

Zen Buddhism: The Basics

Monday 7:15 – 8:30
September 13 – October 4
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Minnesota Zen Meditation Center

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Zen Buddhism: The Basics provides foundational information about Zen Buddhism at an introductory level. It surveys a wide range of topics, including the Buddha's life and basic teachings, the history of Zen and its schools (Soto and Rinzai), approaches to meditation, the experience of a retreat, and the relevance of Zen practice in the world today.

Reading material

Way of Zen by Martine Batchelor (2001, Thorsons, \$12.95). A clear, straightforward, and brief introduction that compares the type of Zen practiced at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (Soto, with Japanese roots) with other kinds of Zen (mainly Chinese, Korean, and Rinzai).

Weekly reading

September 13 **Introduction and Chapter 1: Basic Ideas & Principles**

Although Zen practice is slightly different from country to country, all schools share certain ideas. The Introduction and Chapter 1 introduce the most basic of these ideas: the importance of the Bodhisattva way in the Mahayana tradition; the existence of an inherent Buddha nature that we all share; the necessity of equal training in ethics, meditation, and wisdom; and the value of cultivating great faith, great courage, and great questioning.

September 20 **Chapter 2: History, and Chapter 3: Rinzai & Soto**

Chapter 2 is a fact-jammed review of the early history of Buddhism, from its origin in India to its spread to China, Korea, and Japan, in that order. A key theme is the distinctive character that Buddhism assumed in each of these countries. Chapter 3 lays out the key differences between Rinzai (koans) and Soto (silent illumination, just sitting) Zen. Since the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center falls within the Soto lineage, the chapter helps us better understand the reasons for the practices taught here.

September 27 **Chapter 4: Ten Oxherding Pictures, and Chapter 5: Zen Meditation Exercises**

Chapter 4 introduces the Ten Oxherding Pictures that describe an idealized path to enlightenment and self-development in the Zen tradition using folk images. Although Soto Zen does not usually think in terms of phases of self-development, the pictures capture features of an enlightened Zen master. Chapter 5 reviews a variety of Zen meditation exercises, from 'sitting like a mountain' to a single-pointed concentration on a koan like 'What is this?' or Mu. The chapter also explains why meditation is considered a central practice in Zen.

October 4 **Chapter 6: On a Retreat, and Chapter 7: Zen & the Modern World**

In Zen, extended periods (usually 2-3 to 7 days) of meditation are called retreats. Chapter 6 compares what goes on in a retreat in a Chinese, Korean, and Japanese-derived center. It also reviews some of the more common obstacles to sustained meditation during a retreat. Chapter 7 concentrates on Zen in the modern world, but especially in America. It considers issues like the interaction between Zen and western religions, women and Zen, the involvement of Zen students and priests in contemporary social problems and issues, and the future of Zen.

What happens in our weekly meetings?

Our teaching style in this introductory class is fairly informal (if guided) discussion. To help us focus our discussion, a list of questions that concern that week's reading is handed out a week before each meeting – though we can raise questions about whatever else interests us. Given the limited time we have each session for discussion, we cannot hope to review all of the questions on a handout sheet or explore in depth all of the questions that you may want to discuss. Our most basic goal in the course is to make you aware of key issues in the history and practice of Zen. So much the better if you learn some of the details of Zen history and practice along the way.

How to read *Ways of Zen*

You can, of course, read *Ways of Zen* any way you wish. However, an efficient approach that will aid our group discussions is to read through the questions on the handout for that week first. Then work your way through the reading, preparing possible answers (if only in your head) to the questions. If other questions come up along the way, write them down and raise them during discussion. Focus on those questions and parts of a chapter that interest you the most.

What amount of reading and practice do you have time for?

Many people are curious about Zen Buddhism but do not have enough time during the week (or are not curious enough) to spend time trying to answer questions about several chapters of reading. If that is your case, glance through the reading and questions, and participate in the group discussion the best you can. You will undoubtedly learn a fair amount about Zen just by listening to discussions and raising a question or two. If you have the time, prepare a sentence or two for each question. As course instructors, we (Martin and Guy) provide answers to the questions, too, but the better acquainted you are with the reading, the more sense (we hope) our answers will make.

Notes