



A Glimpse of Nothingness: Experiences in an American Zen Community

Janwillem van de Wetering

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The description of a Zen path of one Westerner who began by seeking for the sense of it all, and who came to realize at least a part of it.

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Femmesquara says

a cute and light foray into an American Zen Buddhist monastery through the eyes of a Dutchman. enjoyed all the little buddhist asides about the Buddha Nature, knowing nothing, being nothing. Some notable quotes "Real wisdom can never be expressed in words", "man is a collection of ever-changing properties, housed in an ever-changing body", "buddhism is negative. it tells you only what it is not. it is only specific about its methods. it suggests taht you should create your own situations, rather than being pushed around by yrself and others. it warns that you should not avoid your own doubts. it recommends trying things out for yourself." there is a great parable (is it a parable?) about a man who is trying to pick apples, but he has to jump for them, and he winds up crushing the apples, which are not ripe anyhow. instead, the wise man waits for them to fall, ripened and in abundance, so in abundance there are too many for him to eat. the rest, he gives away.

Marie says

Netherlands

"Just repeat the mantra. Let every breath hold one repetition of the mantra. Become the mantra. Forget everything else. Pay no attention to your thoughts."

"I remembered how often he has told me not to ask, but to find out."

"Everything is allowed, provided you can accept the consequences of what you do."

"Perhaps being tired is one of the many illusions we live with."

"You don't need much and too much luxury will only block your path."

"Nothing happens by accident." "Nothing is the key."

"The moments of change are of importance. At those moments we are forced to wake up and look around. And only when we are awake do we see something, and there is too much to be seen."

"Detachment is caused by a slow process, and the results of this process are gradual."

"There is no self. There is a constantly changing combination of properties, housed in a constantly changing body."

"An unpleasant situation does not have to be accepted."

"A man is nothing but an ever changing combination of ever changing habits."

"To see that it isn't true is easy. But to see what is true will take some doing."

"You are not alone. There are others, on their way on the same track. Travelers from nowhere to nowhere, on their way from nothing to nothing. The track may be narrow and steep and boring and frightening but everybody walks it. You are not alone but linked to everything around you."

"Whatever it is I want will come. All I have to do is be there when it comes and then I give it away."

"Emptiness, the great goal which is to be reached by losing everything there is to lose."

"The disciple has to meditate. For hours and hours. Everyday. Insight is caused by long sitting."

"We are frightened by the emptiness within and try to fill it. With ideas, with names, with definitions."

"Anything he has ever been, ever learned, ever owned, floats past him, still and without life, moved by the slow current of the wide river. It is the first moment of his liberation."

Frank says

Too nihilistic. He asks himself questions, such as "have I learned anything in my pursuit of Buddhism?", and his responses are nihilistic. He goes over those questions too many times in the book.

I hate his answers. He could have described the other disciples with more depth. The people he meets at the monastery are given only superficial background stories and character descriptions.

Lynne-marie says

I read a lot about Zen Buddhism, but find it hard to write about what I've read. This book is honest, straightforward and not about philosophy, but a day-by-day description of life in an American Zen community as the surrounding Americans call it. I found it enlightening with a small "e". I would recommend it to someone getting their feet wet in the concepts of Zen.

William Burr says

I had another book on the go that I was having trouble getting through when I had a moment of despair and decided to pick this one up, having a feeling that it would be more appealing, since I really enjoyed the first book in the series, *An Empty Mirror*. I was right - I breezed through this one in a week. Not sure how van der Wetering makes the most mundane aspects of life interesting. In this book, he visits an American Zen retreat centre, with a rather authoritarian master.

It's interesting to see his progression since the first book, where he introduced himself to Zen at a Kyoto monastery. This book happens a good while later. I found that he had more faith in the Buddhist teachings this time. The way he describes Zen masters in this book is full of awe and wonder- he believes that they are in touch with a great mystery. As he says in the preface, "Who the master really is I wouldn't know. I could only describe his mask and costume and repeat some of the statements he made and try to recapture the sense of the conversations he had with me."

His writing is simple, and seemingly un-emotional. He has a great eye for detail, and irony.

One of the most memorable moments is when he goes for dinner at the house of a fashionable couple. The hostess is elegant and attractive. At one point, de Wetering notices, though : "The hostess looked at me. The polite behavior of the evening had, for the moment, been forgotten. I saw the frightened face of a woman who is no longer young, whose beauty diminishes by the day, a woman who has seen the first signs of her death. The wrinkles, the first pair of spectacles, the small spots, so aptly named gravespots in English, have appeared on her hands. She is suffering from rheumatism."

That might sound gloomy but the book is not. de Wetering is constantly searching for truth with his writing, and with his life. The book is full of situations where he quietly observes seemingly mundane events and comes to some deeper understanding of life, through them.

ania says

"The old teacher had told me about the man under the apple tree. First he grabbed at the apples and every now and then he would get one, but they were small and they were crushed in his hand. Then he changed his attitude. He just stood under the tree and stopped jumping. He merely held up his hands and when the apples were ripe they fell into his hands, and there were so many apples that he didn't know what to do with them and gave them away. 'So I must wait,' I thought, 'like I am waiting here in the snow. And while I am waiting I can do the best I can.'"

Justin says

I'm reading this because a friend gave it to me for my birthday. It was very nice of him, although his insights are more interesting than some of those in the book. I am on day five of a juice cleanse right now. It feels hard, but not as hard as the form of Zen described in the book. I am enjoying it because I have a little experience with Zen and because it is a story. There are better stories and better books about Zen. But that's not a reason to put it down.

