

## Volume One – Zen Conversations

### Introduction

1. The premise of Zen Conversations is that there isn't a single form of Zen practice, but several which often differ from one another in significant ways. Does this accord with your experience of Zen? Have these differences had an impact on the particular form of Zen in which you are engaged?
2. Several examples of ways in which the word "Zen" has been adapted in the West are given. What other examples are there? How do these affect the way Zen is understood and how it is presented in North America?
3. What differences are there between the early North American enthusiasts and contemporary individuals taking up Zen practice?
4. What distinguishes Zen from other schools of Buddhism?

### Discovering Zen Chapter One

1. Which stories do you most identify with?
2. Which stories do you least identify with?
3. What are the significant differences between the stories?
4. What are the significant similarities?

**Contemporary koans:** When Hozan Senauke called the Berkeley Zen Center and asked what he should do, he was told, "You should find a blank wall and sit down and stare at it."

### The Function of Zen Chapter Two

1. Some of these teachers stress the importance of awakening, others do not. Which of these perspectives are you more comfortable with and why?
2. How do the various teachers' understanding of what "awakening" is differ?
3. For the teachers who do not focus on awakening, what is their understanding of the function of Zen, and do their perceptions differ from one another?
4. What reservations do the teachers who don't stress awakening have about it?

**Contemporary koans:** A practitioner asked Albert Low, "What is the function of Zen?"

Albert replied, "Oh, there's no function of Zen."

"So why do people come here?"

"Because they think there is a function of Zen."

"And they discover?"

"There is no function of Zen. If they work long enough."

### Zen Practice Chapter Three

1. Which of the practices described in this chapter are you comfortable with? Are there practices you are not comfortable with and why?
2. How might you adjust your practice as a result of suggestions made in this chapter?
3. How do you and your community view koan study? Have the teachers who advocate its use in this chapter altered your understanding of that kind of work?
4. What misconceptions about meditation did you have before beginning practice? How did you overcome those misconceptions?

**Contemporary koans:** David Rynick asserted that an essential part of meditation practice is the mind wandering away from the practice.

## **Adapting Zen to the West** Chapter Four

1. What impact does an Asian ambiance have on practice communities?
2. What are the risks of not adapting Zen or Buddhist practices to the West?
3. What adaptations are important and which are less so?
4. How essential is the Buddhist matrix to Zen practice?

**Contemporary koans:** Shinge Chayat asked, “What’s Buddhist? What is ‘Buddhism’? The ‘-ist’ and the ‘-ism’ have very little to do with the awakening process. That awakening is Buddha. So you become Buddha.”

## **Compassionate Action** Chapter 5

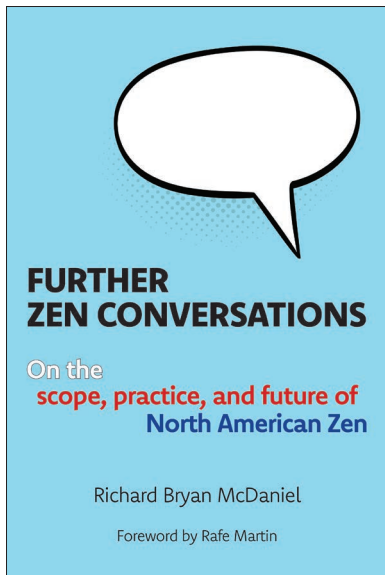
1. How do the descriptions of karuna/compassion given in this chapter differ?
2. In your experience of Zen has there been an equal emphasis placed on the attainments of both prajna and karuna?
3. How has contact with West impacted the understanding of karuna in Zen?
4. How do the Bearing Witness Retreats and the Streets Retreats accord with your understanding of Zen practice?

