feel the need to change?

If you are unhappy or dissatisfied, you are suffering, and if you've read this book, you know what causes that. What are you obsessing with, what are you attaching to, what are you convincing yourself is lasting or important that really isn't? How have you neglected to look inside? And when you do look inside, what do you see? Look deeper. Deeper still. There is a diamond in there. We know it for a fact.

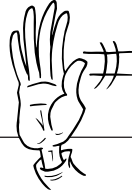
Every Moment Is Now

The next chapter of your book might be about how you came to see how reality exists only in the present moment. Your past is interesting, or painful, or memorable, but it isn't real anymore. The future never actually comes. It is always ahead. Only now matters. What does that mean for you right now? What exists in your present moment? Who are you in the present moment? Who do you love in the present moment? What is your work in the present moment? What surrounds you in the present moment?

And how do you learn to wake up to the present moment? Zazen? Mindfulness in daily life? Contemplation of Zen texts? Talking with friends? More zazen? How did you get there? Or are you getting there still?

All Is One

Then one day you recognize, in your contemplation, your meditation, that all those boundaries and distinctions you made to separate yourself from everyone else and to separate out everything else, these boundaries are all temporary and, in the scheme of things, meaningless. What happened when you recognized the unity of all existence? What happened when you saw your part in it? Did you feel at once more powerful and less? Happier and more detached? A nostalgia followed by excitement at the potential of this new way of seeing? How did it happen for you?



One Hand Clapping

“We experience the world by creating categories and making distinctions among them. ‘This is a Chinese, not a Japanese, vase.’ ‘No, he’s only a freshman.’ ‘The white orchids are endangered.’ ‘She’s his boss now.’ In this way, we make a picture of the world, and of ourselves. Without categories the world might seem to escape us. Tibetan Buddhists call this habit of mind ‘The Lord of Speech’”

—From *Mindfulness*, by Ellen J. Langer

Live in the Doing

After your many new perceptions, you finally brought it all back to the things you are doing in your present moment. How did you bring Zen to your relationships, your job, your hobbies, your art, your favorite sport? How did you bring mindfulness into your daily household chores? How did you bring Zen into your everyday work? What happened that let you finally live fully in your doing?

Your Everlasting Final Chapter

Your personal book about Zen will have a doozy of a final chapter because once you get to the place where you see the truth, the truth is everlasting. You will never cease to be because of what you are made from. Your eternal self, recognized and brought into the light, will endure. It all comes down to you—the real, universal you. You haven’t lost anything except your suffering.

And no matter how endless and everlasting and eternal you are, always remember to come back to the world and live in it. The Zen master Soyen Shaku offered the following guidelines for life, as quoted in *Zen Flesh, Zen Bones*, compiled by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki, which we think make an apt reminder about living Zen in the world:

In the morning before dressing, light incense and meditate.

Retire at a regular hour. Partake of food at regular intervals. Eat with moderation and never to the point of satisfaction.

Receive a guest with the same attitude you have when alone. When alone, maintain the same attitude you have in receiving guests.

Watch what you say, and whatever you say, practice it.

When an opportunity comes, do not let it pass by, yet always think twice before acting.

Do not regret the past. Look to the future.

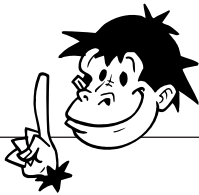
Have the fearless attitude of a hero and the loving heart of a child.

Upon retiring, sleep as if you had entered your last sleep. Upon awakening, leave your bed behind you instantly as if you had cast away a pair of old shoes.

The Universe Within

But we don't want to leave things exactly like that, with the "you, you, you" mantra echoing. It's your life, your process, your Zen. But on the other hand, what is in you is in us, in Gary and Eve, in your parents and children and friends, in everyone else. What is in you is in the universe, and the whole universe is within you.

