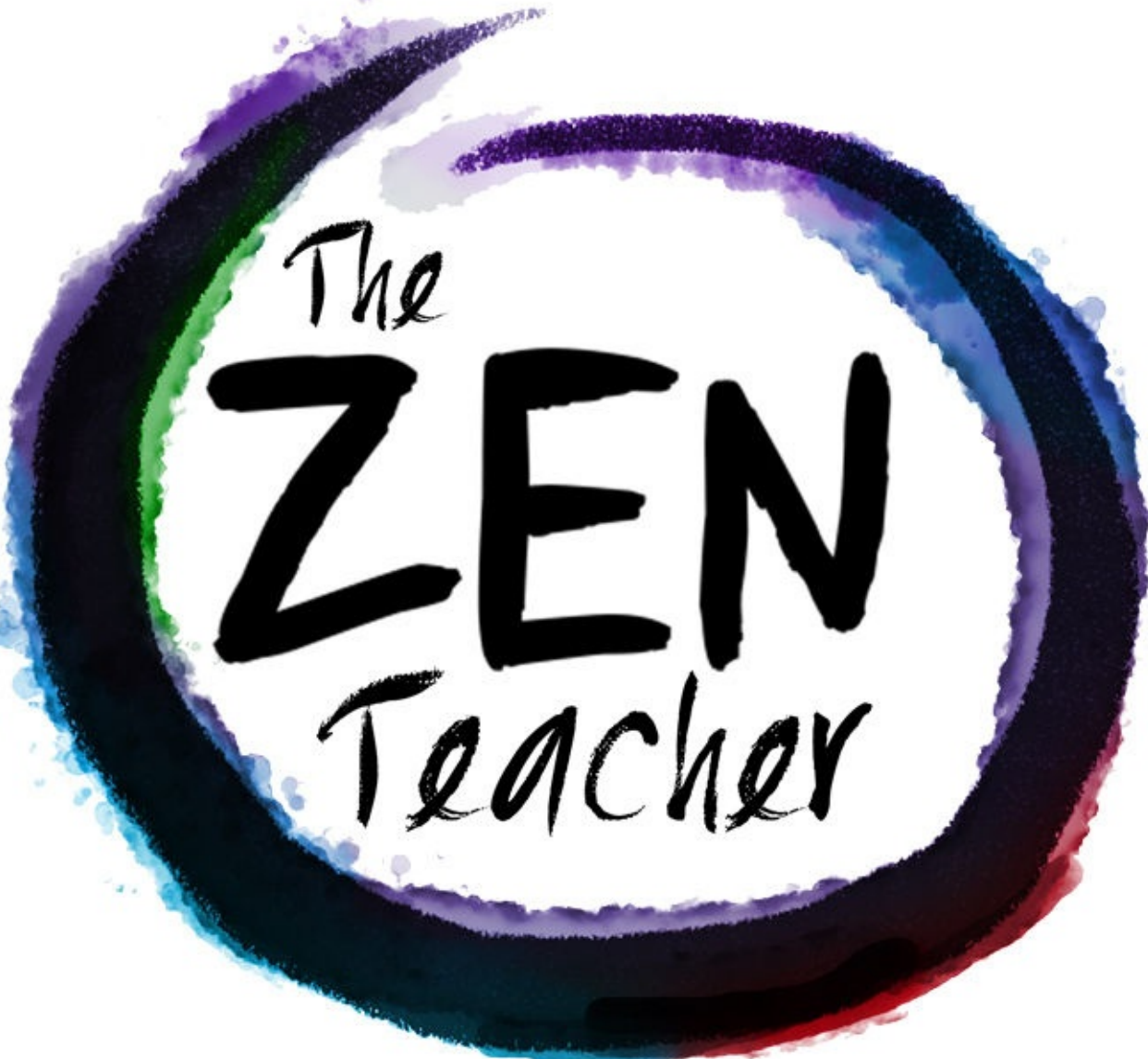


The
ZEN
Teacher

Creating
FOCUS,
SIMPLICITY, and
TRANQUILITY
in the Classroom

Dan Tricarico



The
ZEN
Teacher

The Zen Teacher

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To Tatum Ann and Tessa Marie

*You need not leave your room.
Remain sitting at your table and listen.
You need not even listen, simply wait.
You need not even wait, just learn to be quiet
And still and solitary.
The world will freely offer itself to you
To be unmasked. It has no choice;
It will roll in ecstasy at your feet.
—Franz Kafka*

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Introduction

The goal is the path.

