

# EMBRACING THE INCONCEIVABLE



Interspiritual Practice of  
Zen and Christianity

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## Preface

*“Are we one or are we not?”* This is the challenge Roshi Bernie Glassman put forth in a booming voice to his Zen community amid the din of dismay and disapproval that erupted when he announced that he planned to authorize a Jesuit priest, Robert Kennedy, as a Zen teacher. How can a non-Buddhist, a Christian no less, be a fully authorized Zen teacher? Bernie was not one to be boxed in by narrow beliefs or by imaginary boundaries and barriers. He had a broad vision and a deep sense of the oneness of life. Throughout his life, he honored both his Jewish heritage and his Zen insights. He felt that people of any faith, or none, can benefit from Zen practice and from the realization of our oneness with ultimate reality, God, the earth, and each other.

Since I am a dharma successor of Roshi Robert Kennedy, Bernie is my Zen grandfather. This book honors Bernie’s vision to share Zen beyond the bounds of Buddhism. It serves as a guide for people practicing in more than one faith and as a help to people raised in a Judeo-Christian culture who are trying to integrate their religion of birth with their chosen practice of Zen or other forms of meditation. In my life, the practice of Zen and the practice of Christianity have been mutually enriching. Hopefully, this book frees readers to practice across religious boundaries,

appreciating the differences among traditions while simultaneously experiencing that, ultimately, *we are one*.

Back in the 1980s, Bernie came to visit Sisters of Saint Joseph of Peace Janet Richardson, Rosalie McQuaide, and Mary Byrnes, who lived in Jersey City. These three sisters had practiced Zen meditation and had attended many of Bernie's *sesshins*, silent Zen meditation retreats, for years. Zen typically does not use the word *god* because of the baggage the name carries as an anthropomorphic, personal creator, yet as Bernie visited with the nuns, he heard them frequently mention God. Bernie said that the thought popped into his mind, *After all these years of Zen practice, why are these nuns still talking about God?* In a flash it came to him, *Why not? If I really believe in "not knowing" and I'm open to all possibilities, why not?* Bernie said this was a pivotal moment of insight for him.

Throughout this book I use typical Zen words for the highest reality, such as *ultimate reality*, *the absolute*, *emptiness*, and *thusness*. I also use the Judeo-Christian word *God*. I encourage you, the reader, to choose whatever words are most helpful to you.

## Zen and Nonduality

The word *Zen* has come into common usage in our culture to mean a calm, serene state of body and mind. For many people, Zen conjures up the image of a meticulously landscaped garden, its simplicity accentuating the natural beauty of each rock, tree, and blossom. Advertisements for Zen spas, Zen restaurants, and Zen decor attempt to convey the message that you will experience a calm, relaxed state of mind if you use these products. While Zen certainly relieves stress and promotes equanimity, Zen is so much more.

Zen is a simple, yet profound path of meditation that is concerned with the realization of ultimate reality and the direct experience of nonduality. Zen is a twenty-five-hundred-year-old tradition originating with Buddha in India. Indian Buddhism migrated into China, where it was influenced by Taoism and Confucianism and emerged as Chan, which is the Chinese word for Zen. It then made its way to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam. Zen is now practiced in countries around the world, where it mixes and mingles with the local culture. This book describes a continuation of that process in America as Zen influences and is influenced by our scientific and predominantly Judeo-Christian culture.

Some Zen terminology, such as *nonduality*, can seem abstract and confusing. However, before I was a nurse, a nursing professor, or a Zen teacher, I was a first-grade teacher, so I am confident that I can make Zen terms clear and simple. The word *nondual* simply

means “not two.” It refers to the physical and spiritual aspects of life being not two. They are not separate. They are two aspects of each person or thing, two aspects of the whole. Nonduality is seeing beyond your sense of a separate self to experience that you are not separate from ultimate reality, the universe, other people, or life itself.

Whether we are children or adults, we learn best by doing, so in addition to reading this book, I encourage you to meditate daily. Instructions for Zen meditation appear in chapter 3. Zen is a path of meditation. Nonduality is not a term to be defined and comprehended by the intellect, but rather an experience that you can cultivate through meditation. Nonduality is a spiritual experience that involves the whole person—body, mind, heart, and spirit. This book provides a map of the territory, but while a map is helpful, it is not the experience itself. Meditation is a way to take the journey, grow in awareness, and experience for yourself.

When my brothers and sisters and I were kids, lined up in the backseat of the car during a family vacation, our parents would get upset if they turned to see us sleeping or reading a comic book. Those were the old days. Now kids sit in the backseat watching movies or fiddling with their smartphones, and as long as they are entertaining themselves and not bothering anyone else, nobody cares. However, my parents would say, “Put the comic book down. Sit up and look at the scenery. You can sleep or read comics when we get home. You are missing seeing something new. You might learn something.” We would begrudgingly sit up, put the comic books away, and look out the window for a while. We did expand our horizons by seeing the Adirondack Mountains, the Rocky Mountains, and even the seemingly endless cornfields of Nebraska. We learned that the country is much bigger than we imagined.