This is the place where Zen extends beyond the boundaries of you and, ideally, blurs those boundaries until they don't seem that important. While a lot of Zen literature talks about the illusion of the material world, it isn't that the world and everything in it doesn't exist. It isn't that the self doesn't exist.



Monkey Mind!

How can you be you without clinging to your ideas about yourself? By remembering that your ideas are only a superficial part of the picture. Are you your blonde hair or your people skills or your ability to bench-press 200 pounds? Of course not. You can still be you even when those external things change, as they inevitably will.

It all exists. Intuitively, you know the couch you are sitting on is real, and the friend on the phone with you is real, too. You know you are real because you can feel it.

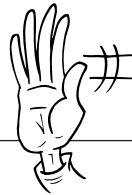
So if Zen tells you the "self" is an illusion, you aren't really going to believe it. That isn't what Zen is saying. Zen says: The self is real, the world is real, the universe is real, but we are all a part of the same thing. So, when you look at it from a more detached perspective, we all look remarkably similar.

Remember the ocean analogy, so often used in Zen? Every wave in the ocean, every whirlpool and eddy, is real. But they are transitory. They swell up, foam or swirl, break or sink back down into the great vast ocean, and when they arise, they are very real. Then they are gone. But the ocean is never gone. What happened to that individual wave? It is still there. It just doesn't look like a wave at the moment.

These are all just ideas for you to consider. Don't get too attached to them! We are all waves, even book authors, even Zen masters. Even the Buddha himself. But the ocean is everlasting. And we have it within us. We are made of it, just like waves are made of it. Imagine a wave saying, "Here I am, but where is the ocean? Deep down inside? I can't find it!" The question is absurd because the wave is made of ocean. The wave is the ocean. But the wave just doesn't see it because it is too caught up in being a wave.

And we, too, are all caught up in the details, when very little of it—some would say none of it—is worth a whole lot of energy. To relish, even rejoice in being a wave, with the recognition that this life on earth is limited and will end—that is Zen.

That wave we personified in the last paragraph will be living Zen if it recognizes every bit of foam, every bubble, every speck of algae, and every fish that passes through it. If it rejoices in the clear or cloudy sky, the fair or turbulent weather, and the whole long rise, swell, and fall of itself in the context of the whole ocean. If it recognizes the other waves, too, and makes room for them. And if it can let go of itself and rejoin the ocean when its time as a wave has come to an end.



One Hand Clapping

"... The aspiration of the Zen student goes further than the wish to be a well-rounded person managing their lives in the world. The Zen practitioner wishes to move on from this plane of firm ego strength to one where the ego and the personal self are transcended. He or she wishes to experience the source from which human consciousness arises and to live out of this very ground of being. The question is now no longer 'I' focused but it is instead 'Who am I?'"

—From *The Elements of Zen*, by David Scott and Tony Doubleday

Maybe you've noticed that we keep going back and forth: You are you. But you are the universe! But you are still you. But you are still the universe! That is one of the recognitions of Zen. Can you find your place within that dichotomy, a place that makes sense? You can try.

And trying like this is a lot of fun because that means living Zen, and living Zen means living like never before (and like it has always been): truly alive, not wasting



Nirvana Notes

Keep a written record of the ways the practice of Zen has changed your life. You can refer to it during those times when you need inspiration, or when one more second of zazen seems impossible.

a moment of this transitory time we have on earth, as humans, with the opportunity to experience, feel, think, love, and make other people's lives better, too.

You can do it. You can make your right now, which is to say your entire life and self, everything it can be. And all you have to do to begin is to pay attention.

The Present Embrace

Maybe your life is getting less frantic. Maybe you are getting less irritable. Maybe you never lose your car in the parking lot anymore because you are always paying attention and remember exactly where you park. Maybe you feel happier.

Whatever effect living Zen has on your life, we know it will be a positive one. We believe the human experience—getting to be that wave—is a great, powerful, and ultimately positive experience, so living it mindfully is great, powerful, and ultimately positive, too.

