

Book Excerpt: Who Is Singing in Chinese? Notes from a 100-Year Zen Retreat

David Peters

Popular wisdom has it that Zen is some kind of “chill-pill.” Feeling tense, keyed up, stressed out? Plagued by sleepless nights and circling thoughts? Just take up meditation, turn off your thinking, and bask in feelings of tranquility and bliss. Or so the theory goes.

If that was all there was to it, Zen might help, but it could hardly transform your life. It turns out that Zen has little in common with popping pills, but is a discipline more akin to running marathons, becoming a concert pianist, or swimming the Florida Straits to Cuba. Or more to the point: To emptying a shuttered house of all its contents and fixtures, making your way inside again and again, to carry out each shadowy item, one by one, and carefully place them on the lawn in the full light of day—every spoon, every sock, every nail, every dog hair. Oh yes, and the house is on fire.

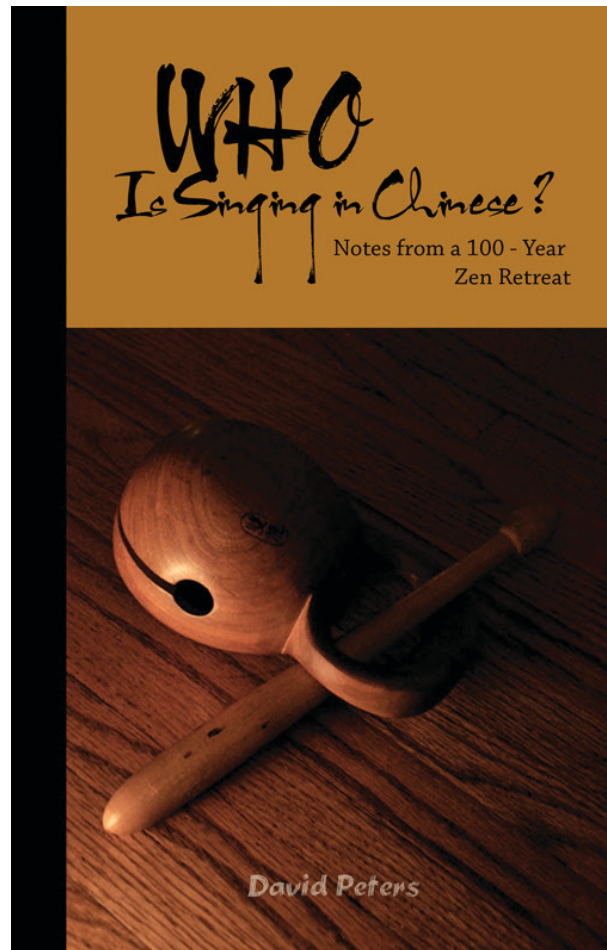
This is hard to appreciate unless you have taken up the discipline yourself—and not so easy, even then. So much of our work in Zen seems to take place behind a curtain.

Zen is interested in what lies beyond the curtain. In the beginning, of course, I had no inkling of any such thing. I only knew that I wanted whatever it was that these Zen people had. In those days our guiding teacher used to make the long drive from eastern Iowa to Madison a couple of evenings a month, to sit Zen with us and give *kong-an* interviews or a *dharma* talk. Bill Brown’s talks were not to be missed. They were warm, sweet, funny—like Bill himself—and for those of us new to this teaching, deeply encouraging. But this was Zen, so they could also be a bit baffling.

One evening Bill gave a talk from which I recall only a single point. He said, “Somehow you have to make this practice real.”

Somehow . . . Now let me just say, nobody wants to hear that. You look at the man seated before you, wearing the teacher’s robe and *kasa*, turning the lacquered Zen stick in his hands. He has more than thirty years of Zen practice under his belt and the honorific “Master” appended to his name. You have to think he knows his way around this practice, knows his way around this *mind*. I remember thinking at the time: What the hell?! This is lousy teaching! “Somehow” is not very long on specifics, you know?

But after many years of Zen practice, I feel that this is



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very good Zen teaching, maybe the best kind.

