

# Starting Here!

Rich Goodson

My journey to Zen began when I was six or seven. At that age, since both my parents worked, I usually stayed with my grandparents during the school holidays. I was bookish and a bit of a loner—and I was desperate to read things. But my grandparents owned only two books: a Bible and a Methodist hymnbook. From these—to my parents' amusement—I got a taste for poetry and a taste for God. I must have been quite a strange and precocious little boy!

I was always questioning and searching. In my late teens, disillusioned with Christianity, I discovered the Baha'i Faith. It seemed to answer two questions that had been bugging me for years: Why are there different religions? And which religion is the right one? The Baha'i faith said all religions were appropriate for the time and place in which they appeared. It claimed it was the latest chapter in an evolving story of religions—so in fact they were *all* right. But, crucially, the Baha'i faith was the most appropriate for the whole of humankind at this point in its history. I was a Baha'i for ten years, till my late twenties. I was devoted to it.

But in my late twenties I finally faced up to the fact that I was a gay man and simultaneously realized that as a gay man I would never be fully accepted as a Baha'i. I did not have the strength to fight for my acceptance. Something had to give! Very painfully, I put God—and all my beloved religion—on the shelf, and with it my meaningful, purposeful life.

I then spent six years in a relationship I didn't feel fully present in, and six years dancing in nightclubs, trying to forget who I was. We can give ourselves a million "good" reasons to forget who we are and not face up to what is. My reason was a crippling fear and shame connected with being gay. I didn't even feel present in my own body. But it wasn't just the gay thing. Shame, I realized, seemed to run in my family, in its DNA. Even my own mother believed that my being gay was *her* punishment for getting pregnant with me before she was married. So she felt—and still feels—shame too. So much karma. Karma upon karma!

But with no God to forgive me, where was I to go to put all this shame down?

I suppose my spiritual search began again in my late thirties, now happily married to my husband, Robin, when I began practicing a secular form of meditation to combat work stress. Soon I was hungry for more! I knew that meditation should be more than just a fix for my stressful life! I realized I was still hungry for that feeling of belonging and purpose that I'd once known in the Baha'i faith.

And so I began my serious engagement with Buddhism. Zen suited me. Maybe its simplicity reminded me of my grandparents' stark, back-to-basics approach to spirituality. I was drawn to its rigor and discipline, but also to its tradition of poetry (because I'm a poet) and to its long history of crazy maverick teachers! After trying out various traditions of Zen

I finally found myself taking the five precepts with the Kwan Um School of Zen on a snowy day in December 2017, with Zen Master Bon Shim. I was given the name Ji Do, meaning Way of Wisdom. Thank you, Zen Master Bon Shim, for giving me my name, and to Jibul (Peter Voke), my first teacher, at Peak Zen!

So why, after exploring different traditions, did I end up in the Kwan Um School of Zen? There are many reasons. One is that it has a genuinely internationalist vision, unlike some schools I'd encountered, which offered "British" or "American" continuations of Asian lineages. I'm attracted too by its rich variety of practice forms. And, of course, by Zen Master Seung Sahn's uncompromisingly direct and humorous way of teaching! But also by the fact that being a monastic isn't the be-all and end-all—everyone can be themselves, as they are, and fully embrace this tradition in their everyday lives. And the rigor and discipline? It's all there. But it's balanced with lightness and joy.

So there you are. That's how I got to Zen. I took my time, but I got there in the end! I'm like the tortoise who took the long route to the finish line! And now, as I enter my fifties, I know intuitively that I'm home. I know that the Kwan Um School of Zen is where I belong. For years I led parallel lives that never quite fit together; I was not fully present in any of them. But they were all slowly converging on the path I'm on now. I need look no further. I'm here! And it's an inexplicable and beautiful feeling. I'm very grateful!

However, just because I'm "home" doesn't mean I'm resting on my laurels. It doesn't mean that anything is finished, or has been attained. When, during my precepts ceremony, Zen Master Bon Shim asked me what I thought Way of Wisdom meant, I said, "Starting here." And that's how it still feels. Because every day I'm starting here, resetting to zero, trying my best to digest the karma of my life and make it useful to others.

After teaching English to refugees in the United Kingdom for the last twenty-five years, I'm now retraining to be a counselor. My future, especially in these strange times, is unknowable—but my direction is crystal clear. I want to continue to help refugees, and I also want to help those who are struggling with shame and who do not feel present in their life. I want to help people find their home, whatever that might mean for them, and to help them be as present as possible.

Life is always ending, but it's always beginning too!  
Kwan Seum Bosal. ♦

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