

Zen Sayings from Ralph Waldo Emerson (II)

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This piece follows my earlier collections:

- 100 Zen Sayings from *The Old Man and the Sea* (1983)
- 150 Zen Sayings from *The Grapes of Wrath* (1984)
- Zen Sayings from Ralph Waldo Emerson (I) (1985)
- 150 Zen Sayings from Whitman's 'Song of Myself' (1986)
- Zen Sayings from Thoreau's *Walden* (1990)

Here I have picked out 140 Zen expressions from R. W. Emerson's essays: "The Over-Soul," "Circles," "The Transcendentalist," "The Poet," "Nature" (*Essays, Second Series*), and "Thoreau."

Each extract in this collection is, so to speak, an original Zen saying written in English. Emerson, who was quite ignorant of Zen, did not mean it at all, but it is quite obvious that there are various Zen viewpoints—what I call "Universalism," "Individualism," "Vitalism," "Zen Ecology," "Zen Radical Humanism," and some other aspects of Zen—vividly expressed in his own "native language" without any mixture of exoticism nor imitation at all. The Zen eye, I am sure, will see in each extract in this collection—one or more than one aspects of Zen.

For detailed information regarding Zen viewpoints, Zen sayings and capping phrases, see my introductions to:

- A Zen Forest: Sayings of the Masters* (New York & Tokyo, 1981)
- A Zen Harvest: Japanese Folk Zen Sayings—Haiku, Dodoitsu, & Waka* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988)

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[The Over-Soul]

- 1 Space is ample, east and west,
But two cannot go abreast,
Cannot travel in two.
- 2 Yonder masterful cuckoo
Crowds every egg out of the nest,
Quick or dead, except its own.
- 3 There is a difference between one and another hour of life in their
authority and subsequent effect.
- 4 Our faith comes in moments; our vice is habitual.
- 5 Man is a stream whose source is hidden.
- 6 I watch that flowing river, which out of regions I see not, pours
for a season its streams into me.
- 7 The earth lies in the soft arms of the atmosphere.
- 8 The act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle,
the subject and the object, are one.
- 9 God comes to see us without bell.

- 10 As there is no screen or ceiling between our heads and the infinite heavens, so is there no bar or wall in the soul.
- 11 Can crowd eternity into an hour
Or stretch an hour to eternity.
- 12 She [the soul] has no dates, nor rites, nor persons, nor specialities,
nor men.
- 13 It is an ebb of the individual rivulet before the flowing surges of
the sea of life.
- 14 [The soul] dwells in the hour that now is, in the earnest experience
of the common day.
- 15 God will not make himself manifest to cowards.
- 16 He must greatly listen to himself, withdrawing himself from all
the accents of other men's devotion.
- 17 I am born into the great, the universal mind.
- 18 I do overlook the sun and the stars and feel them to be the fair
accidents and effects which change and pass.
- 19 The universe is represented in an atom, in a moment of time.
- 20 He will weave no longer a spotted life of shreds and patches, but
he will live with a divine unity.

[Circle]

- 21 A circle whose centre...everywhere and its circumference nowhere.
- 22 There is no end in nature, but every end is a beginning.
- 23 Our globe seen by God is a transparent law, not a mass of facts.
- 24 A little waving hand built this huge wall.
- 25 The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to a new and larger circles, and that without end.
- 26 We thirst for approbation, yet cannot forgive the approver.
- 27 Let us enjoy the cloven flame whilst it glows on our walls.
- 28 All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations and dance before our eyes. And yet here again see the swift circumscription!
- 29 The field cannot be well seen from within the field.
- 30 The astronomer must have his diameter of the earth's orbit as a base to find the parallax of any star.
- 31 Cause and effect are two sides of one fact.
- 32 Geoffrey draws on his boots to go through the woods, that his feet may be safer from the bite of snakes; Aaron never thinks of such a peril.

- 33 Blessed be nothing.
- 34 The worse things are, the better they are.
- 35 One man's justice is another's injustice; one man's beauty another's ugliness; one man's wisdom another's folly; as one beholds the same objects from a higher point.
- 36 No evil is pure, nor hell itself without its extreme satisfaction.
- 37 I simply experiment, an endless seeker with no Past at my back.
- 38 There is no sleep, no pause, no preservation, but all things renew, germinate and spring. Why should we import rags and relics into the new hour?
- 39 In nature every moment is new; the past is always swallowed and forgotten; the coming only is sacred.
- 40 Nothing is secure but life, transition, the energizing spirit.
- 41 People wish to be settled; only as far as they are unsettled is there any hope for them.
- 42 I cast away in this new moment all my once hoarded knowledge, as vacant and vain.
- 43 The simplest words—we do not know what they mean except when we love and aspire.
- 44 Not if they still remind me of the black event. True conquest is the causing the calamity to fade and disappear as an early cloud of insignificant result in a history so large and advancing.

