

My introduction to the dharma began, as it has for many, with a search for a way to relieve the suffering in my life. I had been experiencing a growing sense of hopelessness and frustration over what seemed the pointlessness of this life. The big question of “What am I?” was very strong in my mind, although I was not conscious of the question as such. But, there was definitely a strong feeling of “What is this life for? What is the way to live it best?” I lacked clear direction. My only sense of how to relieve the psychological discomfort I was feeling was to try to get more “things.” Money, material goods, relationships, experiences... whatever I thought at the moment would fill the space inside. I had not grown up in a spiritual tradition, and felt from an early age that organized religion was based on false assumptions and fear, and was rife with hypocrisy and elitism. I wanted no part of it. I looked to philosophy and literature, seeking thinkers who were logical, rational, and who espoused self-reliance and stoicism in the face of adversity. Still, however much I reflected on the words I read, there was no release from suffering. Often anger, cynicism, and resignation were what I read in these philosophers’ writings, and what I felt inside. However much I tried to fortify my mind and body against the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that were causing so much suffering, I only succeeded in closing myself off more. I became increasingly isolated, and began eroding relationships with those who cared about me. Part of my attempts to become a “strong” person included a long time spent practicing various martial arts. This physical practice was, as I see it now, another attempt to make myself invulnerable to the cruel world around me.

I carried on this way through five years or so as a college student, becoming more and more isolated and depressed. Then, within a period of two months, two separate experiences occurred which brought me to the lowest point of my life. The first was an extremely painful injury to the vertebrae of my lower back. This was an injury which causes physical discomfort to this day, and which at the time brought my martial arts progress to an abrupt stop. Years of dedication to the pursuit of one of the only goals that had meaning to me, only to have it suddenly taken away, to feel physically weak and vulnerable, brought about an intense depression.

Shortly afterwards, as a result of being the angry, selfish, and withdrawn person I had become, my girlfriend of five years ended the relationship we had had for so long. I now felt like a person completely adrift, with the things that had come to define my life suddenly pulled away.

Having read a number of books on martial arts philosophy, I had heard references to Zen many times; although, curiously, no writer ever seemed to explain this word very well. I only sensed that it had something to do with the highest levels of martial arts achievement. One day, shortly after these experiences, I was poking through a box of used books in this local store that sold incense, punk rock t-shirts, and assorted junk. A book caught my eye when I saw the word “Zen” on the cover. Because I had seen the word in my martial arts books, I bought the book on a whim. The book was *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac. I took the book home and read it that night. Then I re-read it. Then I read it again. I sensed that there was something important there. Something I hadn’t quite seen before. I could relate to the Smith character’s introverted personality and search

for meaning through living a simple life. But what fascinated me, like Smith, was the character Japhy. He seemed to embody the traits that I felt were most important: simplicity, self-reliance, intelligence, detachment from the pursuits of mainstream society. Yet while having these qualities, he showed no evidence of anger, bitterness, arrogance, or depression. He seemed a man at peace with himself and with life, a man who truly enjoyed his life and drew others to him with his openness, rather than pushing them away. I had an immediate sense that this was an example of the kind of person I wanted to be.

I then began reading sutras and books about Buddhism. Immediately, I encountered the teaching of the four noble truths and my mind was struck. Suddenly, the pattern of my life became clear. I felt the truth of these teachings in a way that I had not experienced before. I knew deep down, and with a sense of relief, that a path lay before me, a path that had been traveled by others before, which I could follow to become the person I wanted to be. Finally, after encountering the dharma, for the first time I felt I had found a direction which I could truly believe in.

This “entering the stream” experience for me was some fourteen years or so ago. Since then, life has taken many twists and turns. But always behind each experience, pleasant or unpleasant, has been this direction. A great faith and a great question, and the direction they point to, has shaped who I am and how I’ve lived my life since those days. It has been a slow, gradual unfolding for me. There have been periods of intense, overzealous practice, and periods of loose wandering in samsara. The poet William Blake once wrote that “the truth cannot be told, so as to be understood, and not be believed.” This belief in the truth of Buddhist teachings has not wavered, no matter how strong or weak my practice resolve has been. I continue to seek a balance, a simplicity, a life which effortlessly embodies the dharma.

The eightfold path as taught by the Buddha led me to ask how I could practice right livelihood. I gave this question a great deal of consideration, and it led me to a career as a public school teacher. The job of any teacher is to use skillful means to impart wisdom and understanding to his students, and to give students the tools to continue their progress independently. The Zen teachers I have encountered in the Kwan Um School have selflessly done this for me. I feel that the seeds of their teachings have grown to the point where I can begin to teach this path to others.

The person I am today bears so little resemblance to the one of fourteen years ago that it almost seems unreal, a dream. Although we always speak of how there is nothing to attain in Zen practice, every moment of practice is still a drop of transformation. The seed that these drops have been watering is a flower of compassion. It’s not at all what I started out seeking. I began along the path of the dharma asking “how can I use this wisdom to ease my suffering?” But with each step, each glimpse of clear mind, the direction increasingly points to “how can I use this wisdom to help others and ease the suffering of this world?” Experiencing great suffering, and subsequently having my mind struck by the teachings of the Buddha, have been and continue to be my primary motivations for Zen practice. Over the years, added to these motivations, is the wish to share what I have learned in order to ease the suffering of others. 