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# JANE ALEXANDER

*If you do only one thing this month...  
...get Zen*

**Who am I?** It's a simple question, isn't it? Well, actually, no it isn't. It's hard, very hard, as I discovered when I spent a weekend at a Zenways intensive retreat.

I first came across Zen meditation on a Serenity Retreat ([serenityretreat.co.uk](http://serenityretreat.co.uk)) run by Kim Bennett. Kim's a Zen meditation teacher and she challenged me to try the Zenways intensive. "It's hardcore," she said with relish. "You'll love it." Then she paused and grinned. "And you'll hate it too."

## KNOW YOURSELF

I'm always up for a challenge and so I joined 17 others at a monastery in Yorkshire. We were a diverse group, an equal split of men and women, ranging in age from our 20s to 60s. The aim of the weekend was to have a 'breakthrough', to come to an understanding of our real selves, our true natures – if you're being fancy about it, you could call it 'enlightenment'.

Most meditation retreats rely on self-practice, just staying in silence with yourself, but the Zenways approach is far more active. We worked in pairs, sitting opposite one another and asking the question, "Tell me who you are?" If you were the one asking the question, your job was simply to sit, in silence, in complete acceptance and non-judgment – to act as a witness. If you were answering the question, your job was to look within, to see what came up and to express it the best way you could. However this wasn't therapy – rather than dwelling on the past, analysing our responses, we were encouraged just to observe what emerged and then let it go.

It was an intriguing process. I found all kinds of random memories popping up and then, bizarrely, old physical symptoms. I felt old aches and pains, old heartaches and old

injuries. At one point I even felt my body balloon as if it remembered my pregnancy.

The listening was equally illuminating. How often do we truly listen to another person? In normal life we bat words around, we play verbal tennis with one another. We barely hear the other person as we are formulating what we are going to say in response. And how seldom do we sift our words; how seldom do we really sit and think, feel, ponder before we talk? I became entranced by these people – watching their faces, listening to their stories – I saw the beauty, the magic in each and every one of them. It was truly humbling.

## ENLIGHTENMENT

Did I 'get it'? Did I achieve enlightenment? Not this time, sadly. But a fair number of people did and their faces shone with an inner magic, a truly transcendent joy. And I thought, yes, I could do with some of that.

I suspect that I'll be back.

*Zenways intensive retreats are by donation (accommodation costs are kept low). Zenways also runs other workshops and classes. For more information see [zenways.org](http://zenways.org)*

*Jane Alexander's latest book is [Wellbeing & Mindfulness](#) (Carlton). See her Amazon author page for a full list of her books. She blogs and tweets as @exmoorjane and is on Facebook as eJaneAlexander*



*"How seldom do we really sit and think, feel, ponder before we talk?"*

