

# The World of Zen

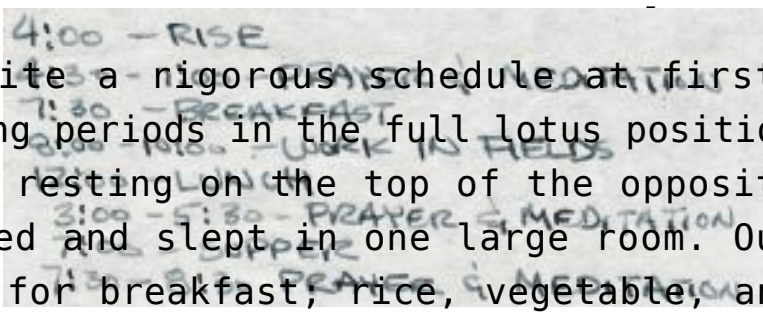
Upon entering the Samanvaya Ashram, I discovered that the program being offered was an immersive course in Zen Buddhism led by Zengo, a Zen Buddhist monk from Japan. There were only eight students (including myself) enrolled in the program—three women and five men. We were from the US, Canada, England and Germany. This picture shows our group with Zengo center front, me behind and to his right, and, on the far right, an Indian man who joined us occasionally.



My only previous exposure to Zen was one visit to a Zen center in Rochester, NY run by Philip Kapleau, author of *Three Pillars of Zen*. Zen can fairly be described as the most

radical form of Buddhism, a fast track path to Enlightenment. At the core of Zen practice is the discipline of Zazen, seated meditation. There was no gradual easing into the rigors of the course for me or my fellow participants. For starters, I had my head shaved as a symbol of giving up worldly attachments to pursue the discipline fully. This was an especially gutsy move for the women in the group. A typical day for us looked like this

(from home): It seemed like quite a rigorous schedule at first, especially sitting for long periods in the full lotus position (legs crossed, with feet resting on the top of the opposite thighs). All the men lived and slept in one large room. Our diet was simple—porridge for breakfast, rice, vegetable, and chapati for lunch and supper. It was clean, wholesome, and no limit was set. I would add a little variety from time to time from street vendors in town.



The founder of the ashram saw it as a laboratory for implementing methods and technologies appropriate to rural India. One was quite amusing. The bathrooms were modern (with squatty potties) and clean. The outflow from the toilets went to a large underground tank, which had a top that would raise or lower based on how much biogas was generated on any given day. The biogas was piped to burners and used for cooking our food. If the cooks needed more gas, all they had to do was increase the amount of lentils they fed to us!

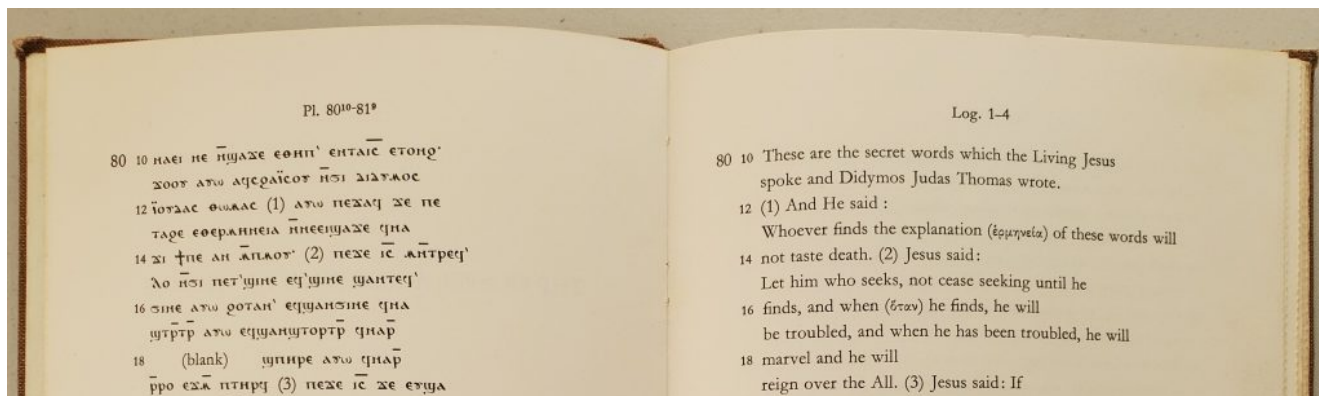
In my next post, I will describe our daily routines of work and meditation in more detail, in addition to some insights into how I was processing all this new input at the time.

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# Venturing Deeper Within

After my time with Jonathan and family, I headed back to Sarnath, the village outside of Benares that I had found so attractive. My plan was to stay for a month of R&R—reading and rumination. I was reading a wide variety of books at the time. In addition to the Bible that I brought with me, I also had a copy of *The Gospel According to Thomas*, a Coptic text discovered in 1945 and claiming to be “the hidden words which the Living Jesus spoke and Didymos Judas Thomas wrote.” This so-called gospel appealed to me then and continues to appeal to many today because it presents mystical sayings claiming to come from Jesus, which are much easier to integrate with Eastern teachings than any of Jesus’ authentic teaching contained in the Gospels in the Bible—Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.



