



Daniel Levin

the

ZEN

book

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## ***Introduction***

I remember being told a story. Although I'd heard it a thousand times before, as I listened to it this time it changed my life. Have you ever seen that black-and-white drawing that, when viewed one way, looks like a vase, while if you look at it differently, it appears to be two faces in profile? When you see one of the images, you can't see the other. This is what happened to me upon hearing that one story again . . . for the first time.

I also recall hearing "God is love" for the first time. I thought, *That is so beautiful*. Later, I heard "God is love" again, and I couldn't believe that I'd never understood it before. And when I heard it yet again years later, it was entirely new and wonderful, and the realization was as if I'd never heard it. Each time I heard "God is love," it went deeper into me—and it was as if I was peeling layers off of myself to ultimately discover anew my innermost being.

My hope in writing down the sayings and stories in this book is that you'll discover the "Zen Mind," the mind that sees all things for the first time. Each time you read a story, it will be as if you've never read it before. And each time, the meaning of the story will enter you anew.

A drop of water that continuously drips on a rock eventually makes a hole; similarly, these are sayings and stories that, when read over time, peel away the layers of who we think we "should" be and almost imperceptibly allow us to become who we are.

The stories in this book come from many different places. Many of them I've read in books, others have been told to me by my teachers, and still others are from the great religious traditions. Regardless, they all have the power to change perceptions by offering a new way of looking at something we've seen a thousand times before.

When we're ready to see, we see. When we're ready to learn, we remember. This, then, is a book of memories. It isn't meant to teach, but rather to remind us

of what we already know.

I share with you now one simple story that changed my life.

*A man walked into a Shiva temple [Shiva is the Hindu God of destruction—the destroyer of bad habits and so forth]. In the middle of the room was a lingam [a phalliclike stone]. The man sat down on the floor and put his feet up on the lingam.*

*The priest of the temple rushed in and asked, “Don’t you know what a sin you’ve just done? No one can put their feet on such a holy shrine! The punishment for such an act is eternity in hell.”*

*The man, humble in his way, answered, “Please accept my apology, for I did not know that what I did was wrong. Can you please place my feet somewhere where God won’t be offended?”*

*Immediately, the priest took the man’s feet off the stone and threw them to the ground. To the man’s surprise, before his feet could touch the ground, another Shiva lingam appeared to catch them. Not believing his eyes, the priest again threw the man’s feet from the second lingam to the floor. And once again, a lingam appeared to catch the man’s feet.*

*This time the humble man, with a glimmer in his eye, asked the priest to place his feet where God did not exist. At that, the priest bowed to the feet of this holy man and apologized.*

*The holy man replied, “There is no place where God is not.”*

When I heard this, it struck me that if God is everywhere and in everything, what I needed to do was see the perfection that already existed in all things. Nothing needed changing— everything had perfection already in it. I realized that my pain comes from wanting things to be other than they are. When I accept things as they are, I’m completely happy.

In Zen, the saying *Wabi Sabi* means “the perfectly imperfect.” Since nothing in this world is perfect, the practice of *Wabi Sabi* is seeing that which is perfect in all

of life's imperfections.

May all sentient beings be released from their suffering and find happiness.





***Be  
yourself.***

You are so beautiful. Never before in creation has there been anyone exactly like you.

You are unique in the whole universe—what could be more beautiful than that?

***When we accept  
ourselves completely,***

enlightenment happens.

***The teacher  
walked around  
the room***

and told the disciples that they'd all be free. One student was told he'd be free this

lifetime, another in the next lifetime, and so on. When he got to his closest disciple, the teacher told him that he'd be free in 100,000 lifetimes. As the other students cringed in pain, they didn't see that this certain disciple was up and dancing. When they noticed, they came to him and asked, "Didn't you hear what the teacher said—it will take you 100,000 more lifetimes to be free?"

The student replied, "Didn't you hear what he said? In 100,000 lifetimes I will be *free!*"

At that moment, the teacher came over and slapped this disciple on the chest, and he immediately became enlightened. The teacher wanted the others to see the devotion of a true disciple.



***You are  
perfect exactly  
as you are.***

With all your flaws and problems,  
there's no need to change anything.  
All you need to change is the thought  
that you have to change.





***A beautiful way  
to pray for others***

is to breathe in their suffering and breathe out your joy.  
With each exhalation, feel that you're expelling their pain.

With each inhalation, feel happiness filling the  
space created by pulling out their pain.  
(Do this as a means to end your own suffering, too.)