- 45 To forget ourselves, to be surprised out of our property, to lose our sempiternal memory and to do something without knowing how or why; in short to draw a new circle.
- 46 Nothing great was ever achieved without enthusiasm.
- 47 The way of life is wonderful; it is by abandonment.
- 48 A man never rises so high as when he knows not whither he is going.
- 49 Dreams and drunkenness, the use of opium and alcohol are the semblance and counterfeit of this oracular genius, and hence their dangerous attraction for men.

[The Transcendentalist]

- 50 The light is always identical in its composition, but it falls on a great variety of objects, and by so falling is first revealed to us, not in its own form, for it is formless, but in theirs.
- 51 The squirrel hoards nuts and the bee gathers honey, without knowing what they do, and they are thus provided for without selfishness or disgrace.
- 52 Nature is transcendental, exists primarily, necessarily, ever works and advances, yet takes no thought for the morrow.
- 53 Every one must do after his kind, be he asp or angel, and these must.
- 54 Eat clouds, and drink wind.

[The Poet]

- 55 You should rub a log of dry wood in one spot to produce fire, all the rest remaining cold.
- 56 Nature enhances her beauty, to the eye of loving men.
- 57 The man is only half himself, the other half is his expression.
- 58 These three [truth, good, beauty] are equal. Each is that which he is, essentially, so that he cannot be surmounted or analyzed, and each of these three has the power of the others latent in him and his own, patent.
- 59 Poetry was all written before time was.
- 60 Words and deeds are quite indifferent modes of the divine energy.
- 61 Words are also actions, and actions are a kind of words.
- 62 He is plainly a contemporary, not an eternal man.
- 63 Man, never so often deceived, still watches for the arrival of a brother who can hold him steady to a truth until he has made it his own.
- 64 I shall mount above these clouds and opaque airs in which I live — opaque, though they seem transparent — and from the heaven of truth I shall see and comprehend my relations.
- 65 That will reconcile me to life and renovate nature, to see trifles animated by a tendency, and to know what I am doing. Life will no more be a noise; now I shall see men and women, and know

signs by which they may be discerned from fools and satans.

- 66 This day shall be better than my birthday: then I became an animal;
now I am invited into science of the real.
- 67 The carpenter's stretched cord, if you hold your ear close enough,
is musical in the breeze.
- 68 He loves the earnest of the north wind, of rain, of stone and wood
iron.
- 69 What would be base, or even obscene, to the obscene, becomes illus-
trious, spoken in a new connection of thought.
- 70 The poorest experience is rich enough for all the purposes of ex-
pressing thought.
- 71 Day and night, house and garden, a few books, a few actions, serve
us as well as would all trades and all spectacles.
- 72 Every word was once a poem.
- 73 No mountain is of any appreciable height to break the curve of
the sphere.
- 74 The poet turns the world to glass, and shows us all things in their
right series and procesion.
- 75 Language is fossil poetry.
- 76 The ancients were wont to express themselves, not with intellect
alone but with the intellect inebriated by nectar.

- 77 The traveller who has lost his way throws his reins on his horse's neck and trusts to the instinct of the animal to find his road.
- 78 We fill the hands and nurseries of our children with all manner of dolls, drums and horses; withdrawing their eyes from the plain face and sufficing objects of nature, the sun and moon, the animals, the water and stones, which should be their toys.
- 79 The poor shepherd, who blinded and lost in the snowstorm, perishes in a drift within a few feet of his cottage door.
- 80 The figs become grapes whilst he eats them.

[Nature]

- 81 At the gates of the forest, the surprised man of the world is forced to leave his city estimates of great and small, wise and foolish.
- 82 The incommunicable trees begin to persuade us to live with them, and quit our life of solemn trifles.
- 83 We go out daily and nightly to feed the eyes on the horizon, and require so much scope.
- 84 We nestle in nature, and draw our living as parasites from her roots and grains.
- 85 He who knows what sweets and virtues are in the ground, the waters, the plants, the heavens, and how to come at these enchantments, is the rich and royal man.
- 86 It is the magical lights of the horizon and the blue sky for the

background which save all our works of art, which were otherwise bawbles.

