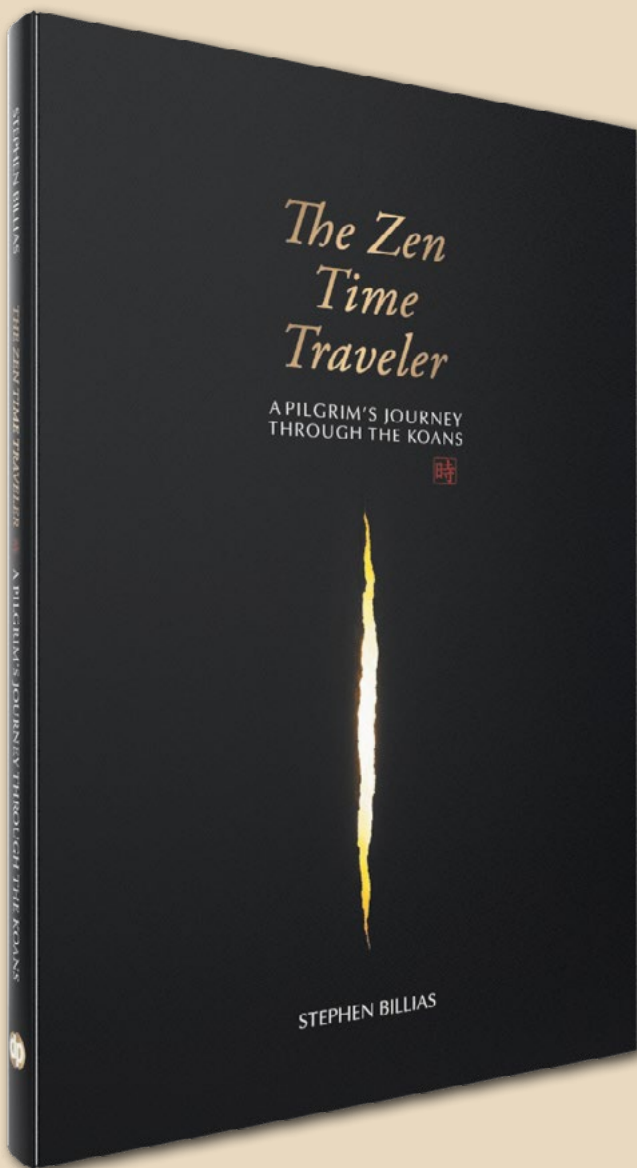


# *The Zen Time Traveler*

A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE KOANS

STEPHEN BILLIAS

*“Lost between the ancient wisdom of 13th-century China and the unraveling of his modern life, one man must solve the ultimate koan: how to live in the present...”*



Stephen Maine is a middle-aged project manager navigating the collapse of his marriage and the quiet despair of modern burnout. But his weekly Zen meditation class in a Massachusetts church basement offers an unexpected escape. By reciting a mysterious haiku, Stephen finds his consciousness hurtled across the space-time continuum, landing squarely in the body of Wūkōng, a Japanese monk traveling through Song Dynasty China in the year 1225.

In this vibrant, dangerous ancient world, Zen koans are not abstract intellectual riddles—they are visceral, life-or-death encounters with legendary Chan masters. As Stephen navigates this dual existence, he finds himself increasingly drawn to the past, captivated by a fierce, magical sword maker named Yabaku, and the thrilling asceticism of his host's spiritual quest.

Yet, the fabric of history is delicate. Stephen belatedly realizes that his host, Wūkōng, is none other than Dogen, the revered founder of Japanese Soto Zen. Caught between a fantastical past and his disintegrating reality in 2024, Stephen faces a profound choice. To save the future of a global spiritual tradition, he must confront his own attachments, relinquish his escapist fantasies, and do the hardest thing of all: return to his own flawed life.

*The Zen Time Traveler* is a brilliant, genre-defying novel. Endorsed by Barbara McHugh, the Jikoji Zen Center, and John Harrison, it masterfully bridges the gap between cerebral speculative fiction and authentic Buddhist philosophy, offering a resonant tale about mindfulness, marital commitment, and the illusion of time.



## KEY THEMES EXPLORED

### LIVING THE KOAN

A demystification of ancient Zen philosophy, translating abstract spiritual riddles into visceral, lived experiences with the legendary Chan masters of antiquity.

### THE ILLUSION OF TIME

An exploration of the space-time continuum through the lens of Buddhist philosophy (*Uji* / Being-Time), blending the thrills of time-travel fiction with profound metaphysical inquiry.

### ATTACHMENT AND ESCAPISM

A raw look at the modern desire to flee from our responsibilities—and how true enlightenment often means facing the difficult, messy reality of our immediate present and our relationships.

### THE ORIGINS OF A TRADITION

A historically rich, fictionalized reimagining of Zen Master Dogen's perilous journey through China to retrieve the teachings that would shape global Buddhism.