***A judge came to a teacher***

and asked him how he could give up so much for the sake of his beliefs. The teacher said, “A thief broke into my house and while he was there, he dropped something that he’d stolen from another house that was of more value than all that he’d taken from me. I’m wondering what I should do: Should I try to return the jewel that the thief left?”

The judge said, “Foolish man, keep what you have! It’s of more value, so don’t try to return it.”

The teacher then looked the judge in the eye and said, “Follow your own advice. The things of this world are meaningless when you’ve found the source of true happiness. What the thief left me is far greater than what he took away.”

In that moment, the judge became a student of the teacher.





***The only problem  
that ever exists***

is not accepting things the way they are.  
This is the cause of all suffering.

***Practice  
being nothing—***

*no thing.*

In doing so,  
you'll become  
everything.

### ***A Zen monk was invited***

to the monastery of another religion to discuss religious practice. He told them that if they'd meditate and live mindfully in all that they do, enlightenment would surely come. One of the other monks there said, "But teacher, we live a simple life of prayer without effort, waiting for the grace of God to come and illuminate us."

The Zen monk replied simply, "In the practice of Zen, we believe that God has already done his share. All that awaits doing is our part."

### ***Watch the clouds. . . .***

As they pass unruffled over peaks and valleys, they're not elated by the peaks, nor bored by the valleys. That is the Zen mind: neither elated nor bored, but rather always at peace.

***Sentient  
beings  
everywhere***

***want the  
same thing:***

to get out of pain and be happy. The delusion of this world is that we think we're the only ones who have pain—we imagine that everyone else's life is going great. When we realize that we're all the same, that we all have pain and suffering, then we see the world with the utmost compassion.







***A student had an amazing  
revelation that truly  
touched his soul.***

He awoke to find that God is everywhere. And as he wandered the streets, he smiled as he saw his beloved in all things. Before he knew it, he was walking right in the path of an elephant being driven by a man who had lost control. The elephant was running right toward the student! *No fear*, he thought. *God is in me, God is in the elephant.*

The driver of the elephant was now screaming at the top of his lungs: “Wild elephant! Get out of the way!” The student kept telling himself, *God is in me, God is*



*in the ele*—BAM! Before he could finish thinking the word *elephant*, he was struck down by the uncontrollable beast. The student awoke in the hospital days later, saying he didn't understand: If God was everywhere, how could this have happened?

And his friend said, "God was also in the elephant driver, telling you to get out of the way."

***The  
river flows,  
the mountain  
remains motionless.***

The river can't remain still, nor can the mountain flow. Is one right or wrong? Our *dharma* (duty) is to do what's ours to do, not to be like others.

***Watch the caterpillar  
become a butterfly:***

Does he not transform? Is it because of his effort that this happens? Why then do we think that we're responsible for changing ourselves?

***Run after the  
things of this world,***

and quite often what you seek so desperately runs away from you. Covet nothing, crave nothing, and celebrate whatever comes—this is the way of contentment.

***Perfection  
isn't found  
in everything  
going right,***

but rather in accepting the beauty of what's happening moment to moment.





***There's a story  
of three men in search  
of enlightenment.***

Their teacher told them that he'd take them to a field to visit a wall that they wouldn't be able to get over on their own. Yet on the other side of the wall was everything they were seeking. After their teacher left, the three men promised each other that they wouldn't go over unless all three went together.

When they got to the wall, the first man climbed on the backs of the other two, stood on top of the wall, and said to the others, "It's so beautiful." And without hesitation, he jumped over to the other side.

The remaining two looked at each other and exclaimed, “I can’t believe he did that! We made a pact that we’d only go over together.” Nevertheless, the second man ended up doing the same to the third man.

In shock, the third man returned to town to tell his story. He ended up bringing thousands to the wall, helping them see the other side, and then assisting them up and over. He sacrificed all that he sought so that others could have what they wanted. At the end of his days, his students hoisted him up on their backs and helped *him* get to the top of the wall. As he peered over, he saw in an instant why his brothers all jumped the second they saw what was there, but then he looked at all the people on this side of the wall—all that he could still bring over—and he jumped back to the side from which he came. In that moment the wall dropped, and all that were in the field with him became enlightened.

For some, their work is to help others, but for others, their work is simply to change themselves. Neither is right or wrong, better or worse.





***Practice kindness,***

not because it's right or because someone tells you to, but because it will bring you happiness.

***No matter who we are—***

doctor, lawyer, prostitute, or thief—we're all the same. We fear the same things, long for the same intimacy, and want to love and be loved.

***The waves go in and out,  
crash, and remain still.***

This is the ebb and flow of life. Everything is constantly changing: Excitement is followed by quiet, which is followed by upheaval, which is followed by peace. Become whatever's happening, always content to be with what is.