Let the present embrace you and see what happens. It doesn't take any commitment. You won't lose anything—or at least, not anything you mind losing. All it takes is a wake-up call, which we hope this book has provided. You're done now, so don't waste another moment. Put this book down. Breathe. Look around you. Sit quietly for a moment, and feel what it's like to live. Strange? Familiar? Exciting? Entirely ordinary?

You fill in the blank. It's your life. And now you know it, now that you are living Zen. That's your wrap-up, and that's a wrap, folks. It's been lovely existing in your present moment with you for a few hundred pages. Now you are on your own—which you've been all along, and which you never really were.

The Least You Need to Know

- You can live Zen without calling it Zen. You can call it whatever you want to call it, including nothing at all (which would be very Zen-like).
- Zen is your life, so you can make it into whatever you want. Search for truth your own way.
- Zen means finding your place within the knowledge that you are you, and you are also the whole universe.
- Let your present moment embrace you, and you will be living Zen.



Further Reading

Books

We like to read books as well as write them. Here are a few of our favorites that we find helpful and inspiring:

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Web Sites

As long as you are surfing, you might as well surf for sites that encourage and inspire you in your quest for Zen living. Here are a few we love:

www.geocities.com/Athens/Parthenon/6469/main.html

As Zen Replaces the Id is an interesting site dealing with the link between Zen and psychology

www.ozemail.com.au/~caveman/Creative/

Creativity Web

www.dailyzen.com

Daily Zen

www.dharmanet.org/infowebz.html

DharmaNet's Zen Buddhist InfoWeb, the Virtual Library of Online Zen Buddhist Associations, Monasteries & Practice Centers

www.iiijnet.or.jp/iriz/irizhtml/irizhome.htm

Electronic Bodhidharma Journal/IRIZ: The International Research Institute of Zen Buddhism Web site has numerous links to Buddhist information including what they claim is the "largest collection of Buddhist primary text materials on the Internet"

www.ibiblio.org/zen/faq.html

Frequently asked questions (FAQs) from alt.zen

www.frugalfamilynetwork.com

Frugal Family Network

hometown.aol.com/DSimple/links.html

Frugality and Simple Living links

glwarner.narrowgate.net/haiku

The Haiku Gateway

www.dalailama.com

His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet has his own Web site

www.hooked.net/users/verdant/index.htm

Overcoming consumerism

glwarner.narrowgate.net/haiku/hkuframe.html

The Shiki Internet Haiku Salon of Matsuyama University

www.simpleliving.net

Simple Living Network

www.tricycle.com

Tricycle.com: The Buddhist Review is the Web site for the most well-known of Buddhist magazines, includes "Buddhist Basics" and "Daily Dharma"

www.ciolek.com/WWWVL-Zen.html

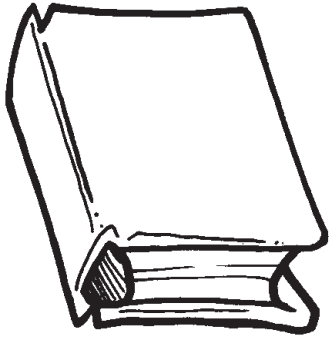
Zen Buddhism WWW Virtual Library

www.rider.edu/users/suler/zenstory/zenstory.html

Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbor site contains many famous Zen koans and anecdotes—you'll probably recognize a few

www.zenko.org

Zenko International, an international kyudo (Zen archery) organization



Glossary

asceticism The practice of self-deprivation, which can include doing without possessions, fasting, going without sleep, begging, and even self-inflicted pain.

