

# Zenecdotes from a Zenecdotal Life

Steve Abhaya Brooks

If you want to express the truth,  
Throw out your words, throw out  
Your silence, and tell me about  
Your own Zen.

The Gateless Gate

“These Zenecdotes are stories of my own Zen. I’ve always sought, whether intentionally or not, to be true to my own being as the source of whatever I’ve been or done. It’s led me to this. As a Zenish author, I’ve written about this awareness. These Zenecdotes are intended to stay within that awareness.”

A man wrote an introduction to his Zenecdotes, small stories of his own Zen, and in the introduction, he reverted to the formality of Non-Zen writing, in order, he thought, to make his meaning clear to the Non-Zen mind. This is like holding up a painting in order to make the scenery clear. The scenery of Zen is not scenic. You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make a horse. Zen is. The language of Zen is Zenlike, becoming then less Zen and more like Zen.

1.

I read Zen stories and notice my irritation. These kind of stories seem so certain, the Zen Masters so ready to teach uncertainty. I turn my invisible socks inside out. There is no wisdom in the wise, except the wise reside in wisdom, and wisdom resides nowhere.

2.

When I'm filled with joy, my body fills with sadness, squeezing out the reluctant pain. It helps to stay in joy, until the pain takes care of itself.

3.

I have lived my entire life as an enlightened being, even when I thought I was confused, unknowing, and struggling. A great beauty is constantly being undressed.

4.

A man who used to frighten me, saw me act without fear. He came up to me and said, *Stay the same as you are*, his eyes filled with happy tears.

5.

I held my face against the face of my friend, and in that touch, we were lovers, with no past or future. We came together in no sin, no sacrament, in love itself.

6.

There's the rumble of a roar in my throat, whenever my mind is focused on its own, imminent demise, like a rumbling underground, when a mountain is being born.

7.

On stage, I noticed my hand in the empty air. All attention was on that hand. I was reluctant to speak, the audience was silent, and the sound of silence filled the room.

8.

The bounty hunter yells at criminals, as he wrenches them to the ground. Then he offers them a brother's compassion. When his wife mocks him, he smiles. His arms are strong, and his breasts are larger and softer than hers, and she knows it, and she loves him even more.

9.

I swam back and forth, lap after lap, until swimming disappeared. I became something of nothing beyond myself, so I continued to swim, getting stronger with every stroke.

10.

Coming around a bend in the road, I saw I was entering the same bend in the same road that continued as if endlessly. When I lost interest in

fear, the road became straight. Fear is a bend in the road that takes one back toward oneself, until one is headed straight for home.

11.

My father had a brain tumor that was expected to kill him. Then, the tumor was gone, and he was expected to live. Between diagnoses, he gave his money to the hospital.

12.

I lived with a woman who ridiculed everything I did and was, so I left her, and tried to carry on her legacy. I failed as such ridicule, until even my failure lost its luster.

13.

I sat with a master who refused to create an ashram or accept one when it was offered to him, because, he said, of the inevitable corruption of financial institutions. After that time, I became a teacher in a university, and I understood the sorrow he avoided.

14.

*I tell my students, if you read, and you don't remember what you have read, it's like after dreaming, when you awaken and forget your dream. This life is a dream. Live the dream, pay attention to the dreamer, and let the dream go.*

15.

When I tell stories from my life, I trust the truth will be revealed. When I tell the truth, I trust my true self will be revealed.

16.

My body is an empty vessel, occasionally filled with intoxicants, other times with nourishing foods, sometimes with sourness, bitterness, and poison. I'm grateful for my emptiness. Otherwise, I might become a block of something or other.

17.

Everyone has an opening beauty. Beauty is in the nature of opening. An old friend or an old lover is one with whom one never stops opening.

18.

She said, *You're too old for me*. Since I'm ageless in love, I became instantly grateful. I thank her, everyday, for the return of my attention on my ageless freedom.

19.

I become bothered by the harbingers of death, and I feel the rising up of fear. When my life is threatened, fear leaps to take the reins of my

life. When my life takes back the reins, fear is an imposter.

20.

A great basketball coach, a leader of men, has been a student of Zen for thirty years. When his wife's unruly dog enters a room, he accommodates the dog. A tiny dog rules the master of men, and Zen is revealed as his cherished pastime.

21.

A certain part of my heart died when I was sixty, and yet the heart of my being is boundless, without parts or limitations. How is this possible? Death is small and confined to itself, wherever it goes.

22.

Whenever I think about dying, all I am is fear and sadness. When I forget about my life, I become an ever-expanding freedom, with no fear and only happiness.

23.