Along with the Buddhist texts that I mentioned in an earlier posts, I was reading things like *The Politics of Experience and The Bird of Paradise* by R. D. Lang, a Scottish psychiatrist. I reread some of Aldous Huxley’s works. You can hear in these words written to friends that I was being drawn to look deeper within myself for some stable point in the ever changing world. “Each day the world goes on to a different state than that in which we saw it the day before. If we are

not equipped with new vision for that day—that is if we rely on yesterday's insights—we begin to fall behind and in the end understand very little.”

I wrote this to my parents about my time in Sarnath: “As with most places I have stayed in India, my accommodation is a small room with bed, desk and chair. The floor is concrete and the walls and ceiling are whitewashed. Here are both Indians and Tibetans. So, for one meal I have rice, vegetable curry, dal (like lentils), and chapati (flat, unleavened wheat bread). For the other I have thukpa (Tibetan noodle soup) and momo (meat wrapped in dough and cooked in steam—like wanton).”

My plans to stay for a month in Sarnath were cut short abruptly. The dharmshala where I was staying was becoming crowded, and pilgrims had first preference, so I was required to leave. Several people had told me about the beauty of a small village called Bodh Gaya, the place where Gautama Buddha received his Enlightenment. There are numerous temples in the town built by nearly every Buddhist nation. At first it appeared that I was again out of luck, since most lodging places were full because of a ten-day meditation course being offered at the Burmese monastery.



I was about to leave when someone suggested an ashram hidden back from the main street and just across from the Mahabodhi temple, the central Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya (see my picture above). So it was that I arrived at the Samanvaya Ashram, which was founded by Vinoba Bhave, a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi, as a center for work and for promoting the founder's understanding that the religions of the world have a common basis. At the time I arrived, a special program had just begun—mainly for the Westerners here. *Much* more about that in future posts.

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## Venturing into Kolkata

I left the Stringhams shortly after Christmas. I had decided that I would be taking unnecessary risks to travel to Kolkata (Calcutta) alone. So, I arranged to meet Jonathan, the Indian evangelist, who was planning to be in Kolkata after Christmas. Kolkata supposedly takes its name from Kali, the Hindu goddess of death and destruction. There is a prominent Kali temple in Kolkata. As my train came into the city, I could see the slums stretching for miles in the distance all the way up to within a few feet of the train tracks. I've not seen such an overwhelming number of people living in abject poverty before or since. Those same slum communities are a fixture of Kolkata up to today.





I was not the first Maffin to visit Kolkata. My dad spent time in Kolkata in the final days of WWII, while India was still under British rule—25 years before my visit . He faithfully wrote letters to my mom from shipboard and during his time in India. Thankfully, she preserved his letters. Dad had the soul of a poet. He and a number of his Army buddies made periodic trips from their Army encampment into Kolkata. Here are just a few of his observations. “The place is filled with people of every description. They tell me there is no middle class in India—they are either very poor or very rich.”

In another letter, dad described seeing an Indian holy man, still a prominent sight when I visited Kolkata 25 years later. “The particularly strange character I saw must have been a holy man. He seemed to be begging but was richly dressed, from the royal blue turban on down to a matching draped garment of the same color with a black belt. And he leaned on an extremely crooked silver cane, which had several ornaments dangling from every curve.”

Jonathan had encouraged me to stay with him at the Baptist Missionary Society hostel, which was housed in an old colonial style building. In hindsight, it was a truly humorous situation. Here was a hippie in a hostel with Christian missionaries, both national and expatriate, serving in India and other neighboring countries. One of my vivid memories from that time was of two British missionaries to Nepal who had come to Kolkata for supplies. They seemed to be trying to outdo each other to be the humblest of servants, as Jesus commanded His followers. They found it hard to walk through a doorway. "After you." "No, please, after you." "No, I insist, after you."



After our time in Kolkata, Jonathan had invited me to spend time with his family in Siliguri as the new year of 1971 dawned. I described that visit in a letter to my parents. "Am



having an enjoyable stay with Jonathan and family. Don't know if I explained—the family and in-laws move here for the two coldest months and rent a house. He has a son who is about 5 and a daughter who is 1 today. His wife is a Nepali and a doctor. His father-in-law plays violin passably, so we've been playing together. [I carried a soprano recorder along with me].”

I concluded the letter to my parents with this expression of hope. “Jonathan is so full of life. I pray that we can all come to a deeper knowledge of Christianity in the coming year. ‘I have come that might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly.’ (John 10:10)” I had no idea how marvelously God was going to answer my prayer.