Our small self is all too willing to settle for a pill. Or if not a pill, then perhaps a brief technical manual, with easy-to-follow, step-by-step instructions disclosing every relevant detail of Buddhist practice and stipulating delivery of the promised goods—“enlightenment” (whatever that means)—within a specified time frame. But the remedies we want may not be the ones we actually need.

Bill Brown’s “somehow” undercuts all of that. “Somehow” is big, so much bigger than any remedy or instruction manual. In this vast “somehow” is everything we do not know, everything to which our small self remains stubbornly oblivious. In this vast place of not knowing, we are thrown back upon our own fathomless resources,

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Note

Providence Zen Center has been holding a monthly Dharma School for children on Sunday mornings since 2010. The school teaches Zen practice and tradition as well as promoting a sense of community with the children and families. Near this past Easter, the children had an egg hunt. Mina, one of the organizers, came up with the idea of hiding words inside the eggs. Afterward, the children got together in two teams and composed these poems.



Photo: Barry Briggs JDPSN

Dharma School Poem 1

Zen Buddha has awesome kids
Flowers dance with trees
Hunt wet dirty eggs
 Love big blue birds
Parents shout very loudly

Dharma School Poem 2

Calmy water swiftly moves quickly
 to pagoda. Clouds grow
standing silently. Silly friends hug
 garden. Meditation look funny.
Bow is cool looking.
Bright blue sky has fast
whispering winds.
Kids search for bright colored
eggs covered in green leaves

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our True Self and deepest potentiality.

Of course nobody wants to hear that. Because this “somehow” also contains the hard spiritual truth for grown-ups: Zen is entirely up to you. No one can do it for you.

Oh, to be sure, Zen teachers can give practice pointers, offer encouraging words or a stern rebuke, poke and prod you along through the long years of kong-an practice, maybe even keep you from blundering into the weeds. And your fellow practitioners can provide their love, camaraderie, and support.

But sooner or later, by one means or another, you have to wedge your foot in the door and make your way into the shuttered, smoldering house of the mind. It is yours alone, after all. Only you can grope your way along its dreary corridors and pry open the bolted doors. Only you can climb into its stifling attics and descend into its crumbling cellars. “Somehow” means that it will not be enough to merely read about it, talk about it, or think about it. “Somehow” means that you will actually have to *do* it.

Let’s suppose that we do just that. Even if, in the beginning, we are only seeking a remedy for what ails us, some kind of pill. Then “make this practice real” means take it personally. Take it to heart, make it your own. Not in the sense of having Zen your own way—far from it! But by making Zen practice part of your life in such a way that it takes on a life of its own. Then Zen is no longer held at arm’s length, a hammer taken up to pound down a particular nail; no, eventually it lets us realize ourselves

as both the hammer and the nail, with the power to transform our lives and the lives of those around us.

Then the burning house stands transfigured. We may be startled to find the shutters gone, great tree limbs in full leaf jutting over the windowsills and into vacant rooms, and all the interior doors blown open. Or maybe the roof suddenly goes missing, leaving nothing but blue sky overhead. Or the four walls topple outward, like the sides of a flattened cardboard box, with nothing but green fields extending in every direction. Then all of those items so laboriously carried out of the house and placed on the lawn are entirely beside the point. Or better still, they can be put to new uses.

Who Is Singing in Chinese? Notes from a 100-Year Zen Retreat by David Peters will be available Summer, 2014, from Firethroat Press and from online and main street book vendors. www.firethroatpress.com.

Dave Peters is abbot and senior dharma teacher of the Isthmus Zen Community in Madison, Wisconsin. Dave began practice in the Kwan Um School of Zen in 1997 with Zen Master Dae Kwang and William Brown JDPSN and in 2007 received bodhisattva teacher precepts from guiding teacher Thomas Pastor JDPSN (now Zen Master Ji Haeng). Dave was employed for 26 years by a Wisconsin-based insurance company until his retirement in 2013. He and his wife Marilyn make their home in Fitchburg, Wisconsin.