—Zen saying

By the time I retire, I will have spent more than thirty years of my life teaching in a classroom. Furthermore, I will have spent the majority of those years in the same classroom. And when I plop down in my La-Z-Boy and toss the shawl across my knees, I will have taught nearly 6,000 students. Throw in summer school, extended assignments, serving as club advisor, and tutoring students after school, and I wouldn't be surprised if that number was double.

Working in education is different than many other jobs in that, unless one becomes an administrator, a teacher typically enters the classroom in his early twenties and leaves in his early-to-mid sixties exactly where he started. In other words, there is no corporate ladder to speak of. So in 1997, after realizing that a mortgage and a family would take more money than my teaching credentials alone could provide, I earned my master's degree in educational administration.

I realized early on, however, that the front office experience wasn't for me. It wasn't the long hours, supervising school dances, handling student referrals, monitoring behavior problems, or even dealing with the endless bureaucracy and piles of paperwork that deterred me. Rather, it would have taken me out of the classroom, and teaching is my passion. I wanted to be in a classroom with students, hovering over a text, a project, or a piece of writing, our sleeves rolled up, toiling together to create something or (if we were lucky) to make something better.

To me, that is teaching—that is the path.

In our profession, the movement is not up, but out. Our influence in the world has a ripple effect, like concentric circles on the surface of a lake. The students we encounter enter their adulthoods deeply changed by the experiences they have with us. We leave a footprint and thanks to our students, that footprint gets passed on to the future. And while it's difficult to pay your mortgage with a metaphorical footprint, it's a pretty profound way to spend your career and to, as Steve Jobs said, "make a dent in the universe."

We all know dispassionate teachers who do it for the paycheck and for whom teaching does not even begin to approach a "calling." I feel sorry for these folks. While it's true that

they are still capable of solid, competent work, I mourn the absence of passion that would make their (and by extension, their students') experience transcendent. I wish they knew the joy of the effort, the sweet exhaustion of the process, the motivating frustration of the “almost right” lesson, and the sleepy-eyed feeling of satisfaction that comes from knowing you’re on an important, meaningful journey—even if they are, like me, driving a 1998 Buick Century that has bald tires, a digital odometer that died six months after purchasing the car, and a steering wheel that is crumbling to pieces in their hands. And even though I am sometimes embarrassed to rattle up to the corner grocery store, I know there is a nobility to my pursuits.

As teachers, we are given an amazing opportunity to influence young people and profoundly affect how they see the world. It’s an awe-inspiring privilege, but it’s also a challenge. In the last decade, I’ve seen a number of excellent teachers break down, crash and burn, or just plain leave the profession. This is a result of the stressors they’ve encountered at their schools or in their classrooms and also because the industry has, in many ways, gone plain “loco.” My school has also witnessed a significant drop in the number of student-teacher applicants, a sobering indication that fewer people view teaching as a viable career. It’s a shame.

That’s why I began *The Zen Teacher* blog and eventually wrote this book. I am devoted to showing teachers how to maintain a sense of focus, simplicity, and tranquility in the face of the obstacles and problems the modern American educator encounters daily. I want to show them that they can not just survive, but thrive in the classroom.

Teachers do incredibly important and influential work—and they do it almost entirely devoid of the concrete, culturally valued rewards associated with professional employment, such as the big paycheck, the luxury car, or the corner office with the stunning view. Despite the limited tangible rewards, there is, perhaps, no career as fulfilling to the soul as education. The noble profession can provide a deep sense of Zen tranquility because we know that the ripples we create today can influence and even improve tomorrow. The path we travel day and day out with our students—and the manner in which we travel—is important. And if the goal is the path, then it helps to love the path.

Zen

What is Zen?

The white cloud is always the white cloud. The blue mountain is always the blue mountain.

—Tozan, Zen Master

The warmth of the sun. The greenness of the grass. The cries of a child.

When you notice your world exactly as it is—free from judgment and with detachment from anticipated outcomes—that is Zen.

Finding a moment of Zen can be a profoundly deep and meaningful pursuit. In that moment, you are fully present and are experiencing life in a way that the rest of the world—its insane marathon of haste, chaos, and busyness—typically ignores.

Tuned into the actuality of the present moment, you are living life.

As it happens.

Right now.

The pursuit of a Zen moment can begin with a practice as simple as focusing on your breathing, which is the life force that ties you to both the earth and to your soul, your essence, your inner being.

