

An Introduction to Zen Thought

By Lorna Gentry

You can find the word "Zen" used to describe everything from archery techniques to zoo design. Curious about what it means? Though it won't make you a *sensei*, this article gives you a flash of insight into these basics of Zen thought and practice:

- What Zen is and isn't
- Where to find Zen
- Simple Zen practices for anyone
- The online path to greater enlightenment

Zen Masters Say

According to some Zen teachings, words are meaningless and usually serve to confuse rather than enlighten. In fact, many Zen practitioners would say that I could best explain Zen with a totally blank page. Unfortunately, the unenlightened editors of this site refused to pay me for that option, so try to overcome the confusion of my words, and read on.

What Zen is and isn't

The term *Zen* refers to a practice (not a religion, not a philosophy, not an investment technique) that began as the teachings of Buddha around 2500 years ago in what is now India, mingled with Taoism in fourth-century China, and emerged as Zen Buddhism in twelfth-century Japan.

Zen isn't so much a "what" as it is a "how"—as in, a way to eliminate suffering. The idea is that we suffer because we become attached to impermanent things—people, possessions, money, life, clothing sizes. We resist change, which is inevitable, and thus we suffer. Zen teachings say that if we live fully in the here-and-now, without worrying about the future or hanging on to the past, our lives are richer. We pay more attention to the things we do, we appreciate the things we have, and our every action and interaction is as good and successful as it can possibly be.

Zen teachings encourage people to find enlightenment through, among other concepts:

- *Mindfulness*: paying close attention to the world around you and your actions within it.
- *Generosity*: behaving ethically, overcoming selfish impulses, and caring enough to *really* communicate with people.
- *Oneness*: seeing yourself as part of the universe rather than the center of it (as in, "I'm ready for my close-up, Mr. DeMille ...").

Zen Masters Say

Another important concept in Zen teaching is the idea that nothing is absolutely true or false, good or evil; it just *is*. One of the characters in Tom Robbins's best-selling book *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues* (yeah, there was a movie, too) expressed this Zen thought nicely when he said, "I believe in everything; nothing is sacred. I believe in nothing; everything is sacred."

How Zen translates in the Western World

Zen made its first appearances in American pop culture in the writings of the 1950s Beat poets and authors—such greats as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, and Gary Snyder—and continued to be felt in the music, art, and hippie culture of the sixties. But Western culture's flirtation with antimaterialism, nonviolence, and love and respect for all living things was largely abandoned in the pursuit of the ultimate leisure suit (1970s), biggest Rolex (eighties), and most expensive expression of mass-produced personal style (nineties).

Today, Americans seem to be once again searching for some sort of inner peace, and we're willing to try anything from primal-scream therapy to Feng-Shui consultations and travel-ready aromatherapy systems. And, in spite of the fact that Zen practice requires no special clothing, equipment, or body-piercing, lots of folks at the dawn of the twenty-first century are giving it a whirl, too. In fact, if you've sought to simplify your lifestyle, eat less meat, learn yoga, do volunteer services, or spend more time talking with your kids, you've joined the millions of Americans who dabble in Zen practices.

Zen Masters Say

Want to try a free, legal, zero-calorie mind-altering experience? Try contemplating a Zen *koan* or irrational question. Zen masters ask these questions to empty their student's mind of previously learned "truths" and thus make room for the flash of Zen enlightenment.

Simple Zen practices for anyone

Here are three very simple exercises, rooted in Zen practice that may help you foster a bit of inner calm:

Beginner's Meditation: the object of meditation is to relax and empty your mind; you can do it in any position you choose, for however long you choose to do it. The longer you practice it, the more "portable" it becomes (i.e., you learn not to be distracted by noise and the activity of others). Sit or lie down in a comfortable position, breathe deeply, and don't think of anything but your breathing. When other thoughts enter your mind, brush them away, and return your attention to your breathing. Keep it up as long as you'd like, and do it as often as you can (daily is great).

Once-a-day Anger Management: if you find that your anger has developed a hair trigger, you're begging for a heart attack (and you're probably not much of a joy to be around, either). Just once a day, when you feel ready to explode, stop and take three slow, deep, breaths. After you finish the third breath, tell yourself "In the Big Picture, it really doesn't matter at all" and just let the anger go. Sound difficult? Well, it can be done and it's really good for your physical and mental health. Hey, you tried jogging once, remember?

Mindful Conversation: talk to someone (your kid, spouse, parent, or that odd guy in the cubicle next to yours) and listen to what the person says. When you *really* talk to someone, you think about and mean everything you say. And, maybe even more important, you *really* listen to what the other person says. Mindful conversation helps you adjust your perspective on your place in the world and it can bring you closer to those who share it with you.

The online path to greater enlightenment: Web resources

<http://dailyrevolution.org/Sunday.zen.html#1>

Good Zen glossary and description of meditation

www.charm.net/~brooklyn/Topics/Buddhism.html

Learn about the Beats and the Zen messages in their works

www.zenguide.com