# ZEN IN MINNESOTA

Robert Pirsig

... and there was, as we have noted, Pirsig's remarkable, unforgettable book about motorcycles and the mind of man. Pirsig came from St. Paul, Minnesota, a fact which may well have contributed to his success. For this was the year of the Minnesota Syndrome--the year when America seemed to take it into its head that if it could all be like just one state, that one state would be the chilly, rolling wood-and-pasture land of cows and pig-iron that the Indians, and now we, call Minnesota. Reporters and photographers trekked the state from International Falls to New Ulm, from Winona to Red Lake Falls and returned, like survivors from some Cortezian expedition, to talk of discovering a land of decent, hard-working people who believed in privacy and fairness and cleanliness and godliness and liberalism and patriotism and internationalism all rolled up into one.... The wooded, cold, forgotten northern heartlands suddenly seemed on the verge of becoming a latter-day Eden.

--from the Manchester (England) Guardian

# Zen Buddhism in America

A historic step forward in the growth of Zen Buddhism in America has been the establishment of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center in Minneapolis. It is the first time in the entire region between New York and California that an ordained Zen Master has taken up permanent residence for the teaching of Zen. The problems faced are great, but it is hoped that in time both the Midwest and Zen practice will benefit from the cultural exchange. Zen Buddhism has come to Minnesota not as an exotic Japanese flower to be stared at and admired from a distance. Neither has it been brought here to impose Oriental manners and modes of thought upon an established American pattern of life. Organized Zen is here in Minnesota for the first time to enrich the lives of Minnesotans as they are now lived, with the increased awareness of each moment in these lives that Zen practice can give.

# Zen Study

"Zen" literally means meditation, and practice at the Minnesota Zen Center consists primarily of a sitting form of meditation known as zazen. Meditative practices are associated with almost every major religion, but in the particular variant of zazen used at the Zen Center known as shikan taza, the purpose is not to concentrate on any thought or image or feeling or to try to achieve mystic religious union with anything. Quite the contrary. The purpose is to get rid of all thoughts, dogmas, images and mystic feelings because these prevent an understanding of the reality of one's own life. Reality is new experience every second and to see it in its clearest form without distortion one must empty one's cup of all old experience, otherwise the old experience will try to govern and dictate what one sees.

This practice of just sitting in silence and doing absolutely nothing else is not an other-worldly effort. It has been carried on through the centuries by advanced individuals as a means of freeing themselves from the entangling details of their lives in order to understand themselves better and, through this understanding, benefit themselves and others. Its purpose is to show the students this world, right here and now as it really is, uncluttered by everyone's thoughts and opinions about it, including their own. There is no way to discover this reality in books or even by spoken instruction. All that can be done is to provide an environment where distractions are temporarily removed so that the real world, which is never independent from one's own nature, can make itself apparent. That is the purpose of the Zen Meditation Center.

Sitting quietly, doing nothing, would seem to be the easiest thing in the world, but is soon discovered to be something else. One learns that doing nothing is every bit as hard as doing something and all the difficulties that were formerly thought to reside in the job one was doing are still there, even though one does no job and makes no effort at all. It usually comes as quite a surprise, and not a pleasant one. But it is a very much needed surprise, for one is discovering one's self.

A bright underachiever, for example, who has never been able to study well because of boredom with his subjects gradually discovers, when practicing shikan taza, that his boredom had nothing to do with the subjects he was studying but is located entirely within himself. Now, sitting quietly in meditation, he finds there is no more running from this boredom unless he wishes to give up Zen practice entirely. At this point the Zen master might tell him: "Yes, but if you give up Zen practice, you will have to do something else, and soon you will get tired of that too, and turn to something else. Soon you'll get tired of that and turn to something else. And then something else. And then something else. No matter what you do, no matter where you turn, you are soon going to get tired of it....So you might just as well stay here."

The student takes the advice, faces up to his own boredom, suffers with it and slowly and painfully over many months learns to forget about it. He sees no purpose in this but he sees no purpose in anything else either and misery cannot last forever and gradually he adjusts to this new kind of life. Then one day, lo and behold! he discovers that the subjects in school which were once so tedious have become much more interesting. His grades have gone up and he sees that somehow he has become a different, more respectable person now that he was before he began Zen meditation.

# Enlightenment

Experiences such as this are quite common and quite normal. As one sits, allowing the thoughts and worries of the day to gradually die away like waves after the wind has stopped, one begins to sense a freedom from one's own situation and with it a new ability to get on top of this situation and deal with it rather than be victimized by it. In time one may thus handle deep problems of self-understanding and self-control that have crippled personal development for years. But Zen would not be a major aspect of one of the world's oldest religions if its effects stopped here. In time one discovers that there are advanced levels of non-doing quite as difficult and profound as the levels of doing which we are accustomed to in a modern Western society. One can stop most of one's self-centered thoughts and thus achieve a measure of self-control, or ninety percent of them, or even ninety-nine percent. But to stop absolutely all of one's selfish, egoistic activities, and thus achieve what Zen Buddhists call satori or enlightenment, is attained only by a few, usually only after long years of totally dedicated meditative practice. When a state of complete selflessness is acquired a kind of implosion occurs in which the absolute reality of the world, never before understood because of one's own sense of selfness, comes flooding in and a complete transformation takes place. It is an event of central importance to all Oriental understanding and is not at all unknown to the West. Medieval literature abounds in descriptions of this event. The "state of grace" described by our own American religious forefathers is clearly parallel phenomenon.