Bodhidharma A much-legendized figure who traveled to China from India to spread the word of Buddhism. He is usually represented as a scowling figure with a long, hooked nose and was known as the blue-eyed demon because his Aryan appearance and blue eyes were an oddity in China.

bodhisattva Someone who devotes his or her life to ending the suffering and aiding the enlightenment of all sentient beings. In classical Buddhism, bodhisattvas such as Kuan Yin (“Kannon” in Japanese) are similar to gods and goddesses, appearing occasionally to humans in need. A Buddhist who makes a formal commitment to the life of a bodhisattva will vow to follow certain bodhisattva precepts in a formal ceremony.

bodhisattva precepts These are precepts the long-practicing Zen practitioner formally commits to in an official ceremony. They embody the spirit and values of Buddhism. The precepts are 1) be one with the Buddha; 2) be one with the dharma; 3) be one with the sangha; 4) don’t do evil; 5) do good; 6) do good for others; 7) don’t kill; 8) don’t steal; 9) don’t misuse sex; 10) don’t lie; 11) don’t become intoxicated; 12) don’t put other people down; 13) don’t consider yourself above anyone or blame anyone; 14) don’t be stingy; 15) don’t become angry; 16) don’t put down the Buddha, the dharma, or the sangha.

Ch’an The Chinese term for meditation and for the type of Buddhism that is “Zen” in Japanese.

chi kung An ancient system of movements and other practices designed to maximize the flow of energy or chi in the body for greater physical, mental, and spiritual health.

cosmic mudra The traditional zazen hand position, in which the dominant hand cradles the other hand just below the navel with thumbs meeting to form an oval shape.

dharma Truth, or truth as realized by the Buddha, or the Buddha's teachings about this truth (or all three).

dhyana The Sanskrit term for "meditation."

Diamond Sutra One of the teachings of the Buddha (written down many years after the words were actually spoken), expounding upon the diamond-hard edge of emptiness that can finally cut through delusion, leading to enlightenment. In many Zen communities, the Diamond Sutra and other sutras such as the Heart Sutra and the Platform Sutra, are recited, chanted, and/or studied and contemplated.

dokusan A private meeting between a student and a Zen teacher, for the student to ask questions, receive encouragement, or present the answer to a koan.

dukkha Suffering or, more generally, that deep feeling of discomfort, dissatisfaction, restlessness, unfulfilled desire, and want that so often characterizes human existence.

Eightfold Path The substance of Buddhism's fourth noble truth, consisting of guidelines for purposeful living that will help pave the way to the release from suffering: right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

Five Precepts The Buddha's five guidelines for living a compassionate life: practicing nonviolence, cultivating loving kindness, refusing to engage in sexual misconduct, speaking only words of truth and kindness, and refusing to overindulge in food, drink, or the accumulation of possessions.

Four Noble Truths The heart of the dharma, or the Buddha's teaching, these Four Noble Truths state that: 1) to be human is to experience dukkha, or suffering; 2) suffering is caused by desire for or attachment to impermanent things at the expense of the knowledge of truth; 3) suffering can be eliminated by the elimination of desire; 4) desire can be eliminated through the practice of the Eightfold Path. (See "Eightfold Path.")

haiku A form of Japanese poetry containing (traditionally) three lines of five, seven, and five syllables each. Haikus are meant to be direct expressions of experience, with little, if any, reliance on literary devices like similes and metaphors (comparing something to something else).

half lotus pose A less advanced meditative sitting position than the lotus pose; you place one foot on top of the opposite thigh and the other foot under its opposite thigh.

Japanese sitting pose The traditional meditation posture in Japan; in this pose the meditator sits on his or her heels with a cushion between the feet to sit on.

karma Also called kamma, karma is a Sanskrit term for the universal law of cause and effect. Everything that happens is balanced by an effect, either in this life or the next. Karma isn't punishment for bad behavior or reward for good behavior.

