

*The Zen
Time
Traveler*

A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY
THROUGH THE KOANS



STEPHEN BILLIAS

ADVANCE PRAISE FOR
The Zen Time Traveler

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*See each thing in this
entire world as a
moment of time...*

*This is the
understanding that
self is time.*

*Know that in this way
there are myriads of
forms and hundreds
of grasses throughout
the entire earth, and
yet each grass and
each form itself is the
entire earth.*

*The study of this
is the beginning of
practice...*

*Since there is nothing
but just this moment,
the time being is all
the time there is.*

*Grass being, form
being, are both time.*

*Each moment is all
being; each moment
is the entire world.*

—Dogen, “Uji” (“Being-Time”)¹



CHAPTER 1

The Barbarian Has No Beard

~

I was in a Zen meditation one evening at the *zendo* when it all started. I was sitting cross-legged with a *sangha* of a dozen or so other Zen students, idly daydreaming and watching the incessant flood of thoughts that passed through my head. I wondered what I would have for dinner after, ruing the errors I had made during the day, and in my life. There were so many bad moments, an as-yet unwritten 800-page memoir entitled *My Mistakes*, full of the things I've said and done to my wife Joanna.

I'm Stephen Maine, a middle-aged project manager for a small software company. Medium height, brown hair, brown eyes, half-Greek. Everyman-ish. I'm still a Zen beginner. I started to occasionally meet with a particular group a few years ago.

We sit in *zazen*, trying to be still and empty our minds of thought. Or so I thought.

There I was on the cushion, mentally fidgeting about the endless meaningless trivialities of my life, when suddenly the following verse popped into my mind:

*still point. endless time
intersects limitless space
right where you are now*

come to you.” Felicia said nothing, but pouted a little at not being able to grasp the ungraspable.

I loved all my sangha friends. A few were dedicated regulars. Others were occasional drop-ins. Still others came once and never returned to the zendo. Either they found what they needed in one sit, or they didn’t. All were part of the sangha. The zendo had become a second home to me. Now it had the additional lure of being a launching pad into the past, where I lived as if in the present. I couldn’t share my journey with any of them. It was too strange. I would have liked to have taken them all: Doug, Bob, Chloe, Felicia, and especially Richard with me, but there was no way. This was a solo trip. So far it wasn’t a one-way trip, but there were no guarantees.

Chloe, the delicate, fine-skinned and blue-veined, white-haired elder who always spoke meaningfully, murmured in a low voice about how it would be wonderful to experience what Chao-chou did, that immediacy of transformation, but for her it was taking a lifetime.

“No difference,” Richard said. “No time.”

Then Richard turned his attention to me. He stared at me, to the point where others in the room began to look at me also. He called my name.

“Stephen? What say you?” I was incapable of speaking. Richard showed me compassion. He ended the dharma discussion by saying, “It doesn’t matter where you are, how long you’ve been there, what struggles you went through. All that matters is that, like Chao-chou, you learn the wisdom of ordinary mind. That’s all. Ordinary mind. Let’s finish with a few breaths.” Richard’s words were like a sword cutting my flesh. He intuited more than I thought possible. He was telling me not to think I was important. He was warning me not to get a swollen ego. I wondered how he could know so much, and I so little.



CHAPTER 13

“Are You Still Carrying Her?”

~

Joanna and I maintained an uneasy truce in our house while she waited for a sign that my “obsession,” as she called it, was declining. It wasn’t. I got the key to the church meeting room from my teacher Richard. It didn’t need to be a Wednesday night sit for the portal to open for me. The cushions, their position, and the haiku were all that was needed. I could go there anytime the UU wasn’t using the space, sit alone in the dark in my preferred seat, and send myself or be sent into the Asian past.

Things got more complicated for me the next time I tried to act out a Zen story I knew by taking the part of a character. When I landed, I was walking with another monk on a road somewhere. It had rained heavily, and the road was muddy. We came to a river swollen by the recent deluge. The remnants of a rope bridge were clinging to the edge, but the rest of the structure had been washed away. A young woman in colorful silken robes was standing at the edge, staring at the rushing waters. She was hauntingly beautiful. Perfect oval face with no smallpox dents. Coquettish eyes. Slim and, at the same time, strong and supple. The strangest thing was that, despite her delicate and ravishing dress, she was clutching a sword in its scabbard. I was entranced. The thought flitted through my brain that I was married in the twenty-first century but a bachelor here. Nonetheless, I lifted and carried her across the

shallow but turbulent stream. We smiled at each other and then my monk companion and I moved on while the young woman sat down to clean her muddy hem and compose herself. My fellow monk was shocked, but said nothing until hours later, when he asked me:

“We monks don’t go near females, especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?”

“I set her down on the other side of the river. Are you still carrying her?”¹⁶ I said, completing the mondo smugly.

But I hadn’t put her down. I was carrying her in my heart and mind and dreaming of her ever since the river. My fellow monk berated me, and I took the opportunity to separate from him. I turned back toward the ford. I was sublimely unclear why I was going back. Something or someone was controlling me. I was like a skateboarder or a snowboarder, careening downhill mad fast with no brakes.





CHAPTER 36

Linji Draws a Line

~

Having stayed overnight, I was time-shifting in more ways than one. By lengthening my stay this way, I was either aging more quickly or more slowly, according to Einstein. I didn't know which. It was quantum physics, way beyond my pay grade. I only knew that Wūkōng and I were going to continue knocking about in thirteenth century China. He, coming from Japan, and me, from 2024; the two of us: a single entity to anyone outside our shared body-mind.