Does a dog have Buddha-nature? BUDDHA BITES DOG. After writing that one headline, the newspaper went out of business.

24.

A professor asked me, during a quiz, *Are you taking this?* I replied,

without thinking, *I'm taking it in stride*. I should have been arrested for theft and assault for stealing his language and throwing it back at him. No one in the class laughed, and in the silence, I knew what it was to sit in the empty chair of unshared laughter and private pleasure.

25.

I showed a book of aphorisms to my father, and he read them. *Too much*, he said. It reminded me of the time when I was leaving for a long trip. I hoped for some help from my father, but instead of offering me money, he said, *You've been broke before*. My father's recognition was more than I could have asked for.

26.

In college, I stopped my roommate in the hall to our room and asked him, *What is poetry?* I thought he knew and could tell me. He stared at nothing, for a moment. Then he turned and left the room. He was right, and I learned even more of what I already knew.

27.

Today is a gray day. I become gray in myself. I think, *This is my gray day*, and I become a happy gray. When there is no *my* in my senses, I feel bright elation in my body. This elation not only takes away the gray, it shocks me. Many years ago, a friend said I followed a negative with a positive. I tried following a positive with another positive. It felt

great. Then I followed a positive with a superlative, and I became so happy, I could hardly stand it.

28.

I think about my death all the time. This is the red herring of thought. When the thought appears, I realize I'm close to real peace and joy.

29.

Why does the finest reality seem hidden from everyone? Why is everyone hiding from the finest reality? This reality is hiding in plain sight. This reality is hiding *inside* plain sight.

30.

When I want to be seen, and I think no one sees me, I lose sight of the eyes of being itself. When I see in the eyes of being itself, I am seen.

31.

A famous poet said he would as soon kill a man as a hawk. Philosophy kills men, birds, and poetry. I too have been a philosopher, a kind of murderer. I atone with arrows of silence from the quiver of stillness. See how it goes? When life and death are my teachers, I can't stop killing and dying. The bodies of literature are stacked high, like kindling for hearts on fire.

32.

A wise man stands before his eager listeners. *Please ignore my silence*, he says and sits down. He seems to keep all his gold to himself. *Go get your own*, the wise man says, but he leaves his bag open.

33.

My friend and I were both heavy drinkers. He moved in with a woman we both knew. They held a dinner party and served a bottle of fine wine. I began drinking the wine. My friend reminded me that it was a fine wine. I reminded him it was merely wine and that drinking it was fine. He apologized for his lapse in awareness. Later, I apologized for my arrogance.

34.

I make everything I cherish, that I've ever done, available to anyone who wants it. It feels like pouring my storehouse of vintage wine into the ocean. It isn't enough to get the ocean drunk, but it's a naturopathic cure for my own drunkenness.

35.

When I was a boy, with my friends, on an early morning hike to the river, we stopped at a small grocery for provisions. The grocer gave me too much change for my candy bar, and I gave him back the extra

coins. He praised me lavishly for my honesty, and, later, I wanted to break into his store and rob him, to punish him for the theft of my integrity.

36.

My father set back the odometer on a car he was selling. I asked him about it. He said everyone assumed that everyone else did it, so he had to do it, too. He seemed to be telling me he was the same as every other man, and, I assumed, as his son, that I should be like him. In a world of such thieves, I realized I could be an honest man with no effort, whatsoever.

37.

A great actor died, and everyone praised him. Another actor was asked about the dead man's character, *His character was like the characters he portrayed. When we're put on film, we become the truth of our illusion. There's no greater illusion than this life. Memory is another illusion. I'm an actor, too, and I love my illusory profession, but I only temporarily believe the movies I've seen or done, including the movie I'm in.*

38.

The most brilliant human being is one who's never had a thought - not a mindless idiot, but the master of mindless brilliance. The most original writer is one who's not yet written a single line, not yet had a thought, not yet spoken a word. The first human being who saw the

ocean, said, *Ah*, and the rest is history. Great books were written long after these humans were conscious in their unencumbered awareness. This is burden, direction, and freedom.

39.

The famous dog handler says, *I rehabilitate dogs, and I train people*, over and over. He is popular and well-known, yet people say, *I hope he can make my dog a good dog instead of a bad dog*. People go to teachers to make their minds into good minds instead of bad minds, and the teachers say, *Let your mind be a mind, it's not the problem*, and the people beg the teachers, *Please fix my broken mind?*

40.

I know the inherent wisdom of being, and yet, when I stub my toe, it hurts. I can speak the essence, yet I take a job teaching school. I can paint, yet I watch television. I'm free, yet I choose to flirt with incarceration. My clothing is thousands of years old, when all I need, to be who I am, is my nakedness. I covet a comfortable chair. I'm very close to freedom, to be so troubled by these paper prisons.