Those who have experienced this phenomenon affirm that no verbal description of it ever comes close. It is also affirmed that it is an unstable time for the student and should not be attempted except under the guidance of an experienced teacher. The official title of "Roshi," the highest ordination that can be given in Zen Buddhism, is only given to those who have experienced this transformation and are pronounced capable of guiding others toward it. Minnesota is extremely fortunate to have such a person here.

"LIFE DOESN'T SPRING FROM THOUGHTS....THOUGHTS SPRING FROM LIFE."

--Katagiri Roshi

# Daiun Katagiri Roshi

In some respects, particularly those of ritual, a Zen Master's relation to his congregation is like that of a Christian minister. But the similarity soon ends. The Christian minister traditionally stands as an intermediary between God and man, explaining God's word and God's way to his parishioners, and helping to prepare them for heaven after death.

Buddhists, on the other hand, feel that God is in no way separate from man on earth except where man's confusion creates this separateness. The Roshi's function therefore is to help end this confusion in the Buddhas he sees seated before him so that their true natures can be realized with all possible speed. Sometimes when the confusion seems to be gaining he gets quite crabby about this. Sometimes, when he sees real progress in a student, his mood is pure delight. But whatever his mood, this goal is always present and integral in every action. He would not be a Roshi if it weren't.

To achieve this the Roshi simultaneously employs two traditions of Buddism which are deeply contradictory to one another but yet are fused harmoniously in his own person. The first tradition is total, unrelenting, ritualistic formalism--a program of austerity so extreme it seems to have no equal. One sits in an exact posture, hands formed just so, eyes trained just so, tongue in mouth just so, everything just so--and maintains this posture for long periods of time. During the sesshin, the most extensive practice, the periods extend all day long from five o'clock in the morning until nine at night, day after day after day, interrupted only by a work period, meals and

ritual services. The student is expected to give total undivided dedicated effort every second. The purpose of this, of course, is not cruelty or self-torture or even austerity for its own sake. It has simply been worked out through the centuries as the most practical method of achieving self-discipline and enlightenment with a minimum of time, effort and nonsense.

In total contrast to the ruthless formalism of this so-called Hinayana practice is the completely formless, vitally compassionate humanistic tradition sometimes called "beginner's mind" which gives Zen much of its historic flavor. One notices almost immediately that personalities of the Zen Masters and also the arts and the literature of Zen are filled with this vitality--a kind of sudden, quick, instantaneous insightfulness. There is buoyancy and a zest for life that cannot be missed here, because it is so strikingly different from the baleful solemnity that accompanies most religious practice. This is the result of "beginner's mind."

"In the expert's mind there are few possibilities," the late Shunryu Suzuki Roshi said, "but in the beginner's mind there are many." Beginner's mind understands that what happened in the last second is past and gone and to cling to it is to cling to death. What will happen in the next second is unreal and to cling to it is to cling to dreams. But what is happening <u>now</u>, in this thousandth of a second, that is life itself--and that is what must be grasped.

But how to grasp it? Not by thought. Thought takes time. If you try to grasp reality by thought your mind will be like a movie in which the sound track lags three seconds behind the film. What a headache! To achieve be-

ginner's mind you must eliminate all containing thoughts, all egoistic desires through the continued Hinayana practice of zazen until the synchronization comes together and you are really in the film, a part of it, and not just an unhappy onlooker. That is what the Roshi is trying to teach. Not, as is commonly mistaken, some other-worldly land called Nirvana. He is trying to teach a very this-worldly land called nirvana. Nirvana is right here and now and it will never be anywhere else.

A Roshi has been compared to a man who sits by a river selling water. Selling water day after day at the same old station is a very tedious business and one sometimes gets the feeling that the Roshi would rather go fishing or swimming and get out of selling water if he could. One senses that what he really hopes is that you will not just sit there buying water day after day after day but will watch him closely, follow him, and discover where and how he goes about getting the water that he sells, and by this means discover the river of nirvana for yourself.

# What Minnesota can do for Zen Buddhism...

Members of the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center who have been born and raised in Minnesota and know the Minnesota way of life have little doubt that the center will eventually grow and flourish here, despite the many problems attending these first formative years. The basic attitudes are deeply compatible.

The attitude is still quite strong in Minnesota that it is basically right that people should work hard, save their money, help their children and neighbors, go easy on the intoxicants, abstain from lechery, and in general contribute what they can to the building and mending of their community. This has sometimes been put down as "the Protestant ethic" by modern intellectuals who tend to see these ideas as rather old-fashioned and narrow-minded--as though they only apply to old-time Protestants and nobody else.

