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Posted on 10 May 2017 By Lawrence Shainberg

Seeking Help With His Basketball Game, Shainberg Embraced Zen Buddhism In And Was Catapulted On A Life Long Spiritual Journey Alternately Comic And Reverential, Ambivalent Zen Chronicles The Rewards And Dangers Of Spiritual Ambition And Presents A Poignant Reflection Of The Experiences Faced By Many Americans Involved In The Zen Movement

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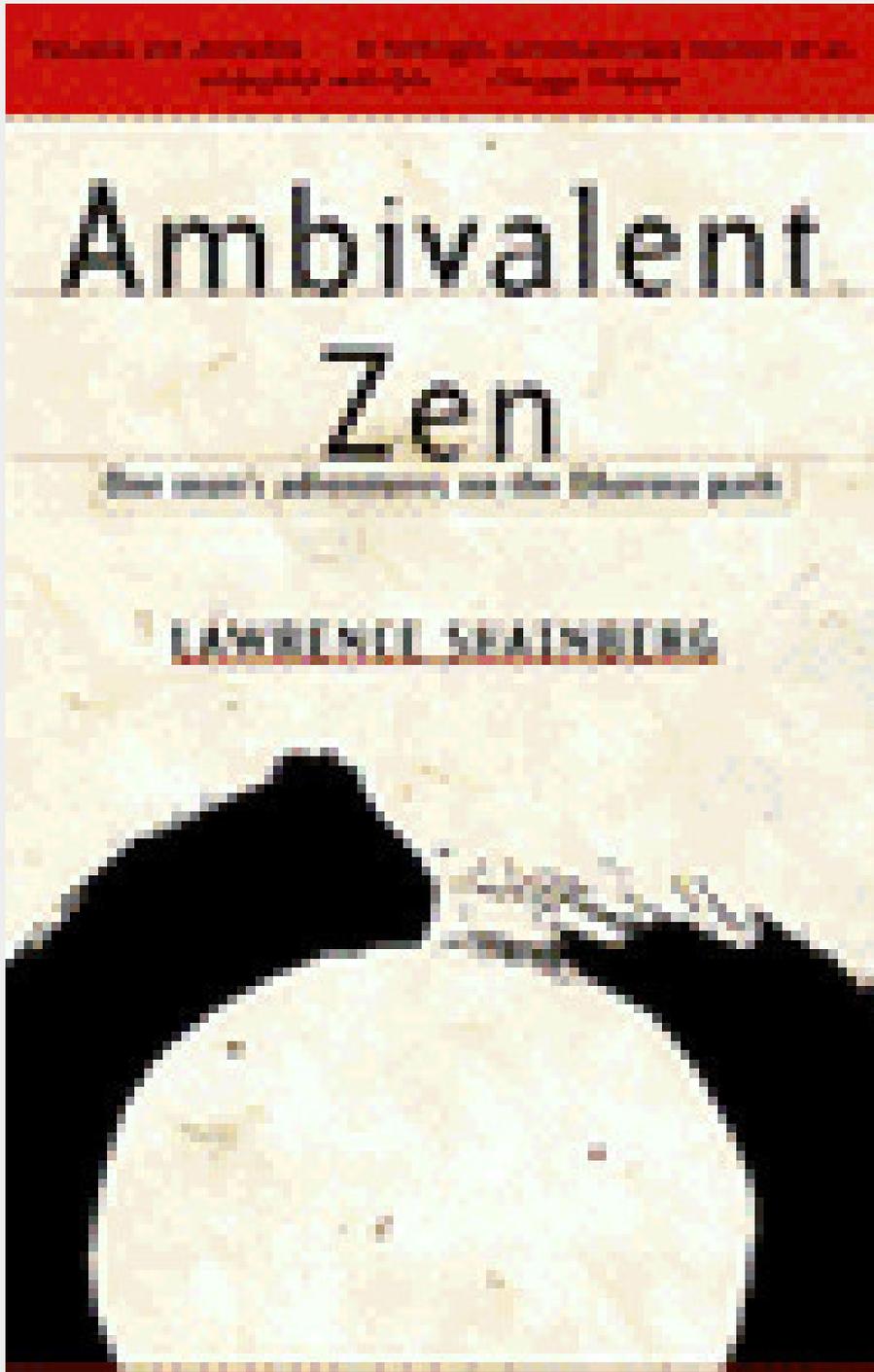
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10 thoughts on “Ambivalent Zen : One Man's Adventures on the Dharma Path”



David Guy David Guy says:

