

Zen, Baby, Zen

Written by Jack Sparacino

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Through difficulty often comes learning and progress, sometimes spiritual, sometimes practical, and if you're lucky, both. That simple realization has come home to me through a series of recent experiences. At one point I actually found myself slipping back over 40 years to college courses nearly forgotten. Didn't we cover a nickel or so worth of Zen and other Eastern religions? Have I been having little Jack-style Zen episodes?

Not a bad question, but first it seemed a good idea to refresh my memory on a simple definition of "Zen." It seems that Zen is a type of Buddhism focused on awareness through meditation. One reference indicated that an example of zen is a rock garden that is tended to meditate, and that "the definition of zen is slang for feeling peaceful and relaxed. An example of zen as an adjective is to have a zen experience, [e.g.,] how you feel during a day at the spa." What, me at the spa? Not likely, but I got the idea and kept reading and learned that "Zen emphasizes the attainment of enlightenment and the personal expression of direct insight... it de-emphasizes mere knowledge ...and favors direct understanding."

Ah, now we're getting somewhere, said I the simple fisherman and writer. This is really about gentle awareness and then presumably doing something positive with that awareness. Let's see if I can nail this down through some specific examples.

Taking care of a dog with failing kidneys. A friend's treasured little companion of many years was recently diagnosed with the same disease that afflicted our wonderful Maggie late in her life. The vet suggested that Sue hydrate her with an intravenous drip every two days and provide special food. The drip is not an inherently easy procedure to get accustomed to, though done properly it is not uncomfortable for the dog and is vital in maintaining their health. Sue found the process very stressful at first, even with help, as Mesha resisted uncomfortably.

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We talked about how to get in the right groove. I said that you basically follow the physical steps suggested by the vet but one's calmness and relaxed demeanor are critical, something like "Dog Whisperer" Cesar Millan displays on TV. We walked through the process I used every day for nearly a year with Maggie and agreed it could be summarized, perhaps a bit simplistically, as "zen, baby, zen." Stay peaceful and relaxed and (literally) go with the flow (of the drip). Happily, Mesha no longer resists the process and both she and Sue are doing nicely.

Getting your darned car out of park. Twice this year my trusty old Audi wouldn't let me get it out of park, though it started normally. After trying repeatedly on the first occasion, I called my friend Steve who had owned the same make and model car for years. He got behind the wheel and instantly slid the car into reverse. Then he did it again! What the heck did you do? (or words to that effect), I asked incredulously. He then showed me his gentle touch and advised that I basically glide the shift over and back. This worked fine for a week until it happened again outside our vet's office. This time I didn't get upset but took a deep breath, relaxed, closed my eyes and tried again. Bingo. And off I went. Happily, this easy touch has worked perfectly for months now. Zen, baby, zen say I (out loud no less) each time I get back into the car. And it's listening, just perhaps.

Coaxing fish out of the rocks or wrecks. We salty lowcountry types like to fish, inshore or offshore. Ever get hung up when bottom fishing? It's usually best not to try to force the issue and keep pulling up hard. Better to let out some slack and try again gently. Maybe move a few feet and test a different angle, perhaps even let someone else try it once or twice. An easy touch is once again your friend.

Wiggling your way free. Lots of examples here, too many perhaps. Getting stuck in the middle of an "impossible" exam (or column!). Or trying to find your destination while driving at night in bad weather without GPS but with bad directions. Maybe willing that graceful game winning free throw in a crucial basketball game. Or getting a called third strike off a tough home plate umpire and against a dangerous hitter in the bottom of the ninth during a pivotal road game. Skill and determination play essential roles but so does that certain something extra, the ability to relax and establish a feeling of inner calm. In many cases despite the hammering of your own heart or the deafening roar of the crowd!

At no time in my life was there a better personal illustration of this than in 1974 when I was struggling with an exam that served to qualify or disqualify you from continuing your graduate studies at The University of Chicago. I was 24, lean and not mean but apprehensive, trying

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frantically to write down practically everything I knew about social forces as they affect individual behavior. Drinking lots of Coke for fuel, too. Keeping me from bouncing off the ceiling was our big beautiful black and white cat, Bercelak, who kept purring and gently swishing his tail. Easy does it, Jack, easy does it he seemed to be saying. Evidently it worked because I did somehow pass that vital exam and went on to finish my studies four years later.

Deep in the heart of Texas. Fast way forward. While waiting for the Geek Squad to finish setting up a new laptop at Best Buy recently (thanks, Ben), I wandered the aisles looking for heaven knows what. I came by the huge barrel of miscellaneous \$5 CD's and sifted through those I could reach. Lo and behold, there was a Stevie Ray Vaughan collection ("Martin Scorsese Presents") with my name on it. Born in 1954 in Dallas, Vaughan began playing the instrument with his name on it, the guitar, when he was all of seven. He went on to have a stratospheric career playing blues infused rock until his untimely death in a helicopter crash in 1990. I have been playing this CD as often as possible and nearly as loud as I can take it and you know what? It gives me a feeling of zen, much like that other Texas favorite, Willie Nelson, does though at a much lower volume. Not bad for a kid born in New York City who's lived across the country but never even been to Texas.

So off I go aided by my rudimentary sense of relaxing my way through some of life's elbow joints in the road. Family and friends sure help, as do memories and recollections like those of that big ole cat and our dearest sweetheart Maggie. Zen, baby, zen alright. Zen, baby, zen.