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Done now. No need to fall into the existentialist trap the author's cohorts seem to have set for themselves. Perils of Zen, perhaps. Or the misinterpretation.

Jerobeam says

In *Het dagende niets* beschrijft Janwillem van de Wetering hoe hij argwanend werd toen zijn boekhandelaar in Rotterdam hem zei dat niets toevallig gebeurt.

"U bent toch geen spiritist he?" had ik argwanend gevraagd.

Mijn vraag deed hem droog krakend lachen.

"Nee" zei hij, toen hij uitgelachen was. "Maar niets gebeurt toevallig. Als je een boek meeneemt komt dat omdat je er iets van jezelf in vindt. In dat boek staat iets dat je zelf bent.

Dat wil je bevestigen."

Hoe of waar ik hoorde van Janwillem van de Wetering weet ik niet meer. Van Grijpstra en De Gier heb ik wel eens gehoord, het doet me vaag aan Rutger Hauer denken. Ik las op internet dat Van de Wetering was opgegroeid in een huis dat ik wel ken, het duurste, grootste en mooist gelegen huis van Hillegersberg. Maar mijn interesse was pas echt gewekt toen ik vernam dat hij ook drie boeken heeft geschreven over zijn ervaringen met het Zen-boeddhisme.

In dit tweede boek uit de Zen-trilogie, verschenen in 1973, beschrijft Janwillem van de Wetering hoe hij na een verblijf in Japan op zoek gaat naar een andere leerling, die het werk van de Japanse Zen-meester voortzet in de Amerikaanse staat Maine, aan de grens met Canada. Van de Wetering beschrijft zijn eerste stapjes richting bewustwording met humor en nuchterheid.

We nemen het mystieke pad in een hoogverheven bui. We zijn er van overtuigd dat we de meest prachtige ervaringen zullen hebben, we verwachten wonder wat aan visioenen en hemelse belevenissen maar behalve dat je benen pijn doen als je mediteert gebeurt er niet veel. En als er iets gebeurt, is het iets vervelends.

Zoekend op het internet kwam ik er al snel achter dat de meester, Peter, in het echt Walter heette, Walter Novick. De 'hoofdmonnik' bij wie Van de Wetering logeerde, Rupert, heet in werkelijkheid Stuart. Om een bepaald artikel van deze Stuart te lezen, moest ik me ergens op een website registreren. Daarbij werd kennelijk een bericht gestuurd naar de auteur, want ik ontving een e-mail van de man die in 1973 zo uitgebreid door Janwillem van de Wetering was beschreven. Ik schreef terug en zo kwam het dat ik een uitgebreide en bijzonder interessante mail ontving over Zen, Janwillem van de Wetering, diens vrouw Juanita en hun tijd bij Walter Novick, over wie Stuart bij nader inzien toch minder enthousiast is.

Die oude boekhandelaar met zijn krakende lach had gelijk: toeval bestaat niet.

Eric says

I think I tend to like this sort of first-person stuff (eg. Novice to Master: An Ongoing Lesson in the Extent of My Own Stupidity). Makes for good light reading, no pressure. Was also interesting to see a bit of life on the Rinzaï end of the spectrum.

Gotta say, the book overall had a weirdly gloomy and lonely feel... The atmosphere reminded me of that Philip K. Dick novel with that slightly-broken kid on Mars that could see everybody through time. So pretty traumatising for him because every time he looked at a guy, he basically saw a walking corpse. The book kind of felt like that. I mean, there were some human connection and warmth scenes, but somehow it all seemed a bit disconnected...

Marilyn Di Carlo-Ames says

There are no secrets here; the people who live a monastic life are mere mortals like the rest of us. The wit and humor that van de Wetering captures in his characters are, just that, characters. There are different ways that we go about finding ourselves, and in this world chaotic, it sounds very sensual to imagine retreating, but do you have the sanctity to do it in this manner? Being one who is familiar and comfortable with solitude the idea sounds enchanting, yet when you learn of the Zen masters rules, I personally think cult. You decide. Either way, this book is an eye-opener into the concept of what does anything matter anyway? Hmm...

Arjen says

Het lijkt alsof Janwillem een stuk cynischer is geworden na zijn avontuur in Japan, maar ik ben benieuwd naar het derde -en laatste- boek.

Sarah says

This book wasn't for me. I felt like the author became too esoteric and was unsure why this was written or what purpose it served, it felt very self aggrandizing even though it was pretending not to be.

Vi says

Jan van de Wetering continues his exploration of Zen Buddhism. Some ten years ago, he had spent time in a Japanese Zen monastery and studied with a Master. While there for a year and a half, he was given a koan, a riddle of sorts, to solve and left before reaching any enlightenment. The koan did not lay dormant and through chance encounters, Jan finds himself staying in the United States at a newly established Zen community of one of the disciples of his previous Master.

Brisk and amusing read. Not much talk about the pain of meditation, but still it humanizes the people and the practice of meditation.

Fred says

i found this book entertaining and helpful. and as someone who sits (meditates) in a zen-esque manner every day it's a rare zen-related book that strikes me as both.

Libby says

There are those people out there who say they are Buddhist, who do yoga and vegan diets and oppose wars and meditate occasionally. The latest "trend" is mindfulness, how you can practice five min a day and

everything is clearer, one step closer to Nirvana.

Which is why I love books like this. According to this book, if you label yourself a Buddhist, you're not there yet.

Great nonfiction telling of the author's experience in deepening his understanding of beliefs. It is in fact a glimpse into another world, and in reading it I hope others gain a bit of insight. Or, at least they try their best.
