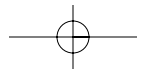
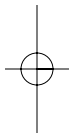
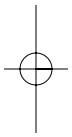


PART ONE

GETTING STARTED



## CHAPTER 1

## WHAT IS ZEN?

ZEN MIRACLE 1  
*You can laugh when you laugh  
and cry when you cry.*

An ancient Zen story tells that centuries ago, a physician, faced daily with death and suffering, sought out the guidance of a famous Zen Master who was living quietly in an inaccessible mountain hut. The physician climbed the mountain, searched for the hut, and, after many days, found him raking leaves at the side of his tiny house. The teacher did not look up when the student arrived, but kept raking slowly.

“I have come to understand the essence of Zen,” the physician proclaimed. The Zen Master looked up for a moment. “Go home and be kind to your patients,” the Master replied. “That is Zen.”

—*Ancient Zen story*

## FINDING YOUR ANSWERS

Most questions have answers. They are addressed to our rational mind. We want information we can get our hands

around, answers to quench our insatiable thirst to know and do what's right, to handle the unending complications life presents. We strategize, plan, and gather whatever facts we can find. We search for authorities, assuming someone out there has our answer. This search can become a mania, as we run to teachers, doctors, psychologists, priests, and rabbis in the belief they have the "right way." Wars have been fought and lives have been sacrificed in the effort to protect the right answer or system.

The answers to Zen questions cannot be found by thinking, talking, or finding a Zen Master or other authority. A Zen Master can only prod, kick, yell, cajole, love, and shove you into realizing that no one else has your truth. To find the answers to your life questions, you must look within. Nothing less will do. Nothing more is needed.

Zen is about finding and honoring the head on your own shoulders, the heart that's beating right now inside of you. It's about turning the search around, discovering and trusting what's within.

Don't put a head on your own head. What's wrong with the one you have?

—*Nyogen Senzaki*

## DON'T PUT A HEAD ON YOUR OWN HEAD

Zen practice is authoritarian and antiauthoritarian at the same time. It is antiauthoritarian in the sense that Zen students are taught how to totally reclaim their lives and their minds. They become able to take back all the scattered power and energy they have given to the thousands of "authorities" they have found or projected in the outside world. After years of practice, a Zen student is finally able to walk on this earth with his own two feet, to live the life given to him. He is able to laugh when he laughs, cry when he cries. He is wholehearted and without deception.

## EAT WHEN YOU'RE HUNGRY, SLEEP WHEN YOU'RE TIRED

Rinzai Gigen was the founder of one of the main schools of Zen. He died in A.D. 866; the date of his birth is unknown. Rinzai Zen is known for its dynamism and uncompromising directness. His teaching was brought to Japan in the thirteenth century.

Rinzai said, "When I'm hungry, I eat, when I'm tired I sleep. Fools laugh at me. But the wise understand." (*Rinzai Roku*)

How many of us can really eat when we're hungry, or sleep when tired? For many it is difficult to even recognize hunger for what it is. When we're hungry we talk, search for love, diet, or gobble down the wrong food. When we're tired we push ourselves to work harder, run, dance, or fall into bed and toss all night with difficult dreams. How many of us can really taste the food we are eating, appreciate it, and digest it? How many of us know sleep that truly refreshes, innocent sleep like that of a little child?

## LAURA'S STORY

Laura, a mother in her mid-forties who had always led a life of good health, woke up one day to find herself feeling ill. She initially discounted it for a passing virus, but weeks passed and it remained. Her moods became uncontrollable, and finally her balance was off and her eyes were swollen. After visiting a number of doctors, she was finally diagnosed with a thyroid disorder. Laura was put on medication and was told she may or may not get better. Months passed, but with no improvement. Desperate, she tried acupuncture, herbs, and a host of other alternative remedies, and yet her condition remained unchanged.

One afternoon a friend offered to teach her Zen meditation. Laura felt she had nothing to lose. She followed the basic instruc-

tions, spending about an hour that day with her friend. “It felt good,” Laura said, “but not spectacular. Bells didn’t go off. I didn’t get high.” Nevertheless, something drew her back to the meditation cushion, and she decided, from that point on, to spend an hour a day sitting on her own.

Within six months of steady Zen practice, Laura’s eyes became normal, her moods steadied, she became balanced again. Now, when asked about Zen, she says, “I don’t know exactly what happened, but it has simply saved my life.”

## WHAT IS THE ILLNESS?

The whole world is medicine

What is the illness?

—*Ancient Zen saying*

What exactly is the illness that Laura was suffering from? Most come to the *zendo* (the meditation place) to practice because they are suffering with many problems, anxiety, dissatisfaction in life. Something is wrong—missing. No matter what other paths they’ve chosen, this churning inside goes on and on.

Buddha described this churning beautifully. When asked who he was, he said, “I’m a doctor who’s come to cure the ills of the world. We’ve all been shot by a poison arrow and I will show you how to pull the arrow out.” He never said, “I’m going to pull it out for you.” In Zen practice we do not depend on others, but instead learn how to pull our own poison arrows out.

Most of us spend our time discussing and analyzing the nature of our suffering, figuring out who can help. Here, in Zen practice, we put an end to discussion, and just take the arrow and pull it out. After the arrow is removed, people are often amazed to discover that many of the things they longed for, chased after, and thought they couldn’t live without, were the poison itself.

