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# If You're Lucky, Your Heart Will Break

*Field Notes  
from a Zen Life*



James Ishmael Ford

AUTHOR OF *ZEN MASTER WHO?* AND EDITOR OF *THE BOOK OF MU*

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*For Jan Seymour-Ford*



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*Let me respectfully remind you:  
Life and death are of supreme importance.  
Time swiftly passes by and opportunity is lost.  
Each of us should strive to awaken... awaken!*

*Take heed!*

*Do not squander your life.*

■ TRADITIONAL ZEN VERSE ■





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# Contents

Introduction.....	I
PART I: <i>What Is Awakening?</i>	
The Answer, Sort Of.....	11
Earthquakes.....	17
Every Day Is a Good Day.....	25
PART II: <i>Sit Down, Shut Up, and Pay Attention</i>	
On Having a Spiritual Practice.....	35
Beginning.....	41
Shikantaza.....	49
Koan Introspection.....	53
Listening for the Sound of the Single Hand: How to Let a Koan Work On You.....	57
Some of What Zen Practice Is, a Little of What It Isn't.....	65
Spiritual Directors.....	69

What to Look for When Looking for  
a Zen Teacher..... 75

Only Don't Know ..... 79

PART III: *Talking the Talk, Walking the Walk*

Putting It Together ..... 87

Karma, Rebirth, & Finding a Real Life..... 91

Wrestling with Natural Law ..... 103

Seven Suggestions..... 107

Do Not Cut Yourself Off from This World:  
Love Your Mother ..... 113

Do Not Kill: Reverence This Mysterious Life..... 119

Do Not Lie: Speak Truthfully..... 129

Do Not Steal: Respect the Integrity of Things ..... 137

Do Not Misuse Sex: Respect Our Bodies..... 145

Do Not Forget Your Family: Seek Justice ..... 155

Do Not Drink the Wine of Delusions:  
Seek Clarity..... 163

  

Afterword..... 173

Acknowledgments ..... 177

Index ..... 179

About the Author ..... 185

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## *Introduction*

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

■ HENRY DAVID THOREAU ■

AS BEST ANYONE KNOWS, the first Zen master to teach in the West was the Japanese abbot Soyen Shaku. He was invited to speak at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago. The roshi spoke little English, so his paper on causality, also known as karma, was translated by his young student D.T. Suzuki, and read by one of the parliament's organizers. The paper received little attention from the press, but it did attract the notice of the writer and publisher Paul Carus.

Carus and the roshi became friends, and through that friendship some five years later the Zen master would return to the United States and spend nine months based in California. While there, he taught the basic practices of Zen to several people; among them was Ida Evelyn Russell, the first Westerner of European descent I can ascertain to have taken on koan introspection practice. In the little more than a hundred years that have passed since Soyen Shaku's visits laid those first seeds into our rich Western loam, Zen has taken

root, perhaps tentatively and no doubt a little shallowly but also indisputably.

For me there is no tentativeness; the tendrils of this way have wound round and into my being and made me the person I am. What I write in the following pages represents the fruit of my Zen life. This is not an autobiography or memoir, but rather a deeply personal description of Zen teachings and central practices as best I understand them and as best I can present them. Most of all it is written for those who yearn for a way into genuine depth, for a map through the wastelands of the human heart and mind to our true home.

SADLY THE DHARMA IN THE WEST has divided along ethnic lines. Over the years communities of Asian immigrants have established themselves in the West, and while some of these Buddhist communities exist within an ethnic bubble, many do not. Among the most Western Buddhist communities primarily serving people of East Asian descent, I think immediately of the Buddhist Churches of America. The BCA has brought and adapted Pure Land Buddhism, creating a fascinating spiritual institution that can only be described as one of the predominant expressions of our emerging Western Dharma.

And this fact has frequently been missed. The majority of ethnic European descent converts have joined communities that are majority European descent, following trajectories ignorant of the evolution of Western Dharma within those communities established by Asian immigrants. I'm sure there are good reasons as well as bad for this, but I also believe this divide has been a wound in the Dharma come West.

And these divides continue.

Except for some intensely evangelical Lotus Sutra groups,

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which have long had African-American membership, Americans of African descent are only now beginning to come to the Dharma in measurable numbers. The same has been true for people of Latino and Native American descent. We're just beginning to see a broadening of the attraction to the Dharma in the West.

My main point in raising all this, however, is that it would be a serious mistake to speak of these communities of European descent only as "Western Buddhism." I think the next generations coming along are more sensitive to these divides and, I think, more open to closing them. What I am seeing, is that whatever is coming as Western Buddhism is rich and getting richer.

