

Zen and the Art of Civil Liberty - Overview

By Dennis Watson

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Introduction

When I was young the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was very popular. People in the West were beginning to look at the ideas of Zen and apply them to their own outlook on life. Two worlds came together and in so doing both became more enriched. The reason the book appealed to me was because I rode a motorcycle and I had studied Zen in the martial arts.

Zen is all about experiencing life in the moment. To talk about Zen while riding across the country on a motorcycle is fitting because on a motorcycle you are very much in the elements experiencing them first hand. When you are driving your car in the rain or snow you are separate from the elements like being in a plastic bubble.

On a motorcycle you experience the warmth of the sun, the dampness of the rain and the bitter cold of the winter wind first hand. It is very Zen. There's no way to get around it. However, for me Zen is more than experiencing life in the moment. For me Zen is about aspiring to something higher.

For me, Mother Teresa was a Zen Master just like Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mohamed, Buddha, Moses, even Jesus Christ. All of these wise teachers taught us to aspire to something higher. Helping others isn't just a Christian principle; it's a Zen principle. Selfishness and greed are not tenants of an enlightened sage. Treating others the way you want to be treated is.

For me, riding a motorcycle across the country and reflecting on lost liberty is very timely since the Constitution hangs by a thread and civil liberty is under constant attack not from terrorists or foreign threats but from local politicians and enemies within.

Although Zen can apply to any school of thought, most of us think of Buddhism when we hear the term Zen. Likewise, when we hear Buddhism most of us think of the Dalai Lama in Tibet. A wise sage inspiring love and tolerance with his passive aggressive reminder of the fact that Tibet is not free. Communism is not good. The Dalai Lama is a witness of that fact. His struggle for Tibet's liberation is evidence of it.

Tying Zen in with civil liberty is as natural as riding a motorcycle so we can experience real beauty and the elements first hand. As Lao Tzu said "The journey of a thousand miles begins with one step." So this journey begins.

Chapter One: Who am I?

Although Zen is all about experiencing life in the moment, I will briefly define who I am before we embark on this journey so the reader can understand where I am coming from so they can put my thoughts into perspective.

Jackie Chan made a funny movie called Who am I? His character in the movie had a head injury and amnesia was the result. He forgot who he was. They called him who am I because he kept asking that question over and over again.

Most of us when we're young go through an identity crisis of some sort as we struggle to define who we are as individuals and how we fit into this great scheme of life. After high school I went traveling around the world for four years to define myself. Now that I am an old man I know who I am and I'm Ok with that.

Who am I? I am no one yet I am everyone. I am no better than any other person on the planet yet I am as good as anyone. As the Rankin Family stated, I'm just a rider on a Western highway, from the mountains to the sea. I'm just a rider on a Western highway who thanks God that he is free.

I was born a free man in North Vancouver. I appreciate the outdoors. I was taught at a young age the importance of community service and the value of hard work. I was raised to respect cultural diversity and to judge a man by the content of his character not by the color of his skin. I am a Canadian.

When I was young I was inspired by an American named Curtis Sliwa who founded a volunteer group called the Guardian Angels. No one knows what that is now. I joined the group in Canada and went to New York City to meet Curtis and see for myself how they did things in the big city. Curtis was inspiring, motivating and hard working. They called him the Rock. Curtis did what others said couldn't be done on a regular basis.

Much of my youth was devoted to combating violent crime. When the crack plague swept the United States back in the /80's Curtis led us to that battle head on. I still believe in the New York Model. I saw it. I was there.

My blog about the Vancouver Gang War called Gangsters Out has created quite a stir in Canada and has received a huge amount of traffic. Yet that is not what this book is about. This book is about moving forward and inviting people to leave gangs and drugs behind so they can find a better life. One that is much more fulfilling.

In the United States there is a new epidemic found within the opiate crisis. Macklemore sang about it in his song stating my Doctor was a Drug Dealer. Pharmaceutical companies get rich from over prescribing opiates, the cost of which forces people to turn to heroin on the street. Images of middle class Americans overdosing in their car with kids in the back seat have broken our hearts.

I am from the land of BC Bud. Organized crime trades the BC Bud in the US for cocaine and brings it back to Canada to be sold as crack remixing the US Crack epidemic in

Canada. Crystal meth and heroin continue to be a Canadian scourge and feeble attempts at harm reduction have become harm promotion only to compound the problem a hundred fold. Death from fentanyl use has consequently skyrocketed.

So how do we overcome addiction? How do we aspire to something higher when we are a slave to drugs? It begins by defining who we are. I am a human being. I am not a drug addict. Likewise, so is every person out there struggling with addiction.

Drug addicts aren't drug addicts per say. That is not who they are, that is just a symptom of their slavery. A prisoner in jail isn't just a prisoner. That isn't who or what they are. Who and what they are is far more than the slavery they are trapped in.

Martin Luther King taught that "Man is more than a whirling vagabond of electrons; man is a child of God." We can meditate on that koan all we want. We can try to comprehend what that really means or we can simply embrace it.

Suffice it to say that I am a human being. I have a mind and a heart. I have worth just like every other drug addict on the street. Descartes coined the phrase "I think therefore I am." If I have a mind and am capable of rational thought then I exist - I am. If I have a heart and can feel for others then I exist - I am. I feel. I love. I care. I am capable of making a difference in my own life and in the lives of others.

Since Zen is all about experiencing life in the moment I want to talk about how we feel. Not in a Dr. Phil toxic way but in an intimate heartfelt honest way. We cannot truly define ourselves until we get in touch with our rational thoughts and our intimate feelings. That is what defines us as human beings.

So to answer the question Who am I? I am a human being. I think, I feel, I care.

That founding premise will be the perspective from which we embark on this journey across Canada and the United States in search of civil liberty. Peace.

Chapter Two: Defining Zen

Defining Zen is a bit like naming something that can't be named. Bruce Lee taught Jeet Kune do. It was a style without style - a form without form. It was a martial art like water. Ready to adapt but capable of wearing down and subduing an opponent.

Zen begins with meditating on or contemplating riddles known as koans like what is the sound of one hand clapping? Or if a tree falls in the forest and no one is there to hear it fall, does it really make a sound when it falls?

Zen questions and begins with getting the mind to think and to think outside the box. I submit that the next stage of Zen is to feel and to understand those feelings. The two go hand in hand. Asking questions so we think and reaching out with our hearts so we feel.

I think therefore I am. I feel therefore I act.

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