So take a moment.

Get in touch with the natural rhythm of your breath.

Breathe in. Breathe out.

Look around. Notice your surroundings.

Do not judge.

Just experience.

Sense what you sense.

Experience a Zen moment.

Throughout this book, you will find concepts, activities, and techniques that teach you how to incorporate Zen practices in a way that will not only transform your teaching style but also your life. With practice, they will leave you feeling more centered, focused, and peaceful.

In some ways, Zen is a very simple concept that is immediately understood. In other ways, however, this “simple” skill can take a lifetime to master.

And if that’s the case, then we’d better get started.

Zen Practice

The archer ceases to be conscious of himself as the one who is engaged in hitting the bull's-eye which confronts him

This state of unconsciousness is realized only when, completely empty and rid of the self, he becomes one with the perfecting of his technical skill, though there is in it something of a quite different order which cannot be attained by any progressive study of the art.

—Eugene Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery*

Everything I ever needed to know about Zen, I learned from Disneyland. If my family was planning a trip to the Magic Kingdom, the weeks before were pure torture. I spent all my waking hours waiting in agony. Waiting for my parents to tell us what time we were leaving. Waiting for school to end. Waiting to pack up the car in the morning, my eyes heavy with sleep, my heart pounding with anticipation. I focused most of my brainpower on our upcoming trip—picking the first ride I wanted to go on and thinking about which restaurants had the best food. I engaged in deep, philosophical discussions with my friends about the relative value of Tomorrowland versus Fantasyland.

And sleep the night before? Forget it!

The next thing I knew, I was waking up the morning after the trip, with only one question floating through my mind: What in the world just happened?

I had dreamed, for so long, of going on the Matterhorn, Haunted Mansion, and Pirates of the Caribbean rides, and now, suddenly, the trip was over. All I had were memories. What happened, I wondered, to the actual trip itself? Why did I have no recollection of actually being at Disneyland, no sense of enjoying the music, watching the parades, riding the rides, or snacking on popcorn and soda?

Why was it already over?

The answer, of course, is because—at the time—I had been totally immersed in the moment.

Even as a child standing in line for the Jungle Cruise, my Present Moment Awareness

(more about that later) was so amplified and my inability to appreciate my immediate experience so pronounced that the actual adventure came and went without my having a real conscious sense of actually having had it. The irony was that I was intuitive enough to be in the moment, but I wasn't quite enlightened enough to know how to acknowledge or appreciate the moment I was in, and so it slipped by me, completely unnoticed and unacknowledged.

I was focused. I was experiencing.

I was so there that the next thing I knew, I wasn't.

That's Zen for you. My youthful trips to Disneyland, therefore, can be counted as one of my earliest experiences with a Zen Practice.

To purists, "Zen Practice" typically refers to *zazen*, a sitting meditation that teaches participants how to completely immerse themselves into the present moment. While initially a facet of Zen Buddhism, Zen, when used as a philosophy, is not connected to any particular religion or doctrine and can be practiced by someone of any faith or religious persuasion. For our somewhat broader purpose, I'd like to suggest that your Zen Practice can be any activity that helps you hone your focus, improve your ability to stay rooted in the present, and be fully aware of what is happening directly before you.

Zen is similar to what university professor Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi named "Flow"—a state of being in which you are so totally engaged by an experience that everything else melts away and you lose track of time. It's what athletes and artists describe when they say they're "in the zone." If you were to call a friend and she said, "I'm sorry; I was outside gardening, and I lost track of time. I almost didn't hear the phone ring," she was participating in her own Zen Practice.

Zen, when used as a philosophy, is not connected to any particular religion.

This is, in part, what German philosopher Eugen Herrigel was referring to in the quote at the start of this chapter when he said, "The archer ceases to be conscious of himself." Although Herrigel said part of a Zen Practice is the pursuit of the technical skill, he also suggested there is "something of quite a different order which cannot be obtained" by practicing—that is, the spiritual side. A Zen Practice allows you to lose yourself to a greater sense of intuition, intensity, and energy that arises from both the focus on, and the detachment from, the activity at hand.

For me, surfing always seemed to be one of the most quintessential Zen Practices. A single person (the surfer) makes attempt after attempt to become one with an element

nature (the wave) and experiences both Yin (riding the wave) and Yang (frequent and inglorious wipeouts). The amateur surfer receives no money or other compensation for his efforts. There is no finish line, no winners, and no losers. So why do it? Because the surfer has found something that allows him to practice peace, experience flow, and become one with nature.

