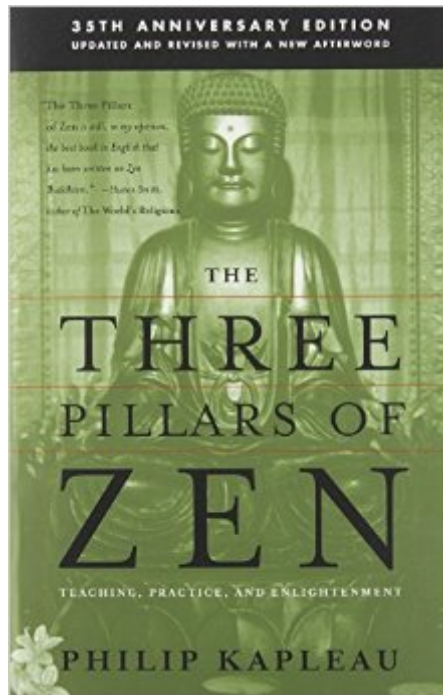


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The Three Pillars Of Zen: Teaching, Practice, And Enlightenment



Synopsis

Through explorations of the three pillars of Zen--teaching, practice, and enlightenment--Roshi Philip Kapleau presents a comprehensive overview of the history and discipline of Zen Buddhism. An established classic, this 35th anniversary edition features new illustrations and photographs, as well as a new afterword by Sensei Bodhin Kjolhede, who has succeeded Philip Kapleau as spiritual director of the Rochester Zen Center, one of the oldest and most influential Zen centers in the United States.

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Customer Reviews

I guess that most people getting interested in Zen without having a competent roshi within reach are facing the living hell of Zen books. At least that was the situation in my case. So, I was picking up all sorts of books on Zen from authors of unknown or doubtful competence. Some aren't really worth the paper they are printed on. This process turned out to be quite time and money consuming without getting closer to the results one is expecting. Even after reading books from known authorities like D.T. Suzuki I found out that my own progress was still slow, because many of these kind of books are pretty academic, barely touching the most important practice and heart of Zen--the practice of Zazen. "The Three Pillars of Zen" is the first book in a fairly long line of Zen books I read that approaches Zen in a practical way that enables Westerners to get started with Zen right away, without having a teacher. Roshi Kapleau wrote a well structured and personal book, reporting from his own development under various Zen masters in Japan back in the 1950s. In the chapters of

"The Three Pillars of Zen" Kapleau lets his own teachers speak. This approach gives a unique insight into Zen practice in Japan, the traps and pitfalls and how to avoid them. It also explains what Zazen and dokusan are all about as well as the important role of the koan, its proper use (and misuse). This book really sets back the majority of Zen books I read so far by at least 2 stars (.com rating). If I'd be forced to pick only one book about Zen, this would be the one.

The Three Pillars of Zen: Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment by Philip Kapleau Now in a 35th Anniversary edition, The Three Pillars of Zen is generally regarded as the "classic" introduction to Zen Buddhism, and along with Shunryu Suzuki's Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind, has probably helped more westerners begin Zen practice than any other book. The book is a collection of texts which describe Zen Buddhism as encountered by Philip Kapleau in Japan in the 1950's. Kapleau's transmission is Zen as it was taught in particular by Harada-Roshi and Yasutani-Roshi, a synthesis of both the Rinzai and Soto traditions. Harada's and Yasutani's school revitalized Zen in the twentieth century, and their teaching is particularly relevant to Americans as many American Zen teachers today are of their lineage. The book is in three parts. Part One is titled "Teaching and Practice" and consists of Yasutani's Introductory Lectures on Zen Training (these alone are worth the price of the book), his Commentary (Teisho) on the Koan Mu, and records of his Private Encounters With Ten Westerners (in dokusan). These three sections provide the reader an idea of what Zen training is, how to begin, and hint at the flavor of the process as practiced in Yasutani's school. Part One concludes with a translation of a dharma talk and some letters by the 14th century Japanese master Bassui. Part Two is titled "Enlightenment" and consists of first-person descriptions of 20th century enlightenment (kensho) experiences. These descriptions are unique and fascinating, and bring the concept of enlightenment a personal relevance - it's not just something that was attained by ancient masters. Of particular interest are the pieces by Kapleau himself, and Kyoze Yamada, both of whom became prominent Zen teachers. Part Three is a collection of supplements to the text and consists of a brief and mystifying selection from Dogen's writings on "Being-Time", the famous "Ten Oxherding Pictures" with commentary and verse, and an extremely helpful section on sitting postures with common questions and answers. The 35th Anniversary edition has a new afterword by Bodhin Kjolhede, Kapleau's successor at the Rochester Zen Center, and a terrific glossary of Zen vocabulary and Buddhist doctrine. While no book can provide a complete in-depth view of the Zen tradition, The Three Pillars of Zen is a comprehensive look at Zen as practiced by a lineage that continues to have great influence in the West. The newcomer to Zen practice will come away from reading this book with clear guidelines about how to begin his or her practice, a

fundamental understanding of Zen terminology, and at least a vague idea of what all this Zen talk is about. Highly recommended.

I have very mixed feelings about this book. It is the book which really brought me to spiritual practice; for that, I will always be grateful. It was, however, the same things about it which first drew me in, that I now find problematic. If you are at all open to practice it is hard not to find this book exciting. There is great drama in the stories of those struggling against all odds to achieve enlightenment. It is that sense of drama which I find problematic. There is a sense of striving encouraged by this book and practice at Rochester. Metaphors of climbing a mountain are used; we are encouraged to "push harder." But who is striving? There is an underlying sense of dualism in this flavor of practice. While that drama of achieving something is perhaps helpful for those difficult early stages of practice, it is ultimately a poison. Traditional Zen practice, such as that described here, pits you in a battle against your ego. Such warfare can, in the end, only be ego building. This is a modern Zen practice in that there is an explanation of the "theory" of practice. At one time you just sat, heard talks on Koans, and had very brief interviews with your teacher. Eventually, you would either get it or not (mostly not, I believe). Of course, in that more historically traditional practice you would have been a monk totally removed from the concerns of the day-to-day world. I think that the practice described by Kapleau Roshi is still too close to those traditional monastic roots. My experience at traditional Zen Centers is that they are beautiful and that meditation practice there has a sense of perceptible strength—it seems quite grounded. The trouble comes when people are off the cushions. I can't say that I see a great deal of impact of practice on people's lives. There is still plenty of confusion and reactivity. There is still an attachment to personal drama. I had teachers tell me that the first step is for people to break through and see who they really were; later they would integrate. I am not sure that step two generally occurs. What, ultimately, is the point of Zen practice? To have an enlightenment experience? Does that drive for kensho come from a need to experience the truth of our life or does it come from a need to fix ourselves? Most of us are driven by this latter need. To the extent that our motivations remain invisible, we can't truly metabolize our experience. We "own" rather than live our realization. My bias is that practice serves life best when it takes on our whole life as a koan. Our life becomes less of a soap opera and becomes more mundane. From that ordinariness emerge joy, compassion, love and all of the other aspects of our true nature. You might have fewer of the kind of lightening bolts of a traditional practice. Instead, you will have a grounded life which brings peace rather than pain into this world.

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