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# THE THREE PILLARS OF ZEN

TEACHINGS OF  
ZEN MASTER PHILIP  
KAPLEAU

Words: Victor M. Parachin

*If you fall into poverty,  
live that way without  
grumbling – then your  
poverty will not burden  
you. Likewise, if you are  
rich, live with your riches.  
All this is the functioning  
of Buddha-nature. In  
short, Buddha-nature  
has the quality of infinite  
adaptability.*

**- Philip Kapleau**



In the years immediately following World War II, Philip Kapleau was a military court reporter assigned to cover war crime trials first in Germany and then in Japan. It was there, in Tokyo, that Kapleau's curiosity about Zen was aroused because he was impacted by the difference between the way the Germans and the Japanese responded to defeat. Unlike Germany, the Japanese recognised the karmic consequences of their actions and accepted the devastations of war which fell on them as karma for the conflict they initiated.

Philip Kapleau was born in New Haven, Connecticut on August 20, 1912. During the depression years, he worked as a court reporter and attended night law school. However, the stress of full-time work and intensive law studies created health issues for him so had to quit law studies. Because of his court reporting experience, he was hired by the US Military (1946) to cover the Nuremburg War Trials in Germany. From there he applied for a transfer to Japan where the Tokyo War Trials were beginning.

In Tokyo, he became acquainted with several individuals who practiced Zen Buddhism and was invited to sit in on lectures given by the scholar D. T. Suzuki. When Suzuki left Japan to become a teacher at Columbia University, Kapleau followed him to New York. Growing disillusioned with Suzuki's academic and intellectual approach to Zen, Kapleau returned to Japan (1953) to seek a more authentic Zen experience and satisfy his spiritual hunger. His stated goal was enlightenment: "I gave up my work, disposed of my belongings, and set sail for Japan, determined not to return until I became enlightened." Kapleau spent fifteen years training in Zen, from 1953 – 1965, studying with several major Zen teachers. In 1958, Kapleau experienced the awakening he had been seeking and said the experience left him feeling "free as a fish swimming in an ocean of cool, clear water, after being stuck in a tank of glue."

He left Japan for America to become an independent Zen teacher, one not associated with a lineage. In 1965 he wrote and had published *'The Three Pillars of Zen'*, a book that became an international bestseller, translated into twelve languages and sold more than a million copies. It continues to remain one of the most influential Zen books of the twentieth century. In that book, he offers this meditation instruction: "The easiest for beginners is counting incoming and outgoing breaths. The value of this particular exercise lies in the fact that all reasoning is excluded and the discriminative mind put at rest. Thus the waves of thought are stilled and a gradual one-pointedness of mind is achieved. To start with, count both inhalations and exhalations. When you inhale concentrate on 'one'; when you exhale, on 'two'; and so on, up to ten. Then you return to 'one' and once more count up to ten, continuing as before. If you lose the count, return to "one." It is as simple as that."

When asked about how long one should sit for meditation, Kapleau's response is practical and compassionate: "How long should you do zazen (meditation) at one sitting? There is no general rule, for it varies according to the degree of one's eagerness as well as the maturity of one's practice. For novices, a shorter

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time is better. If you sit devotedly five minutes a day for a month or two, you will want to increase your sitting to ten or more minutes as your ardour grows. . . .you will come to appreciate the feeling of tranquillity and well-being induced by zazen and will want to practice regularly. For these reasons I recommend that beginners sit for shorter periods of time.”

While on a book tour, he was invited to meet with a meditation group in Rochester, NY in 1965. A year later he returned, establishing the Rochester Zen Centre where he taught for more than 40 years. In his capacity as a “*Roshi*”, the leader of Zen group, Kapleau authorised several women and men to teach his style of Zen.

As a Zen Buddhist, Kapleau took seriously the Five Buddhist precepts especially the first one, “to abstain from taking life.” As a result, he embraced a vegetarian diet and frequently stressed vegetarianism as a vital aspect of Buddhist ethical teaching. He also emphasised the health benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle. “Taking a life is contrary to the first precept and supports the killing of animals... Also, a real connection has been established between cancer and other degenerative diseases and the eating of flesh foods.” Kapleau authored *To Cherish All Life: A Buddhist View of Animal Slaughter and Meat Eating* where he noted: “Every individual who eats flesh food, whether an animal is killed expressly for him or not, is supporting the trade of slaughtering and contributing to the violent deaths of harmless animals.”

Though he was a highly regarded and sought-after teacher, Kapleau maintained an admirable sense of humility about himself. On one occasion, a workshop participant arrived early at the Rochester Zen Centre. There, he saw an older man in the place and assumed it was a janitor. Only after the workshop began did he realise it was Kapleau Roshi. When Kapleau heard this, he said it was the highest compliment he could receive.

In his later years, Kapleau was affected by Parkinson's disease. Speaking of his condition, Kapleau said he suddenly became aware that he and the illness would live together, side by side. “An insight came to me: the disease is now yours, it's inseparable from you. The only way, it seemed to me, to deal with a chronic disease is to accept it as part of you, as part of your life, not something isolated that you just have a marginal relationship with.”

On May 6, 2004, after living with Parkinson's Disease for several years, Kapleau died peacefully in the backyard of the Rochester Zen Centre where he was surrounded by close friends and students. He was 91 years of age.



# WORDS OF WISDOM FROM PHILIP KAPLEAU

- ❖ Although we all possess the seeds of great love and compassion, without the light of the enlightened one's wisdom and the waters of their compassion, these seeds would never spout.
- ❖ For some reason, many people imagine it is more difficult for women to come to Self-realisation than for men. On the contrary, women usually attain kensho (awakening) quicker because their minds are less prone to play with ideas than are men's.
- ❖ In giving yourself over wholly to whatever you are doing at the moment you can achieve a deeper and richer state of mind.
- ❖ You must not practice fitfully. You will never succeed if you do zazen only when you have the whim to, and give up easily. You must carry on steadfastly for one, two, three, or even five years without remission, constantly vigilant.
- ❖ For the ordinary man, whose mind is a checkerboard of criss-crossing reflections, opinions, and prejudices, bare attention is virtually impossible.
- ❖ To suppress the grief, the pain is to condemn oneself to a living death. Living fully means feeling fully; it means being completely one with what you are experiencing and not holding it at arm's length.
- ❖ To be reborn hourly and daily in this life, we need to die—to give of ourselves wholly to the demands of the moment, so that we utterly "disappear."
- ❖ A lawbreaker is not inherently evil, nor is a law-abiding person a pillar of virtue. Nevertheless, for society to function harmoniously, people who go against the accepted laws—who kill or steal, for example—must be segregated for the protection of others.
- ❖ Our every act is a matter either of giving life or taking it away. If we perform each act with total absorption, we give life to our life. If we do things half-heartedly, we kill that life.
- ❖ What we call life is no more than a procession of transformations. If we do not change, we are lifeless. We grow and age because we are alive. The evidence of our having lived is the fact that we die. We die because we are alive.

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