- 87 They have some high-fenced grove which they call a park.
- 88 In every landscape the point of astonishment is the meeting of the sky and the earth, and that is seen from the first hillock.
- 89 The difference between landscape and landscape is small, but there is great difference in the beholders.
- 90 Nature is loved by what is best in us.
- 91 By fault of our dulness and selfishness we are looking up to nature, but when we are convalescent, nature will look up to us.
- 92 The trees are imperfect men, and seem to bemoan their imprisonment, rooted in the ground.
- 93 The men, though young, having tasted the first drop from the cup of thought, are already dissipated.
- 94 That identity makes us all one, and reduces to nothing great intervals on our customary scale.
- 95 We do not eat for the good of living, but because the meat is savory and the appetite is keen.
- 96 The vegetable life does not content itself with casting from the flower or the tree a single seed, but it fills the air and earth with a prodigality of seeds, that, if thousands perish, thousands may plant themselves; that hundreds may come up, that tens may live to maturity; that at least one may replace the parent.

- 97 The love seeks in marriage his private felicity and perfection, with no prospective end.
- 98 Nature hides in his happiness her own end, namely progeny, or the perpetuity of the race.
- 99 No man is quite sane; each has a vein of folly in his composition, a slight determination of blood to the head.
- 100 The contention is ever hottest on minor matters. No less remarkable is the overfaith of each man in the importance of what he has to do or say.
- 101 God himself cannot do without wise men.
- 102 One may have impressive experience and yet may not know how to put his private fact into literature.
- 103 A man can only speak so long as he does not feel his speech to be partial and inadequate.
- 104 For no man can write anything who does not think that what he writes is for the time the history of the world; or do anything well who does not esteem his work to be of importance.
- 105 Bread and wine, mix and cook them how you will, leave us hungry and thirsty, after the stomach is full.
- 106 They are like one who has interrupted the conversation of a company to make his speech, and now has forgotten what he went to say.
- 107 The accepted and betrothed lover has lost the wildest charm of

his maiden in her acceptance of him.

108 She was heaven whilst he pursued her as a star: she cannot be
heaven if she stoops to such a one as he.

109 All over the wide fields of earth grows the prunella or self-heal.

110 Man's life is but seventy salads long, grow they swift or grow
they slow.

111 The reality is more excellent than the report.

112 Nature is the incarnation of a thought, and turns to a thought
again, as ice becomes water and gas.

113 Man imprisoned, man crystalized, man vegetative, speaks to man
impersonated.

[Thoreau]

114 It seemed as if the breezes brought him,
It seemed as if the sparrows taught him,
As if by secret sign he knew
Where in far fields the orchis grew.

115 He could find his path in the woods at night...better by his feet
than his eyes.

116 A yardstick, which, whilst it measures dowlas and diaper, can
equally well measure tapestry and cloth of gold.

117 A very industious man, and setting, like all highly organized men,

a high value on his time, he seemed the only man of leisure in town.

118 The best place for each is where he stands.

119 Nothing is to be hoped from you, if this bit of mould under your feet is not sweeter to you to eat than any other in this world, or in any world.

120 He knew how to sit immovable, a part of the rock he rested on, until the bird, the reptile, the fish, which had retired from him, should come back and resume its habits, nay, moved by curiosity, should come to him and watch him.

121 He knew the country like a fox or a bird, and passed through it as freely by paths of his own.

122 Either he had told the bees things or the bees had told him.

123 Snakes coiled round his legs; the fishes swam into his hand.

124 His eye was open to beauty, and his ear to music. He found these, not in rare conditions, but wheresoever he went.

125 He thought the best of music was in single strains; and he found poetic suggestion in the humming of the telegraph-wire.

126 I hearing get, who had but ears,
And sight, who had but eyes before;
I moments live, who lived but years,
And truth discern, who knew but learning's lore.

127 It was so dry, that you might call it wet.

- 128 The pond was a small ocean; the Atlantic, a large Walden Pond.
- 129 Some circumstantial evidence is very strong, as when you find a trout in the milk.
- 130 The locust z-ing.
- 131 Sugar is not so sweet to the palate as sound to the healthy ear.
- 132 Dead trees love the fire.
- 133 The bluebird carries the sky on his back.
- 134 The tanager flies through the green foliage as if it would ignite the leaves.
- 135 If I wish for a horse-hair for my compass-sight I must go to the stable; but the hair-bird, with her sharp eyes, goes to the road.
- 136 Immortal water, alive even to the superficialities.
- 137 How did these beautiful rainbow-tints get into the shell of the fresh-water clam, buried in the mud at the bottom of our dark river?
- 138 We are strictly confined to our men to whom we give liberty.
- 139 How can we expect a harvest of thought who have not had a seed-time of character?
- 140 Wherever there is knowledge, wherever there is virtue, wherever there is beauty, he will find a home.