**Contemporary Koans:** Joan Sutherland asked, “What is the most beautiful mistake you can make?”

## **Ecodharma** Chapter 6

1. To what extent has your involvement with social issues been affected by your Zen practice?
2. What does the term “Ecodharma” imply to you?
3. To what extent should any form of activism be associated with Zen practice? How can the attitude of “not knowing” be reconciled with political or social activism?
4. During the Second World War, the Zen establishment in Japan supported the Imperialist agenda of the government. Does Zen in North America tend to promote a particular political/social perspective?

**Contemporary koans:** During her first sesshin, Shodo Spring realized she didn’t know anything. “And I was really excited about that.”



## Volume Two – Further Zen Conversations

### Varieties of Zen Experience Chapter 1

1. Which stories do you most identify with?
2. Which stories do you least identify with?
3. What are the significant differences between the stories?
4. What are the significant similarities?

**Contemporary koans:** Meido Moore said, “Do you need to believe in karma and rebirth? No. You can remain agnostic about those issues, but the whole training is predicated upon it, so if you take it out, you remove a linchpin. It’s fine to do that for yourself if you want. But then there is really no need to call it Zen or Buddhism anymore, is there?”

### Is Zen Unique? Chapter 2

1. How does Buddhism differ from other spiritual traditions with which you are familiar?
2. What experience of other forms of Buddhism have you had? In what way does Zen practice differ from them?
3. What are your feelings about basic Buddhist presumptions such as karma and reincarnated lives?
4. How do you understand the four-line gatha attributed to Bodhidharma which describes Zen as: A special transmission outside the scriptures; / Not dependent on words or letters; / By direct pointing to the mind of man, / Seeing into one’s true nature and attaining Buddhahood.

**Contemporary koans:** Jeff Shore said, “A lot of so-called Zen practice is actually a form of ritual, including meditation, sitting in a certain posture, having a certain mind-set for a certain period of time. When you look at it really critically, people who do that are actually avoiding the real practice.”

### What Do Zen Teachers Teach? Chapter 3

1. What is the role of a Zen teacher?
2. Is “teacher” the best term for Zen leaders?
3. What types of things do Zen instructors teach? What else do they do?
4. What is “transmission”?

**Contemporary koans:** A practitioner asked Joshin Byrnes, “What does a Zen teacher teach?” Joshin replied, “How to appreciate your life.”  
“And how do you do that?”  
“One by one.”

### Zen and Psychology Chapter 4

1. Is Zen a religious or secular activity?
2. How do the views on Zen and psychology presented in this chapter differ?
3. How are the reasons people take up a spiritual or a psychological practice similar or different?
4. How are the roles of a Zen teacher and a therapist similar? How different?

**Contemporary koans:** David Weinstein said: “I don’t teach people how to meditate. We don’t learn how to meditate, we remember how to meditate, because we’re born knowing how to meditate.”

### The Impact of Zen Practice Chapter 5

1. Does one “get” anything from the practice of Zen?
2. What keeps you involved in Zen practice?
3. Does the reason one practices Zen change over time? Are the reasons why one takes up the practice necessarily the same as those which cause one to maintain it?
4. How do you understand Torei Enji’s concept of “long maturation”? What are its implications?

**Contemporary koans:** Guokuko Carlson stated that it was less her relationship with Jiyu Kennett than it was the abbey and its schedule which became her teacher.

### **Vows and Precepts** Chapter 6

1. How important are the Precepts in your practice?
2. What does the term “vow” imply?
3. What differences are there in the way the contributors to this chapter understand the Vows and Precepts?
4. The issue of the poor ethical behavior of several well-known Zen teachers has clouded the history of Zen in North America. How do you reconcile these failings with the emphasis placed on the Precepts?

**Contemporary koans:** John Pulleyn asked, “How do you save all beings? They keep making more!”

### **Looking Forward** Chapters 7 + 8

1. A variety of degrees of formality in Zen practice are presented in this chapter. Which are you comfortable with and which do you have reservations about?
2. How inclusive is the community with which you practice? In particular, how politically diverse is the membership?
3. What matters need to be dealt with in your community in order to ensure its continued viability?
4. What are the advantages and disadvantages of using videoconferencing?