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After sesshin this year, I felt an urge to read books about Zen usually I want to read anything but , not dharma books, but memoirs of Zen experience First I turned to a book that only a sideways look at Zen, by a man who practiced reluctantly, Bones of the Master A Journey to Secret Mongolia by George Crane Then I reread, for the third or fourth time, my all time favorite memoir of spiritual practice, Ambivalent Zen, by Lawrence Shainberg. Shainberg has published fiction and non fiction, including an excellent monograph on his favorite writer, Samuel Beckett, in addition to this memoir In a way this seems a book not only about his teacher and his practice, but his whole life And he organizes it so that he shuttles through various time periods, which skillfully comment on one another It s a virtuoso performance. Shainberg followed his father s interest in spiritual matters the elder Shainberg made his money as a Memphis businessman, then spent the rest of his life in an anguished but very sincere kind of seeking, reading spiritual literature and seeking out teachers on a personal level Young Larry, who was interested in his tennis game, nevertheless attended talks by Krishnamurti 1 and had lunch with Alan Watts Years later, a woman friend got him interested in Zen, and Shainberg embraced it wholeheartedly, sitting multiple times per day and going on retreats His problem was that the practice seemed to cure his writing bug he didn t feel the need to write, and sometimes wasn t able to, when he was practicing most seriously The two most absorbing activities of his life were somehow at odds 2 He struggled to find balance 3 He was also, constantly he picked the right title for his book ambivalent about Zen We all have this feeling to

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The Kite Runner

some extent, but Shainberg had it in spades. He would want to go on retreat, spend weeks anticipating it, then get there and be disappointed, feel like leaving once he actually did, then immediately regretted it. He hilariously illustrates the human tendency always to want the thing we do not have. He also seems to be living out a version of his father's ambivalence. The old man could never commit to anything. Shainberg keeps committing then pulling back. From the start he found himself in the Rinzai School of Zen, which seems to include a greater wish for achievement than Soto and a competitive spirit though no Buddhist practice is immune from those things. Almost immediately he ran into a series of Rinzai Assholes, including one who had this to say about his posture, How do you get that crooked spine, accident or something. I can tell you one thing if you want to study Zen, you better get yourself straightened out. Zen is posture and posture is Zen. With a back like that, you're wasting your time on the cushion. The man later made this pronouncement on Shainberg's oryoki form. You still don't get it, do you? When you finish eating, your jihatsu should be tight, all of a piece. If you do it right, it should look as if you've never used it. Yours, my friend, look like something you bought at a flea market. Shainberg also ran into a fascinating character named Chang Wei, who practiced and taught Zen along with various martial arts, who claimed to be able to infuse people with his energy and to heal various diseases. He sometimes even sent energy by phone, putting the receiver near his hara during zazen. The man had an interesting take on the practice of sitting meditation. It is his view that one should never relax while on the cushion. After sitting, one should feel totally exhausted, and those who don't can be sure they've wasted their time. That, I would say, is the polar opposite of how we practice Soto Zen. But because of the skillful way Shainberg alternates time sequences this was a canny strategy on his part. The entire book is dominated by his portrayal of the man who ultimately became his

true teacher, Kyudo Nakagawa Roshi Kyudo became a monk at the age of six and lived a celibate life, apparently because of a promise he made his own teacher, the famous Soen Roshi He practiced for years with his teacher, then had a small zendo in, of all places, Israel, then founded the zendo in New York where Shainberg practiced with him. Neither of the places he presided over was a major institution the zendo in Israel, for instance, where he spent thirteen years, had fewer members than my own practice place, the Chapel Hill Zen Center Kyudo nevertheless led the same daily with great devotion, sitting for two hours three thirty minute periods morning and evening, meeting with students and caring for the zendo He seems to have no ambivalence about Zen at all, and his constant exhortations to Shainberg, his fascinating pronouncements about Zen in general, form the heart of the book Ambivalent Zen has a particular poignance because Shainberg's last teacher before Kyudo Roshi, Bernard Glassman, recently died, and Shainberg's portrait of the man is fascinating Glassman was three years younger than Shainberg, famous as a Zen prodigy he sailed through the koans with Maezumi Roshi, then was told by his teacher to leave L.A and start a sister zendo in New York Glassman's teaching is often brilliant his disquisition on the Heart Sutra, at least the way Shainberg renders it, is one of the most fascinating I've ever heard And he was anything but a Rinzai Zen Asshole, a warm and encouraging man. He was nevertheless such a visionary that he couldn't help continuing to envision, wanting a larger and complicated program, getting further and further into debt he had cannily made Shainberg into one of his major officers, knowing the man had money to donate He eventually got so involved in his various enterprises that he and many of his students abandoned zazen altogether, behavior that would be scandalous in the Soto world Shainberg eventually left him for the much less ambitious Kyudo, who always seemed satisfied with whatever modest