In Buddhism, there is no one to punish or reward you. Instead, karma gives you the power to create and determine your own destiny through your actions.

kensho A Japanese word for an enlightenment experience, or an experience of self-realization, sometimes used interchangeably with the terms *nirvana* and *satori*. (See *nirvana* and *satori*.)

kinhin Walking meditation, which can be practiced individually or, in the context of a zendo, in a group with everyone walking in a circle. Kinhin is often used in alternation with zazen during long periods of meditation. In kinhin, the mind does just what it does in zazen. It is only the body that does something different.

koans Illogical scenarios or questions meant to be considered until the mind makes a leap past logic to understand the koan at a higher level. The most famous koan in the West is the “one hand clapping” koan: You can hear the sound of two hands when they clap together. What is the sound of one hand clapping?

kundalini Psychospiritual energy force in the body that can be released and utilized through certain techniques.

kyudo The ancient Japanese way of the bow and arrow, a spiritual exercise designed to teach the archer that bow, arrow, target, and archer are all one. When this realization is achieved, the arrow will always hit the target.

Lin-chi The Chinese word for the branch of Zen (*Ch'an*) called Rinzai in Japan.

lotus pose An ancient yoga/meditation pose that is meant to mimic the perfection of the lotus flower, providing a stable, solid position for meditation. Sit cross-legged and place each foot on top of the opposite thigh.

mandala A circular, geometric design that draws the eye to its center, designed as a focus for meditation.

mantra A sound, word, or words chanted during meditation as a point of focus and to evoke certain energies in the body.

martial arts A system of combat techniques dating back thousands of years and coming out of many cultures. Some define the martial arts as mental and physical methods for self-defense and offense, unarmed or with weapons. Others claim martial arts are primarily spiritual exercises that also work for combat if necessary. Martial arts popular today include tae kwon do, karate, judo, aikido, and tai chi chuan.

nirvana A Sanskrit word meaning “extinction,” referring to enlightenment due to the liberation or release from the cycle of death and rebirth. Sometimes used interchangeably with the terms *satori* and *kensho*.

Rinzai Called *Lin-chi* in Chinese, this branch of Zen Buddhism was brought to Japan by Zen master Eisai and emphasizes the practice of koans.

samsara A Sanskrit word for everyday life in the phenomenal world. Technically, it refers to the succession of births and rebirths before the release from this cycle that

comes out of the attainment of nirvana. Practically, the word is often used to refer to the daily existence on earth.

samurai Members of the Japanese warrior class, influential in Japanese culture for more than 1,000 years. The Samurai class disappeared in Japan in the nineteenth century. Samurai were famous for their swordsmanship.

sangha The community of either Buddhists or other like-minded people who practice meditating together, or on a wider scale, of all sentient beings, who are essentially one.

satori A Japanese word for enlightenment as experienced by the Buddha; a comprehension of the unity of all things. Sometimes used interchangeably with the terms *nirvana* and *kensho*.

sesshin A period of intense practice (typically a week or two), with long sessions of zazen, as one might experience on a Zen retreat.

shavasana The Sanskrit word for *corpse pose*. It is a meditative yoga relaxation pose that involves lying on your back on the floor in total relaxation.

Siddhartha Gautama Sometimes spelled Siddhattha Gotama, this prince born of India's warrior class about five centuries before the birth of Christ was the man who eventually attained enlightenment and became known as Buddha.

Sixth Patriarch Named Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch was Ch'an Buddhism's final patriarch and the most influential individual on Buddhism's manifestation in China.

Soto Zen Called *Ts'ao-tung* in Chinese, this branch of Zen Buddhism was brought to Japan by Zen master Dogen and emphasizes silent sitting meditation.

t'so-chuan The Chinese word for zazen, or sitting meditation.

tai chi chuan The ancient art of tai chi chuan, which is based in the even more ancient art of chi kung, consists of combat movements that maximize the flow of energy, or chi, in the body. Today, tai chi chuan (sometimes called tai chi) is widely practiced around the world for its health benefits rather than as a martial art.

Tao Sometimes translated as "the Way," the Tao is the Chinese word for the universal principle that allows all things to be and thrive, effortlessly and in their natural state.