41.

I read the sacred texts, looking for humor. There's a lot to laugh about, but not much laughter. It reminds me of riding my bicycle on the streets of Honolulu. Where is the ocean? I steal the ocean air into my lungs.

42.

Walking in India, I saw the translucence of life around me. Where did the ashram go? In art class, back in the States, I saw thirty hands of the same absent artist. What happened to my degree?

43.

On my way to buy a beer, I became drunk. On my way to write a poem, it's written. The Tibetans elevate a child to be their sacred leader; there's no sense waiting around for what's already true. The sunrise can be seen by those in the dark.

44.

*Buddha sat under a tree and something happened. Nobody knows what, but you can't make a religion out of that, my teacher said, and he, too, kept speaking. Buddha was called a chatterbox. The Zen masters created a teaching with language puzzles and sticks. We're an eating and shitting animal. Whatever we take in, we put out, in some form similar to the original, when what we are is unreadable, essential, and inconclusive.*

45.

I used to ask people if they could tell me their spiritual biography. What I heard was biography that was called spiritual. My spiritual

biography is the blank space these words clutter up, like ice cubes tossed in a snow bank. *Spiritual biography* is an oxymoron. A better question is *Who am I?* but even that has formality. A look of simple recognition is better.

46.

My mother said she didn't know where I came from. She should have known, but she was only there for the birth of my body. A man falls in love, in himself, as he lets go of everything one might call loveable, until the awareness of death is the awareness of the reunion of the self with being itself.

47.

When she was small, my friend's grandmother came to see her. *Did you miss me?* she asked the little girl. *No*, the child said, and her grandmother cried. The little girl thought that since she hadn't tried to *hit* her grandmother, how could she have *missed* her?

48.

Another girl's parents referred to a man's private parts as his *business*. Then she heard her parents talking about a friend who had gotten into some difficulty. She heard them say that his business was falling off. She felt sorry for the man. She herself had no such business to be concerned about, so maybe it wasn't so bad, after all.

49.

As soon as my brother began to speak, it was apparent he stammered. That is, it was difficult for him to begin words. They wouldn't come out on time. Because language is the form of meaning, he began to doubt the meaning of everything everyone had to say. The second shock was his discovery how often he was right in his doubt. He found that language was untrustworthy, so he had to begin to look elsewhere.

50.

I heard a teacher say that poets are the luckiest people, because they have the opportunity, at the moment of creation, to turn and look and see the source, but they don't, he said, because they fall in love with the thing created. I am a poet, and I suddenly knew what my job was - to see the source of being and love the poem that comes from being, in the same moment, to see the source and let my love follow the poem, as it's being written, and as it makes its way away from me, doing whatever it is that poems do.

51.

When I was talking to my teacher in his house, his eyes went from the milky yellow eyes of an old man to broken shards of jewels. Of course, this is impossible in anyone's eyes, but not in the eyes of anyone's vision. I saw the eyes of the tiger. I had the eyes of one who

sees the eyes of the tiger. He put his hands on my shoulders and said he was glad I had come to see him.

52.

I awoke from sleep, present and conscious, and could not remember who I was or where I was. I didn't want to leave my namelessness. I didn't want to leave my placelessness. I didn't want to leave my formlessness. I wanted to stay as I was. I realized I could never lose who I was. I had only just then remembered who I was. I was being in being. I was self in self. I was nothing in nowhere. I was home. I was home in myself. I was home in my body. I was at home in being.

53.

Who can presume to be like the great teachers, the saints, gurus, and godmen? Why shouldn't we surpass them and let go of their petty titles? There's no title on the sun, the sky, the sea, the air, or the essence of anything. I go deeper into the nameless being that undefines everything. I cannot drown, sitting on the beach, except by grace. My rain surrenders, and I become the sea.

54.

To All You Men Who Are Gentle, and All You Women Who Are Ladies, I stand before you to stand within you. I awoke in the morning and went into the shower. Thoughts of the day came into my mind, and I

thought, *Oh...thoughts*, and they were gone, along with the thinker, who went not away, but into no separation.

55.

I heard a man say what I knew to be true. I knew it to be true, when I heard him say it. In that moment, all doubt disappeared. In its disappearance, doubt had appeared where I never knew it existed. A thing, whose presence I'd never noticed, was suddenly absent, and I felt the presence of its absence, and it became the presence of my fullness. Absence filled my emptiness, and I was full of nothing - not the nothing that is the absence of something - but the nothing that is the presence of everything.