The Linji Temple was in Hebei province, east of Xianyang and north of Hangzhou, on the northernmost edge of the Song. A ten days' walk from Niaohe. I didn't tell Wūkōng that in my time one could drive there in ten hours and fly there in a couple hours. I was having the best time I'd ever had in my life.

Walking miles each day, stopping at monasteries and inns, or simply lying down off the road and sleeping. Everywhere I went Wūkōng had a connection or made one. He was a man on a mission, but I didn't know what that mission was. Like my journey, it had to do with the koans, but I didn't know in what way.

The obsessive note taking and the careful observation of everything we saw in the monasteries we visited pointed to a greater meaning embedded in my time-traveling excursions. Meanwhile, the long walks and the minimalist food, mostly rice, millet, barley, and a few vegetables,

resulted in my becoming fit. I wondered if it would carry over whenever I returned. I knew that it would not; still I thought how wonderful it would be to be in such good shape in my own middle-aged body. I wasn't in a hurry to go back.

On the early evening of the tenth day, I passed between the two stone lions guarding the entrance to the Linji Temple, and was confronted by a suspicious senior monk who didn't like my dusty and disheveled looks.

"What do you want?" he demanded to know.

"Lodging and food as is customary for pilgrims such as myself," I said confidently. I was taken aback by his response.

"It was a hard winter and a poor, rainy spring. We're on half-rations here. We can give you a place to sleep but all we have for food is rice gruel."

I bowed and accepted his impoverished hospitality. The monastery itself was magnificent, but the monks were struggling—hungry and unable to accept the fact that they could not grow the food they were accustomed to producing for themselves. I passed an uncomfortable night. In the morning the monks served me more gruel for breakfast.

It was now midsummer in Northampton. I wished I could have gone into Joanna's garden back home and brought back a big bag of mustard greens, kale and other healthy foods she was growing. But time travel doesn't work that way. There was no dharma talk scheduled for that day. I decided I would slip out without meeting Master Linji, but as I approached the main entrance, I observed the following exchange:

Linji asked the temple steward, "Where have you come from?"

The temple steward said, "From selling brown rice in the province."

Linji said, "Have you finished selling all of it?"

The manager said, "Yes, I have finished selling all of it."

Linji drew a line with his staff and said, "Have you sold all of this too?"

The manager shouted, "Kaatzu!"

Linji immediately struck him.⁴³

The temple steward continued inside. I looked at Master Linji, but he paid no attention to me. Here was the man who was the initiator of one whole sect of Zen, acting strangely. Why were they selling brown rice in the province if they were so hungry here?

Those orders must come from Master Linji himself. I learned later that they were selling at vastly reduced prices, practically giving it away to keep the people in the province from starving.

Much later, when I was back at home in Florence, among my books, I read that there's a short sequel that completes this koan:

Later, the cook monk came to Linji, who told him about this incident. The monk said, "The steward didn't understand Your Reverence's intention."

Linji said, "How about you?" The monk made a deep bow. Linji struck him likewise.⁴⁴

Why did Master Linji hit them both? The answer was hidden in the Verse that accompanied and followed the koan. The last part of it read:

The sword that gives life, the blade that kills life;

It glitters on the snow against heaven, sharper than the hair-severing sword;

Equally commanding, yet differently to be savored.

The very spot that causes massive pain—who can meet it?⁴⁵

There it was again, Yabaku's life and death-dealing sword. My inner Wūkōng was fascinated, nearly obsessed with these references, which all led back to Yabaku.

I stayed at Linji temple for another day, tolerating the soupy plain rice. I was put to work cleaning the latrines as befitted my lowly status as a foreigner.

The next day Linji gave a dharma talk: "There is one true person of no rank, always coming out and going in through the gates of your face. Beginners who have not yet witnessed that, look! Look!"⁴⁶ It took me a minute to figure out that by "gates of your face" he meant the sense organs, eyes, nose, mouth, and ears. I was a beginner. I grew bold, stood up and asked, "What is the one true person of no rank?"

As I faced the most important decision of my life, I still believed in the validity and value of my Zen practice in the twenty-first century. Otherwise, in the United States, Buddhism in general and Zen in particular were people playacting at rituals from a foreign culture, without any intrinsic meaning. I did not believe that. I may not be a true believer, but I have come so far, in NoHo and here in the Song, that there was no turning back for me. I was the man on top of the hundred-foot pole, about to step off into space.





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The Zen Time Traveler

A PILGRIM'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE KOANS



For Zen student Stephen Maine, a single haiku is not just poetry—it is a portal. In a breath, the walls of his modern life dissolve, hurling him across the centuries into the heart of thirteenth-century China. Here, the legendary Chan masters are not myths, and the ancient koans are not riddles—they are lived reality. But Stephen is not alone in this timeline. He shares his physical form and mind with Wūkōng, a wandering Japanese monk destined to shape the history of Zen.

When both men fall for Yabaku, a beautiful and fiercely independent maker of mystical swords, the fabric of time begins to fray. Torn between his present-day marriage and a growing, profound connection in the past, Stephen must navigate a maze of spiritual awakening and earthly desires. If he finds enlightenment, he may never find his way home...



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