enterprise he was running He was never famous, like Glassman But he seems a truer Zen man. I felt this book reached an apotheosis at the end, something I hadn't noticed in previous readings There is a wonderful meeting between Kyudo Roshi and Shainberg's aging parents, which expresses the essence of Zen and resolves any feeling of ambivalence that the reader might have The truth is that there are all kinds of ambivalences and paradoxes in the theory of Zen, but in practice we wipe them away We're stunned to find out, for instance, that Kyudo prays every day for the people on his sangha, and when Shainberg asks why he does such a thing, in the midst of a non-theistic practice, Kyudo gives the true Zen response I have no idea When I pray, I just pray He has the same kind of response to the elder Shainberg's favorite teacher Ask him has he read Krishnamurti, Shainberg's father says Shainberg is acting as a translator between his parents and teacher because, what with hearing problems and their various accents, they don't understand each other Yes, of course, says Roshi when I've relayed the question Very intelligent, beautiful words Tell him, Krishnamurti hates spiritual practice or any kind of formal meditation Laughing, Roshi offers him a friendly pat on the shoulder Yes, yes Very intelligent I feel same Then what's all that about says Dad, waving his hand in the direction of the zendo How can he maintain this establishment if he doesn't believe in formal meditation Once again, Roshi doesn't wait for me to translate Please you tell him I have no idea This is a marvelous and entertaining book by a true Zen student, however ambivalent, and rewards multiple readings I can't recommend it too highly.

Reply



Marshall Marshall says:

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This was such a fun and fascinating book I was ambivalent about Zen myself, but I committed myself to it for six months and decided it s not for me, so I thought this would be a good memoir to help me make sense of my experience Indeed, there were many concerns I had that were confirmed from reading this book.Zen is very strict, even dogmatic, and it is laser focused on eraticating ego It certainly makes one wonder what it would be like to really commit oneself to this practice in a serious way, and that s what this man did He really went whole hog in the practice, but his persistent ambivalence always made him worry that his sincerity was compromised, along with the quality of his practice I d say it had, since doubt is called one of the five hinderances in Buddhism.Nonetheless, it s a fascinating journey this author takes you on You really see just how human some of these great teachers are, and sometimes it seems like they re just as wrapped up in ego clinging as the rest of us Buddhism is hard work, and Zen even so, and that s all they get Of course, I expect even of Zen practictioners than other Buddhist traditions, because their practice is so much intensive I know better than to judge others when this practice is such a personal one, but I can t help but wish for shining examples of what is possible.

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Kate Kate says:

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An honest even bracing and humorous memoir that endears Larry S to me and also, even, helped my meditation on the cushion Watch out for your mind should be posted like a road sign at all zendoors I can't share his love of Beckett, but that is beside the point Shainberg lets us see and feel how his meditative accomplishment and his humanness are inseparable and always bothered by trying to be inseparable Many Dharma memoirs fall into the pit of overemphasizing the folly of the author, this one doesn't. I loved the portrait of his parents, and was relieved when LS found a decent Zen master.

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Craig Bergland Craig Bergland says:

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Simply outstanding I found myself drawn into the story as if it was a novel and identified with the author's ambivalence around teachers and authority figures and people's willingness to surrender to authority figures even when their behavior doesn't seem to justify it I found his time with Bernie Glassman fascinating and and at the same time disappointing, and was left with the nagging feeling that his real teacher was right under his nose all along Perhaps there is something about the desire to build large communities that is essentially corrupting regardless of the spiritual tradition.

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Rich Lindner Rich Lindner says:

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Very honest warts and all memoir of one man s struggles with his Zen practice.

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Lizzie Lizzie says:

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This is a spiritual autobiography by a cranky, neurotic Zen student He starts with descriptions of his father, another spiritual seeker who was reading Krishnamurti and Buddhist books and going to an analyst in the late 40s Encouraged, he pursues his own spirituality through Zen, martial arts, monastic and lay Buddhist practices I found his descriptions of Bernie Glassman s Zen organization in New York in the 60s interesting it sounds like Glassman fell into the same megalomania that Richard Baker did at the San Francisco Zen Center, though I know he s doing of work with the homeless and peace projects now Anyway, I liked this realistic look at the Zen path.

Reply



Scott Scott says:

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This takes a different approach from most Zen books it s much of a memoir of the author s life, in which Zen practice plays a huge part, than a discussion of the usual Zen issues Which is totally refreshing Shainberg got involved with Zen in the early 50s and over the course of

the next four decades the book ends in the mid 90s practices with and meets a number of well known figures in the Zen world, and his portraits of them here are not all flattering, so there s a bit of a Shoes Outside the Door feel to the book.

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Carrie Carrie says:

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I m newly exploring Zen this book made me a little worried not enough to stop exploring but mostly left me feeling a huge distaste for the author I feel like the book ended abruptly I m sure there s something very Zen about the way he wrote the book, and meant to make it unsettling, but I was just left cold.

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ACT ACT says:

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This book was recommended as a resource to learn about meditation and zen, but what I really took from it was the frustrations and dangers that come from the process of seeking As a memoir, it was certainly entertaining, but with a level of detail that was sometimes aimless and unnecessary to get the story across Perhaps a student of Zen Buddhism would take from it than I did

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Emma Emma says:

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it was a good book, i just found others i became
obsorbed in.

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