As for me, I trained within the European descent bubble, although even there it is impossible to not be affected by, nor terribly grateful for, the influences of East Asian teachers and practitioners who brought the Dharma to us. My teacher's teachers were almost all immigrants from Japan or Japanese nationals who visited and were visited. How can I not have been touched? And as I eat with chopsticks several times a month, depending on what I'm eating, I see the cultural influences of the Buddha's many host cultures, meeting and challenging and melting and recreating, as well.

Today the great mix of American culture, particularly on the Western coast, is increasingly pan-Pacific. As I hope I've adequately said, I've been deeply touched by this. When I think of the African American, Native American and Latino cultural and spiritual perspective entering the conversation, I'm enormously excited, feeling I'm witnessing something very rich happening. Although the contours of what is forming are still unclear.

HERE IN THIS BOOK, I need to acknowledge what I bring to the table: I was raised a fundamentalist Christian of a Californian variety. I embraced a rational and humanist stance in my late adolescence and not much later I found Buddhism as it was presented among the first generation of European descent converts. Whatever its flaws, this presentation was authentic and rich. I was a Zen monk for several years in my young adulthood. For a variety of reasons, some of which I'll touch upon in this book, after that monastic experience I explored a variety of spiritual pathways, including visits with the Episcopal Church, the Gnostic traditions, and the Universalist Sufism taught by Hazrat Inayat Khan and Samuel Lewis and their heirs.

In my late thirties I settled down both physically and spiritually, finding the fullness of my life within Unitarian Universalism and Zen Buddhism. While this book is about Zen, my Zen is also informed by Unitarian Universalism and its institutions. I am a Zen priest, but I am also a UU minister and have spent twenty years serving in UU congregations. Accordingly, I think it important to offer a brief comment here on my perspective regarding Unitarian Universalism.

This emergent Western tradition is probably best called liberal religion. Western liberal religion has two hallmarks. One is a deep respect for reason and rationality. And the second is bringing a broadly humanist perspective to the matters of spirit, acknowledging that whatever else may be true of other worlds or realms, the work of religion is ultimately always here in this world. The great struggle for liberal religion is how best to manifest the broadest individual liberty while knowing that in the last analysis we exist only within relationships. This tradition and its struggles have proven a congenial home for many convert Western Buddhists—

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particularly, through its comprehensive and open religious education programming, Western Buddhists with children. Though historically rooted in Christianity, Unitarian Universalism is not exactly a form of Christianity. I think that it has, through an independent evolution, come to stand in a place roughly between Taoism and Confucianism.

All this acknowledged I believe my stance can be summarized in calling myself a liberal Zen Buddhist. Today I am the heir to these two great traditions, and more as well. But essentially this means my Zen Buddhism is Western, mostly of the European-descent variety, flavored by my Christian upbringing, touched by the mystical traditions of the West and Near East, and very much informed by the great gift of the Western rational tradition. I've thrown myself into the way body, heart, and mind. I've found myself broken open and found in that opening my fundamental connection to the whole world, how we in our lives truly, truly are one.

As a Westerner of the rational inheritance, as I try to understand what I've experienced, I'm informed by a working assumption that if something is said to happen in the phenomenal world, I think it can be and should be subject to testing; and accordingly, I am eternally grateful for philosophical parsimony, the sharpness of Occam's Razor.

And at the same time I know a method is a method and not the goal of the questing heart. Not mixing these two things up has opened the way for me, and allowed me to reflect on this journey in ways that may be helpful to others who yearn for healing in this world of hurt.

The project of Zen and my engagement with it is about finding who I am, who we are as humans, and what is our true home. And that is what this book is about. Unitarian



Universalism and Zen Buddhism have brought me close to the great matter. At first I felt they complemented each other's weaknesses. Zen lacked institutions that made sense to me at the time, while Unitarian Universalism felt light on the spiritual side. Certainly, taken together I found a full life for myself. Today I cannot actually separate the two traditions; they have in a certain sense become one in my heart. There have been a number of consequences to this approach, of course, but on the whole still it has been a rich path to follow.

A great and useful gift I've found has been the ability we all share as human beings, to be able to step back a little, to place just enough distance between myself and my path, so that I am able to appreciate and sometimes appreciatively criticize this way that means so much to me, and which I think can mean so much for many people. Now, this is an important point. I did not find this gift by avoiding a full-hearted engagement with my path, but rather by using this very gift that we all have as human beings: that astonishing ability to watch ourselves. And, this is equally important; at the same time this way has invited me to let go of that distance at just the right moments.