Teaching, too, can be a Zen Practice. When you are in your classroom, completely focused on your students or captivated by the lesson you're presenting, that's Zen. Perhaps you were caught up in your lecture on the Trail of Tears, or lost in the physics project where students built and operated a balloon launcher, or maybe you were moved by a scene in the drama class where the student actors were totally present and in touch with the reality of the moment. Teaching's ability to help us stay in the moment is one of our profession's greatest gifts and why it shares such a kinship with Zen. When our teaching comes from who we are and originates from our passions and our heart, we increase the likelihood that we will experience flow and be "in the zone." Being open to what may happen, without sticking to rigid, anticipated outcomes, and showing compassion and gratitude to those you encounter in the classrooms, the hallways, and the administration office allows you to treat your teaching moments as potentially transcendent experiences.

In the interest of balance, you may also want to develop a Zen Practice outside the classroom. It can be any hobby or activity, as long as it provides an experience that takes you beyond the immediate constraints of time and space and that replenishes your energy, passion, and vitality as a teacher. For some, as I said, it might be surfing. For you, it may be writing, sewing, singing, painting, acting, running, hiking, or bicycling. The key is to find a pursuit that is in sync with your personal rhythms and for which you can muster a bit of passion so that the practice will be fun and effortless.

You can intentionally create your own Zen moments in the classroom, which can lead to a great sense of peace and centeredness.

My father used music to pursue his own sense of Zen, though he never would have called it that. In the evenings, after putting in a full day's work at his day job and then toiling a few more hours at a second job, my father sat in his recliner, turned on some classic rock or the blues, put his head back, and he was gone. He would mentally detach and remove himself from the worries of the day. Having witnessed these musical odysseys growing up, I have no doubt that he was truly "in the zone." And if you ever asked him, I'm sure he'd say it was

pretty wonderful feeling.

Much in the way my father used music, as a teacher, you can intentionally create your own Zen moments in the classroom, which can lead to a great sense of peace and centeredness. With some luck and practice, you will notice a positive difference in your students as well, as a result of you deciding to be more present and intentional with the moments you're giving in the classroom.

What Is Your Zen Practice?

In Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within, author Natalie Goldberg's Zen teacher asks her, "Why don't you make writing your practice? If you go deep enough with writing, it will take you every place." Like Goldberg, I think of writing as part of my Zen Practice. When a writing session is going well, there is nothing else on my radar; I am fully consumed by the words in front of me. It's a very pure, very liberating feeling, and it's one of the places in my life where I can lose myself fully in the now and truly be present.

To discover your own Zen Practice, ask yourself, "What do I love?" and "Where do I feel most in tune with the world, the universe, or myself?" This may be where you discover the essence of the activity you want to pursue. As a teacher, your answer may, of course, lie in the classroom, but what about outside of school? For example, your Zen Practice could be gardening, fishing, cooking, or anything else that lets you focus on your passions, explore your obsessions, be in the moment, and experience flow.

Remember, when you're pursuing your Zen Practice, there is no goal. There is no finish line. It's the doing—the routines, rituals, and techniques—that rewards you; the performance of the task is your prize. I know this is a wildly foreign concept because we are accustomed to wanting to know "What's in it for me?" and, even as teachers, we have a tendency to focus on achieving objectives and outcomes.

Where do you feel most in tune with the world, the universe, or yourself?

Now think back to the surfer. While the surfer can enter competitions and vie for prizes, fame, money, and adulation from adoring fans, most people who don wetsuits and paddle out onto the waves are, I suspect, just hoping to dance with the ocean one more time, feel that connection to nature or, in a less poetic sense, simply get a little exercise. They use each wave as an opportunity to improve, to maybe spend a little more time on the board before falling off.

A personal Zen Practice can be a transformative way to pursue a greater sense of fulfillment, peace, and tranquility. What's nice is that you get to decide how committed you want to be to your Zen Practice. Regardless of where you are on the path—whether you're being introduced to Zen for the first time here or are choosing to study more in a discipline you've dabbled in—I hope this book will be a stepping stone on your Zen journey.

Zen Teacher Assignment

Answer these questions:

1. What do you love to do?
 2. What activities do you participate in when you often lose track of time?
 3. What if you engaged in them regularly and used them as vehicles for peace and focus?
- If that works for you, you may have just discovered your personal Zen Practice.



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