## THE TARGET AUDIENCE

- ♣ **Spiritual Seekers & Zen Practitioners:** Readers seeking an authentic, deeply researched exploration of Buddhist history, koans, and mindfulness wrapped in an engaging narrative.
- ♠ **Fans of Cerebral Speculative Fiction:** Admirers of stories dealing with alternate realities, simulation theories, and the elasticity of time.
- ♥ **Lovers of Philosophical Literary Fiction:** Those drawn to stories of mid-life crisis, marital reconciliation, and the quiet, everyday struggle for personal transformation.



Stephen Billias brings a rare combination of historical rigor, lived spiritual authenticity, and boundless imagination to his prose. A MacDowell Fellow and the author of seven fantasy novels, a short story collection, and the co-authored literary novel *Pilgrim Maya*, his writing is deeply informed by a life as eclectic as his fiction. Before dedicating himself to the page, Stephen's path wound through roles as a professional actor, street-performing juggler, New York City taxi driver, and project manager.

With *The Zen Time Traveler*, Stephen returns to the profound Buddhist themes that have anchored both his life and his literary career. He is a longtime practitioner and instructor of Shintaido, an esoteric Japanese martial art, and alongside his wife, Bela, established and ran a spiritual retreat center in Massachusetts for a decade. He has also studied Tai Chi for fifteen years under the renowned teacher Wolfe Lowenthal.

Today, Stephen grounds his deep metaphysical curiosity in daily practice. A former student of the legendary Roshi Bernie Glassman, he sits with the Boundless Way Zen group in Northampton, Massachusetts, often serving as *jiki* (practice leader) or *doan* (bellringer). He lives in Deerfield, where he continues to explore the intersections of mindfulness, martial arts, and storytelling.



**1. The Origin Story:** What inspired you to merge the historical journey of Zen Master Dogen with a modern-day, sci-fi time-travel narrative?

“I have practiced Zen for decades, but I have also spent my career writing speculative fiction. I wanted to show that Zen isn't just about sitting quietly on a cushion, but about a visceral collision with reality. By dropping a modern, burned-out project manager into the mind of Dogen during his perilous 13th-century quest, I could explore the origins of Zen through a thrilling, accessible, and deeply human lens.”

**2. The Core Concept:** In the novel, Stephen Maine experiences ancient koans as real-life events. How do you feel these ancient teachings apply to the chaotic, distracted lives we lead in the 21st century?

“We live in an era of constant distraction, where our attention is fragmented by screens and endless notifications. Koans were originally designed to shatter our conceptual thinking and force us into the immediate, unvarnished present. By having my protagonist physically live out these koans—facing drawn swords and confounding masters—I wanted to show how these ancient ‘riddles’ are actually radical tools for waking up to the reality right in front of us.”

**3. The Human Element:** Your protagonist struggles deeply with attachment, preferring his thrilling historical escape over his crumbling marriage. What does his journey tell us about the modern desire for escapism?

“Stephen's time-traveling is the ultimate form of escapism—a profound spiritual bypass to avoid the messy, painful reality of his failing marriage. It reflects how often we use distractions, even ‘spiritual’ ones, to run from our everyday responsibilities. His journey reveals that true enlightenment isn't found in a magical past or a fantasy romance, but in the courage to face our ordinary lives and fiercely love the people we are committed to.”

**4. The Message:** When readers close *The Zen Time Traveler*, what is the ultimate feeling or thought you hope they take away with them into their own present moment?

“I hope readers walk away with a profound appreciation for their own ‘ordinary mind’. We don't need a magic haiku or a time machine to find the intersection of limitless space and endless time; it is always right here, right now. If they close the book and look at their partner, their everyday environment, or their daily struggles with a renewed sense of presence and radical acceptance, then the novel has done its job.»

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“A wild joyride through the temples of ancient China... a romp that honors the great Zen masters while exploring the age-old universal ache of clinging. A whirlwind tour filled with classical koans, spiritual comedy, and fun..”


—Chōbun Nenzen, *Abiding Teacher, Jikoji Zen Center*

“An engrossing story that explores multiple dimensions of time, space, and personal identity, while providing a unique opportunity for beginners and experienced practitioners to contemplate Zen koans and their implications.”

—Barbara McHugh, *Teacher of Buddhism and meditation & author of the award-winning novel *Bride of the Buddha**

“In *The Zen Time Traveler*, the journey is the destination. For those familiar with Zen koans, it will be an uncommon and moving quest... for the rest of us, it’s an encouragement to continue seeking.”

—John Harrison, *Writer/Director (Tales From The Darkside, Dune)*



*I was a fragile trinity:  
Yabaku’s splendid,  
strong form; Wukōng’s  
flexible physique, attuned to  
the mountains and meditation;  
and my own wandering,  
modern mind. I couldn’t dwell  
on the idea; I was spread too  
thin across time, a single soul  
struggling to inhabit three  
different skins.”*

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