## MY EYEBROWS ARE HORIZONTAL — MY NOSE IS VERTICAL

After years of practice, when Dogen Zenji (a great, ancient teacher of Zen) returned to Japan he was asked what he learned there.

“I learned that my eyebrows are horizontal and my nose is vertical,” he said.

The questioner looked at him, amazed. “Everyone knows that.”

But the questioner was wrong. How long does it take for us to see things exactly as they are? How many of us can tolerate that? The basic truth of the matter is:

Humankind cannot bear very much  
reality.

—*T. S. Eliot*

Because we cannot bear very much reality we often escape to illusions to soothe us, a process that can cause enormous disappointment and pain. However, reality *is* the medicine. The facts of our lives, when we are able to know them, will free us from the torment we are in. When we can bear reality thoroughly, suffering is over. Pain may exist, but it is only pain. Suffering is what we add to pain. It is the refusal to experience life as it is, moment by moment. It is the many layers of fabrications—meanings and interpretations—we add to whatever we come up against.

After facing an illness, difficulty, or other catastrophe, a craving comes to understand. Some think, *This would never have happened if I were a better person. Or, Someone else is to blame for my suffering. Or, The meaning of this event is that I'm bad, I'm hated, my suffering will eradicate all my sins.*

We can imagine all kinds of explanations, but the deepest truth is, we don't know. Explanations bring superficial consolation. A don't-know mind is different. It is able to take life as it is given, and no matter what happens, to dare to get up and live. A don't-know mind is humble and supple. It does not impose itself upon the facts of life. It eliminates catastrophic expectations. It learns to simply accept and go on.

## THE WORLD OF FEELINGS AND IDEAS

The interpretations we bring to our experience, the thoughts and meanings we arrive at, are the essence of psychological study. Psychologists analyze the content and origin of our thought processes. Some thoughts or obsessions are viewed as a defense against unacceptable memories or emotions. Other thoughts are traced back to their origin, perhaps as a reaction to a punitive parent. By exploring thoughts, feelings, and interpretations, the patient learns to reframe his or her world, to respond differently. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with this except that both the patient and therapist are spending most of their time in the world of feelings and ideas. By doing so, both may become disconnected from the vital reality presenting itself at that moment. Both may not be able to feel the spring breeze blowing on their faces, or the loving touch of a new friend.

Even when the assumptions of psychology are valid on a certain level of truth, Zen practice responds by saying that all mental machinations are off the mark. They themselves are the cause of suffering, separating us from the direct experience of the plain facts of our lives. All the insight we will ever need to live well will come from fully being who and where we are.

## PAIN IS SIMPLY PAIN

When we let mental machinations go, pain is simply pain. It cannot be avoided in life. To try to avoid it is part of the sickness. The more we are able to experience and accept it, the sooner our suffering subsides. We do not need to explain away pain. We cannot figure it out. We can, however, receive it. In the simple receiving, pain transforms into something quite different. Not only does the pain transform, but more important, *we* do. As we practice Zen we see that pain is not bad. It is simply pain. If we spend our lives running away from painful moments, we shut out a great deal of what life brings us, both



the pain and the joy. We can neither laugh when we're happy nor cry when we're sad.

In Zen, we learn how to feel and accept painful moments, to become larger than our pain. When we are willing to accept our experience, just as it is, a strange thing happens: it changes into something else. When we avoid pain, struggle not to feel it, pain turns into suffering.

There is an enormous difference between pain and suffering. Pain often cannot be avoided. Suffering can. As we learn the difference between them, many fears subside.

As we practice, thought subsides and we become one with the sound of the birds, the heat of summer, the smile of a friend, the feeling of soapy dishwater on your hands. Thinking takes us away from that. But direct experience will bring us all the healing, joy, and strength needed for everything.

## THE ZENDO

Silence is the beginning of healing. The zendo is a space dedicated to silence—to Zen meditation. It can be huge, a monastery that holds many, a simple temple, a country shed, a tree house, or it can also be a special part of your own apartment. Usually it is kept clean and empty, with a few flowers and a cushion to sit on. This will be described in detail in a future chapter.

From the moment we enter the zendo, we are silent. All usual social greetings and communications are suspended as we leave our social selves behind at the door. We do not have to pretend to be who we aren't, to be happy when we're sad, to be strong when we're feeling vulnerable. We come to the zendo to practice. We do not come to make demands on anyone else. Unless we are at teatime, or at other times requiring social interaction, we do not look at each other, or seek recognition or approval. This is the time for making acquaintance with our own Self.

Communication with others develops differently as we sit in silence. It becomes deep, profound, and lasting. We speak and are

spoken to in different ways. Bells, clappers, and gongs announce the beginning and end of activities. After a period of sitting, we perform jobs assigned to us, such as cleaning and cooking, with 100 percent of ourselves. This is our communication.

After spending several days sitting beside someone during a silent meditation retreat, you know all there is to know about that person, and feel as close to him or her as to yourself, even though the two of you haven't spoken. Finally, it is easy to realize that our words, actions, and false mannerisms, rather than bringing us closer to one another, can serve as walls to keep others away. At this time you begin to know what it means to "go home and be kind to your patient," and to actualize the command—to love your neighbor as yourself.

All beings are flowers

Blooming

In a blooming universe.

—*Soen Nakagawa Roshi*