

# Meditation and

Robert Blender

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# Morality

**Question:** Briefly explain what you see as the essence of your faith—its key principles.

**Answer:** Zen Buddhism does not dictate a belief system; however, there are some traditional principles. Practitioners are encouraged to “realize” these insights for themselves, not to accept them as doctrine. One insight is that existence is inextricably interconnected, and all things are “empty” or devoid of self-nature. The idea of a separate distinct self that divides me from you is a delusion. The function of this insight is to help this suffering world.

Ethical precepts are also an essential part of Zen practice. The basic rule is to do good and avoid evil, but rules do not make morality. True morality comes from within and arises naturally as we realize our true nature in this world. Each moment of this human life is a precious opportunity to be mindful of these actualities.

**Q:** How did you come to your faith?

**A:** I had read several books by Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, during high school. In 1985, I took a college class in Eastern religions. A member of the local Zen Center came and spoke to the class. We were invited to an introductory evening, which I attended. I subsequently practiced Japanese Rinzai Zen and later found Korean Zen.

**Q:** How does Zen Buddhism differ from other forms of Buddhism? How does the Dalai Lama, the leader of Tibetan Buddhists, factor into the practice of Zen?

**A:** Zen is distinguished by its emphasis on meditation, de-emphasis on words and conceptual thought, and its everyday, here-and-now focus.

The Dalai Lama is the leader of the largest faction of Tibetan Buddhists. He is not a teacher in a Zen lineage, but he is a great teacher and spokesman for Buddhism. Many Zen Buddhists revere him as such.

**Q:** What are the duties involved with being an abbot?

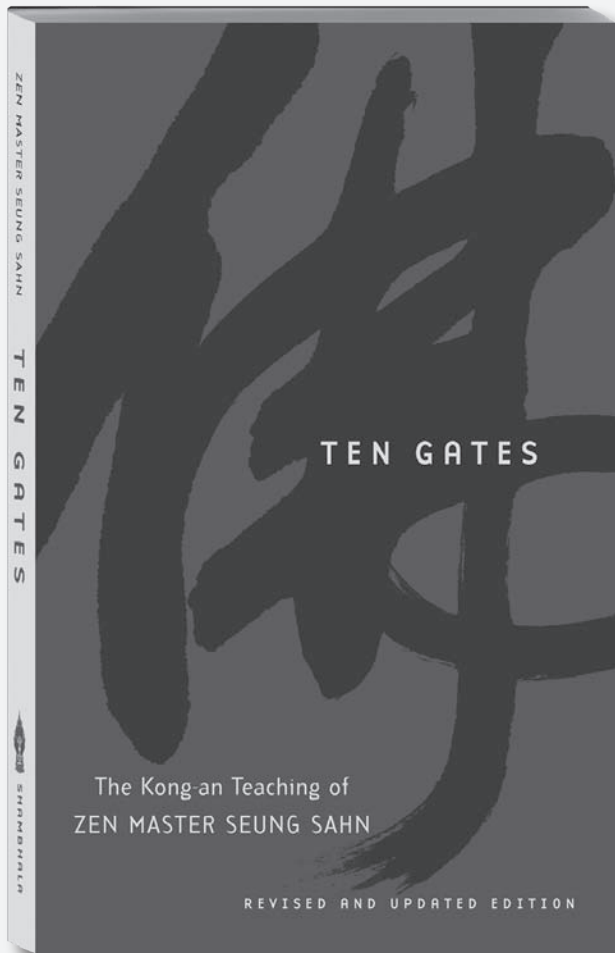
**A:** The position of abbot at our Zen Center is an elected administrative post. The abbot is chairman of the board of directors and oversees the work of other officers, such as the treasurer and director of membership. The abbot does fundraising to support the center and serves as the official spokesperson for the Center. The abbot hosts and attends to visiting teachers and monks. With the guidance of our teacher, the abbot has overall responsibility for the welfare and direction of the Zen Center.

**Q:** How does Zen Buddhism differ from the Abrahamic faiths of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism?

**A:** Zen Buddhism is not a text-based religion. In fact, some say it is not a religion at all, but a practice. Zen is a form of Buddhism that emphasizes sitting meditation as a way to enlightenment.

One major difference between Zen Buddhism and Western religions is that Zen does not rely on a conception of God outside of ourselves. One clear example of this distinction is that the Biblical commandments begin, “Thou shalt not...,” but Zen Buddhist moral precepts are phrased, “I vow not to...” The former posits an entity outside of ourselves telling us what constitutes moral behavior; the latter is an expression of intention emanating from the practitioner.

One other major difference from Western faiths is that Zen is inclusive of other faith paths. It does not present



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itself as the one or even a better way. All ways are different windows onto one ultimate reality.

Zen does not suppose that holiness is something other than everyday life. We make our own heaven and hell. Zen also posits that there is nowhere to go to find the ultimate reality; rather, that it exists here and now. Zen is often a practice of learning to rest in ambiguity, or not knowing; Western religions seem to offer absolute, unambiguous answers.

**Q:** How is it alike?

**A:** All faith paths are a response to existential questions such as: What is this life? What is its purpose? What is a good life? What am I? Zen Buddhism is no differ-

ent. Abrahamic religions have meditative practices similar to Zen: the rosary, for example. Moral precepts occur in both Zen Buddhism and the Abrahamic faiths, and they are very similar: not to take life, lie, steal, misuse sexuality. For Zen, all faith paths are essentially the same; it is thinking, concepts, and words that divide them.

**Q:** In what ways do you see Zen Buddhism helping improve the lives of the students you work with?

**A:** Zen Buddhism is not a goal-oriented practice—it doesn't promise improvements. But some results seem common to longtime practitioners. There is some increased ability to pay attention to the moment and less of a tendency to be judgmental of what it holds. ☸