What can be discovered in a study of Zen Buddhism is that these identical precepts have been arrived at by Buddhists on the other side of the world completely independent of Puritan Christianity. They are not just the narrow-minded cultural habits of White Anglo-Saxon Protestants, they are universal moral standards of man, and the modern intellectual who feels himself above them can, with some effort, discover that there are levels of smartness to which he apparently has not yet attained. The only significant difference between the Christian approach to these standards and the Buddhist approach is that in Christianity the standards are formulated as Com-

mandments--hard rules which one should obey whether he likes them or not. In the Buddhist approach these standards are regarded more as a part of one's true nature, which a person acquires naturally and effortlessly in the process of discovering himself.

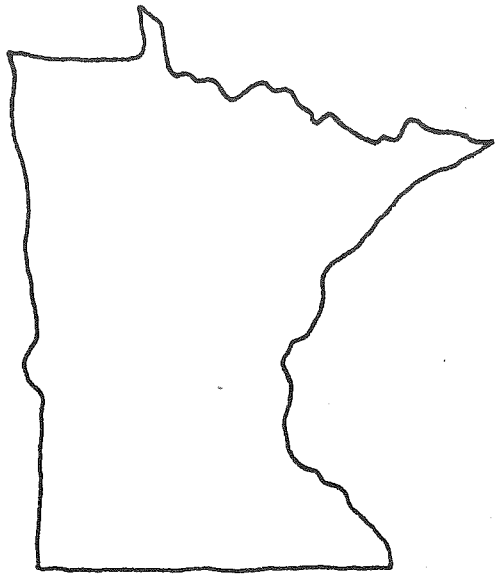
Beyond the compatibility of moral precepts there is an even deeper compatibility between Minnesota's long tradition of open-mindedness and the Mahayana mind of Zen. "If you are a good Christian," says the Zen master, "then to be a good Zen Buddhist you should be a better Christian. If you are an atheist, you should be a good athist. What is important in Zen is not what you say or believe, but the wholeheartedness with which you say it and believe it." Most Minnesotans will understand this attitude readily. It stems from a morality so deep it is often missed. One can accept opposing views because one really doesn't care, but that isn't the case either in Zen or in the Minnesota tradition. Instead one accepts opposing views because one cares more deeply for the living person saying them than for the correctness or incorrectness of the lifeless thoughts themselves. "Life doesn't spring from thoughts," Katagiri Roshi has said, "Thoughts spring from life." The complete open-mindedness and flexibility of the Zen mind stems not from any lack of morality but from a much deeper morality than any rules or dogmas can ever formulate. It is the same deeper morality which underlies Minnesota's traditional "social-cohesiveness" and which, it is hoped, will in time bind the two cultural traditions together.

# What Zen Buddhism can do for Minnesota

In recent years it has become tragically apparent that all the money and energy and care that have been invested in existing institutions for the upgrading of our society--schools, churches and the like--has somehow not been enough or has somehow failed to anticipate a need which is as yet only partly defined. It's notjust a Minnesota problem; it's a national problem. But drug abuse, crime, laziness, and an overall lack of purpose or goals have become so prevalent among adults as well as youth, and the answers provided have been so few or so stale, that sometimes it's difficult to even face the problem any more. Yet it has to be faced if there is to be a continuing sense of community in this state; and faced with a "beginner's mind."

With a beginner's mind we might ask many new questions and among them the question of whether maybe the apparent decay of our time might be rooted in a tendency of our culture to place way too much emphasis on the externals of life and not enough on the internals. We value "knowing" and "observing" and "enjoying" and "loving" and "getting" and "having" but how much do we value just plain "being"? To watch a good program on TV is an important part of an American's life. But to <u>be</u> a good person after the TV is shut off, one feels is not so important in our way of life. Is that right? Long ago in this country one went to school in order to be somebody. Not just to be rich or famous, but to be a person of real value. One never hears that expression any more. Now it's all knowing and getting and enjoying--and <u>being</u> is forgotten.

Zen Buddhism training is training in being. In meditation there is nothing to observe, nothing to know, nothing to enjoy, nothing to love, nothing to get. What occurs in Zen meditation is solely a growth in one's own being, which one never sees from day to day, but which one sometimes catches glimpses of as he looks back over a long period of time. Minnesotans can use more of this growth. Everyone can.



## The Schedule for The Minnesota Zen Meditation Center

| Zazen and Service | | Lectures | Instruction | Sesshin |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Monday through Friday | Saturday | | | |
| 5:00-5:40 am zazen<br>5:50-6:30 am zazen<br>6:30-6:45 am service<br>———————<br>7:30-8:10 pm zazen<br>8:20-9:00 pm zazen<br><br>(On Wed. night zazen starts at 7:00-7:40, service at 7:40-7:50) | 5:00-9:00 am (Includes breakfast and work period) | 7:50 pm Wed.<br>9:00 am Sat. | 6:30 pm Thursday | Every third weekend of the month (Sat. and Sun.) |

425 S.E. 5th Street
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"IN THE EXPERT'S MIND THERE ARE FEW POSSIBILITIES BUT IN THE BEGINNER'S MIND THERE ARE MANY."

--Shunryu Suzuki Roshi