Taoism A Chinese philosophy and religious system emphasizing effortless action, simplicity, mindfulness, and following the Tao (sometimes translated as "the Way"), and an influential contributor to the Zen branch of Buddhism. Taoism's beginnings are attributed to historical figures Lao-tzu, who wrote the *Tao Te Ching*, and Chuang-tzu, who wrote the *Chuang-tzu*. Both texts explore and explain Taoism and were written around the third century B.C.E.

Three Treasures The three resources Buddhists have, in which they can take refuge and find relief: The Buddha himself and the notion that everyone has Buddha nature; the Buddha's teachings, or dharma and the recognition that the teachings reflect ultimate truth; and the Buddhist community, or *sangha*.

Ts'ao-tung The Chinese word for the branch of Zen (*Ch'an*) called Soto in Japan.

zabuton A rectangular mat or cushion typically used in a meditation hall, at retreats, or if you purchase your own, in an at-home zazen practice. The zabuton goes under the small round zafu, or sitting cushion.

zafu The full, small round cushion placed on top of the zabuton and used as a seat during meditation.

zazen The Japanese word for sitting meditation. *Za* means "to sit" and Zen means "meditation." The Chinese word for "zazen" is *T'so-chuan*.

Zen The Japanese word for meditation, not in the sense of the contemplation of something, but as a mode of existing (whether sitting, walking, or otherwise going about your day) without any goal or ulterior motive in what Alan Watts, in his *The Way of Zen*, calls "unified or one-pointed awareness." *Dhyana* in Sanskrit and *Ch'an* in Chinese, the term originated in India (with Buddhism).

zendo A Zen meditation hall. Many larger cities have zendos where people can come to practice zazen together or participate in Zen retreats. Certain rules of etiquette and form are typically practiced in a zendo. These vary according to different Zen traditions.



Ten Bulls

The 10 bull pictures are part of the Zen tradition. Many versions exist, but they all illustrate the Zen process using the bull as a symbol for the truth we seek—or think we need to see—and the mind that eventually perceives truth.



1. First we search for the bull we have lost. Where is it? Where is truth? We feel lost and cannot find what we seek. We know something is missing.



2. We see footprints! A sign! Suddenly we feel we have a direction, a clue to what we seek. We get excited. We feel inspired.



3. We glimpse the bull, just out of reach, running away. But now we know what direction it has gone. We have direction! We feel our search for truth is finally going somewhere.



4. We find the bull and seize it. It fights, and it is strong. But we labor until we have subdued it. At last, we have apprehended what we seek. Mind no longer masters us. We master our own minds.



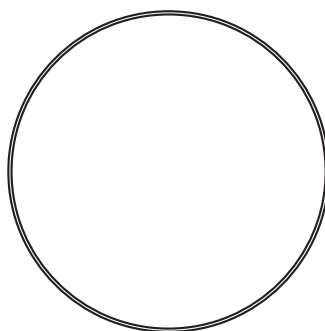
5. Our efforts have paid off. We tame the bull and secure it with a rope. Once the bull is trained, it won't need a rope any longer. Our minds are controlled, serene, tamed.



6. Now we are master of the bull. We climb on its back and ride it home, triumphant! We feel a sense of joy and pride. Is this truth? Is this enlightenment?



7. Now the bull is put away in its pen, and we sit alone, happy, at home. The rope, bull, and struggle are forgotten. We are content. Mind, now mastered, no longer interferes with the perception of truth. But what is truth? Can we see it now?



8. Rope, bull, even ourselves are finally transcended. Nothing remains, or everything, because all is one. Truth takes over. It becomes everything, and everything becomes truth. There is no bull, no rope, no struggle, no self.



9. Suddenly we perceive the origin of all things, how we came to be, how the bull and the rope came to be, where it all began. How misled we have been! The bull was never lost! This, at last, is truth.



10. Now we are able to return to the world, mingle with others, back to work, but changed. We are no longer deluded. We are simply happy. We are enlightened.

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