***Lose a  
flower  
and you can  
easily find  
another,***

lose integrity and you'll wander for some time until you find it again.





*The monks in the Zendo*

***decided that they were going  
to plant a garden.***

They bought seeds of the most beautiful flowers they could find, planted them, and watered the soil, taking care to give the flower bed the perfect amount of sunlight and water. They would have the most beautiful garden ever!

One by one, the flowers grew, and each was more beautiful than the next. The monks were so proud of what they'd grown. A villager came by, saw their garden, and noticed that flowering weeds were all over the place. When he asked the monks why they hadn't pulled the weeds, they replied, "Because we never saw them."

***No  
matter  
what  
people  
say  
about  
you,***

know who you are. Their blame can't injure you, nor can their praise elevate you.  
You are what you are; nothing anyone can say can change that.



## ***The holy man was glorified by the whole town***

as a being who lived his life with purity and dignity. In the village was a beautiful young girl who resided with her family next door. When her parents found out that she was pregnant, they were livid and demanded to know who had done this to her. She refused to tell them, but after much time and harassment, she finally revealed that the father of her child was the holy man. Outraged, the parents went to tell him what had happened. He looked at them and said, “Is that so?”

When the baby was born, he was brought to the holy man, who by now had totally lost his reputation. The baby’s grandparents demanded that he care for the child, which he did without complaint. Finding everything the baby needed, he happily took care of him. Some time later, the boy’s mother could no longer live with herself and told her parents the truth: The real father was a young man in the village. The parents were astonished and went to the holy man and begged his forgiveness for what their daughter had done. When they asked if they could have the child back, the holy man simply replied, “Is that so?”





***Become aware.***

It's a good practice to watch life as you would a movie: Be completely involved with it while it's happening, and then leave it behind when it's done. This is the way of detachment.

## ***Feel gratitude for everything.***

When we see every situation as being perfect just the way it is, happiness grows and grows.

### ***Two frogs were happily hopping around***

when they saw a big pail sitting in front of them. They both were so interested that they couldn't control themselves—they decided to jump up onto the rocks around them to see if they could find out what was inside the bucket. When they couldn't see from that vantage point, they decided to jump in together, splashing into a pail of cream.

At first they were thrilled and drank until they could drink no longer . . . and then they realized that they couldn't get out. Each time they jumped, they hit up against the slippery side of the bucket and fell back in. They kept trying and trying, until the bigger one said, "I can do this no longer. I'm too tired." He gave up and drowned in the bucket.

The little frog told himself, *I'd rather die trying to get out of here than just give up and sink to the bottom.* He continued to paddle and paddle and then he'd try to jump, only to hit the side and slip down again. This went on for some time, until as he was paddling he felt something solid under his foot. He stepped on to this solid thing, jumped, and he was out of the bucket! By continuing to paddle, he'd churned the cream into butter, and was able to jump out.

Never give up, for we never know when the moment when everything will

change will come.

***Be  
thankful  
for anyone  
in your life  
who's a problem.***

They're your teachers, for they show you where you truly stand. A great saint once said to a disciple who came to him complaining about someone else: "He is your greatest blessing. In fact, if he were not here, it would behoove us to go out and find one like him."

***Be  
watchful  
of those  
who bring  
only praise.***

Not because what they say isn't true, but rather because you might start believing their words and begin acting differently.



### ***Fear debilitates.***

When we're scared, we stand like a deer caught in the headlights: not able to move away from the very thing that frightens us. To escape fear, all we have to do is keep moving.

### ***Create space in your mind.***

Whenever you find yourself thinking that you're right, step back and allow your mind to expand. For the moment, assume that others understand why you believe

***Live life  
in the present.***

This moment is the only thing that's real. Worrying about the future and lamenting the past only crowds out the beauty of what is happening now.

***Be yourself.***

People will try to change you into what they think you should be. When they're right, listen; when they're not, have the courage to be yourself.

***A certain teacher,***

known for the simplicity of his ways, came to the village where a very learned scholar had a large following. The students of the learned man left their teacher to go see this simple wandering man. While in his presence, they were struck by the love that flowed from him and were swept away by the love that he cultivated in their own hearts.

Seeing the effect this man was having on his students, the learned scholar went out to teach him a lesson. He asked questions that were meant to trick him with the complexity of the knowledge required to answer. The simple man simply replied, "All that is necessary is that you love completely." The scholar tried again to ask another question, and the simple man again stated, "All that is necessary is that you love completely." The scholar was getting frustrated, yet he couldn't help feeling a love in his heart that he'd never felt before.