I believe Zen is so important that it needs within it those who both love it passionately and also can see some of its flaws and shadows. As a human institution presenting a cluster of insights discovered by human beings, and offering a small package of disciplines also cultivated by human beings, of course it is flawed. The only questions are how flawed—and how helpful?

I threw myself into the Zen way to find out the most important things about who I am and what I might be, always looking at the path itself as well as my own heart

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and mind. What follows is what I have to offer: the results of that life and a description of the way for those who are similarly drawn to a rigorous investigation of the spiritual life, who are seeking nothing watered down, or attenuated. Just honesty. Only the real deal, only the truth—as best I have found it.





## *What Is Awakening?*

Then the Divine answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said: “Who is this who despairs without knowledge? Pull yourself together. I have questions for you, and you must answer. Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth? Tell me, if you understand. Who measured out the universe?—do you understand? Who gave it shape?—do you understand? Who set the foundation, who set down the cornerstone? When the morning stars sang together, and all the children of God shouted for joy, where were you?”

■ JOB 38:1–7 ■



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## The Answer, Sort of

I'VE BEEN WALKING THE ZEN WAY for the larger part of a lifetime. And along this way of terrible broken hearts and unspeakable joys, of learning what a fool I usually am, and of a wondrous beauty that pervades the entire world and invades the hearts of people—even people as difficult as me—I've learned a few things about this Zen way that may be worth sharing.

The first is that it is all oversold a bit. There is indeed such a thing as enlightenment, as awakening, absolutely; I've tasted awakening in small and large ways. But what enlightenment actually is isn't quite as grand as the literature sometimes suggests. Or, rather, it is considerably subtler and more dynamic than we ever think. Actually, as one Zen teacher said, "Awakening isn't what you think." Quite simply, awakening (a term I generally prefer to *enlightenment*) is part and parcel of our human condition. It doesn't take us outside of the natural realm to any other place—awakening is found within our lives, just as they are.

THERE IS A KOAN, a traditional Zen teaching story, that addresses this. This koan appears in the twelfth-century

Chinese anthology the *Wumenguan*, the *Gateless Gate*, case 2:

THE MASTER BAIZHANG HUIHAI gave a series of talks on the Dharma. Among those who attended was an old man who sat near the back of the hall. One day the old man lingered after the talk and the master approached him, asking, “Who are you?”

The old man replied, “Many eons ago I was the master of a Zen temple on this spot. One day a sincere student of the way asked me whether someone who had awakened was bound by the laws of cause and effect, or not. I replied ‘No, such a person is not tangled in the strands of causality.’ Ever since that time I’ve been reborn as a fox. Perhaps five hundred times now. I’m desperately hoping you can say that turning word and free me from this horrible fate.”

He then made formal bows before the master and asked the question. “Is someone who has experienced awakening bound by the laws of cause and effect, or not?”

The master replied, “Such a person is one with the laws of cause and effect.”

Hearing this, the old man responded, “Thank you, those words have liberated me. I am released from this fox body. I have just one more request. My body is around the other side of the mountain. Can you retrieve it and give it a monk’s burial?”

Baizhang agreed and when the spirit vanished he called the head monk and announced that after the noon meal there would be a funeral. This information passed like wildfire through the assembly. Everyone knew there was no one in the infirmary, so they were very curious. After the meal the monks made their way around the mountain, retrieved the

fox's body, returned to the monastery, and gave it a priest's interment.

Later that evening the master told the assembly what had happened.

His student Huangbo stepped forward and asked, "Master, what if when asked about awakening and causality he had given the right answer? What then?"

Baizhang smiled and said, "Come here and I'll tell you."

Baizhang was a very small man, but his teacher's stick was sitting in his lap, and the wise avoided his reach. Huangbo was said to be seven feet tall so as he walked up to his teacher he came within his very long arm's reach while still well short of his teacher's; Huangbo reached out and slapped the master.

Baizhang laughed and laughed, and said to the assembly, "I thought the founder of our way, Bodhidharma, the barbarian from the West, had a red beard. But right here with us is a red-bearded barbarian!"

FOR THOSE ENGAGED in the discipline of Zen koan introspection, this is a complicated case with several important points to investigate. For our purposes here, I want simply to draw your attention to how, in the story, the old master of that mountain had been tangled in the all-too-common idea that awakening/enlightenment somehow excuses us from life. It doesn't.

The awakened person is one with the flow of cause and effect, is one with the play of life and death, is the same person who has longings and desires, who is hurt and who needs. With awakening we are in all respects the same people we've always been, woven out of the mess of genes and history, our stuff the stuff of the world. But with this truth we are awakened to the reality of our intimate connections.



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