Meditation is a way to sit up, let go of your usual distractions, pay attention, and experience something new. It is not a time to sleep or entertain yourself with daydreams, stories, or mental commentaries. This place, this moment, is the destination. In the silent stillness of meditation, you can see, hear, and feel the subtle,

spiritual aspect of all phenomena and the underlying unity of life itself comes to the fore.

Zen is not the only path through the nondual spiritual terrain, but the Zen path of meditation is the one with which I am intimately familiar, and is the focus of this book. Brother Wayne Teasdale, who coined the term *interspirituality*, describes it as “the sharing of ultimate experiences across traditions” (Teasdale 1999, 26). For me, interspirituality takes the form of practicing both Zen and Christianity as mutually enriching spiritual traditions. However, what follows may be relevant and helpful to people engaged in other forms of interspiritual practice.

We live in a world that is out of balance with greed and materialism running rampant to the point of ecological crisis. Our scientific age yields immense knowledge about the physical world that has the potential to improve the quality of life on our planet. However, scientific knowledge alone is not enough. It needs to be integrated with spiritual wisdom to restore balance, decrease suffering, and avert disaster. The point of Zen meditation is to experience ultimate reality directly and awaken to the spiritual wisdom needed to live a full, balanced, and compassionate life.

There is more to life than the material world. As human beings we can sense that we are each more than a physical body made up of numerous parts. We are thinking, feeling, storytelling beings who reflect on our experiences. Some of us sense that we are more than physical and psychological beings. We have a sense of the sacred; we are also spiritual beings.

Zen meditation is a way to expand our worldview beyond a materialistic, cause-and-effect approach to realize a nondual approach that does not separate the spiritual from the physical aspects of reality. A nondual approach requires more than logic and intellect. You can understand nonduality intellectually to some extent, but an intellectual understanding alone will not transform your life. Just as the scientific research process is used to discover and generate scientific knowledge, meditation is a process that opens us to nondual insight and spiritual wisdom.

A classic Zen chant, the *Heart Sutra*, contains a line that says, “Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form” (*Zen Peacemaker Order Service Book* 1997, 4). *Form* means all the things in the universe, such as stars, planets, rocks, water, people, animals, and cars. It also refers to mental forms such as thoughts, concepts, theories, stories, opinions, emotions, and images.

Emptiness is a Zen term referring to that which is formless, that which is empty of substance and boundaries. Other names for emptiness are *ultimate reality*, the *absolute*, or the *infinite*. Form is finite; the formless is infinite. The finite can be measured; the infinite is immeasurable. Emptiness refers to the spiritual aspect of each thing, each person, the universe, the totality, the indivisible whole.

“Form is no other than emptiness; emptiness no other than form” means that form and emptiness are not two separate things. Emptiness or formless ultimate reality takes form. Ultimate reality manifests as everything in the universe. However, form does not exhaust the formless. The formless is greater than form. The infinite includes but exceeds the finite.

Zen does not use the word *god* to refer to the infinite, ineffable, inconceivable highest reality. Zen uses words such as *emptiness*, *empty oneness*, *ultimate reality*, *the absolute*, *the infinite*, *thusness*, *suchness*, or *it*. Zen emphasizes direct experience of the ineffable rather than words or interpretations. The word *god* tends to connote a personal God who created the world. Zen is nontheistic. From a Zen perspective, ultimate reality cannot be described using words like personal or impersonal. Ultimate reality is utterly indescribable. Zen frees us to move beyond either/or thinking. Those of us practicing Zen who grew up with the word *god* and with the experience of a personal relationship with God need not give these up. God is large. God can be called by many names, or by no name, and can be experienced in innumerable ways.

Growing up in a Western culture, I learned as a child that God created the universe and everything in it. Meditation helped me grow beyond a childlike vision of God as a separate being

who stood apart and created the universe like a person building a house or a car. I no longer experience human beings as containers into which God pours his spirit. The body, mind, heart, and spirit are one—one manifestation of God. God as the formless infinite or ultimate reality takes form, and everything in the universe is a manifestation or expression of the living God. I encounter each thing and each being as sacred, spiritual, and a way to know God alive in the world today. Zen dissolves even the faintest concept of God, and the living, breathing God comes forth here and now. Zen practice and the direct experience of nonduality continuously open me to new dimensions of the infinite, inconceivable God. This book is for those who yearn for the awe, reverence, and joy of a life not separate from God or the highest reality.