ZENWAYS

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Julian Daizan Skinner

London-based Zen Master Julian Daizan Skinner spent two decades in Zen monasteries, returning from Japan in 2007. He teaches Zen Yoga in the UK and internationally. Here, he shares his journey with ***By Sarah Bladen***

How did you first get into yoga

When I first got into Zen I was fascinated by the meditation. I was already fit - running marathons, playing rugby. And I expected the meditation practice just to be mind-training. Yet it was far more than that. Every aspect of my being was involved and I was amazed at the level of physical tension and pain brought up just by half an hour of sitting still. I knew I had to do something about this and began tracking down Zen masters with a physical culture aspect to their practice. And from what I learned, things began to open up and my body became able to enjoy the sitting.

What inspired you in those early days

Over the years, I've practiced in Zen temples where everyone does yoga together and I've practiced in temples where it's an individual or a small group practice. The most inspiring thing for me was seeing elderly monks who have been doing the physical stuff for years and noting how energetic, vibrant and joyful they were. My own teacher, Shinzan Roshi, combines yoga practice with a form of acupressure and still runs almost every day and he is in his 80s.

Most transformational yoga moment

I've been fortunate to study with some extraordinary teachers, but a key moment that comes to mind for me was about finding the teacher on an inner level. For the first seven years of monastery life, my living space was a six by three foot section on the meditation platform in the hall with monks sleeping either side. There was no privacy and a lot of attention was paid to physical alignment, both in the meditation position and in action.

So life was intense – a lot of sitting meditation and the application of that presence into every other moment of the day. I was finding a deep but very energised stillness. Then at a certain point my body wanted to move. This impulse wasn't coming out of discomfort or avoidance (I'd already learned a lot about those things). I was in a situation where I could let it happen. I allowed the body to take over. It felt like taking your hands off the steering wheel. Something incredible happened. In this allowing I felt I'd tapped into a deep wisdom of the body. Over time, I realised that this wisdom always tended toward greater freedom, health, alignment and happiness. It was home. Being at one with the universe was a reality, not just a nice sounding idea. From that day to this – over 25 years – this spontaneous movement has been a constant element in my practice. Its wonders never cease. A couple of years ago, with my teacher I climbed a mountain in Japan where an important seventeenth-century Zen master called Hakuin had a two-year solitary retreat. He describes how during that time his body danced and swayed and when he came down from the mountain he never again felt fear. We recorded a DVD called Spontaneous Zen up there as a way of helping people to find their way into this body-wisdom.

Describe your own teaching style

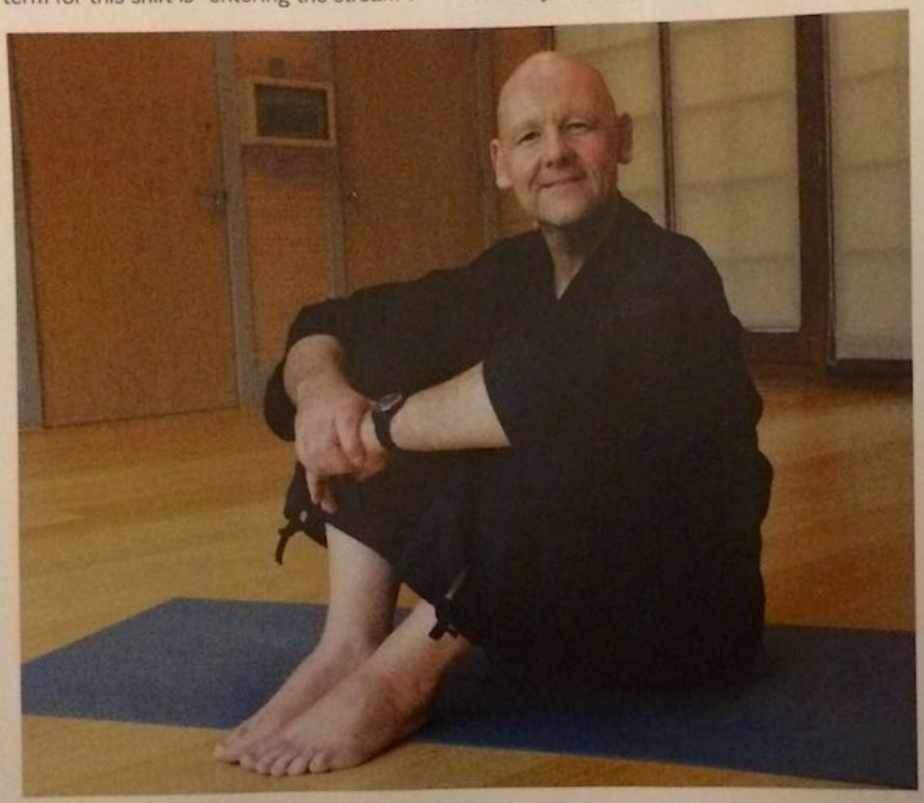
As a teacher, I emphasise physical alignment in the field of gravity, together with a cultivation of the energetics of the body. All of this is underpinned by a quality of mindfulness. You can find the M-word everywhere lately and people have largely assumed it means heightened self-consciousness. But if you go back to the old texts, the Buddha always talks about mindfulness of the body in the body, mindfulness of the breath in the breath and so on. I take this to mean that he is proposing an integrated or non-dual quality of presence, and that's what we work with in the yoga practice. I view myself as a midwife rather than a sculptor. I don't want to tell the students what to conform to, but rather encourage them to listen and respond to the unique needs of this very moment.

How would you like students to feel after class

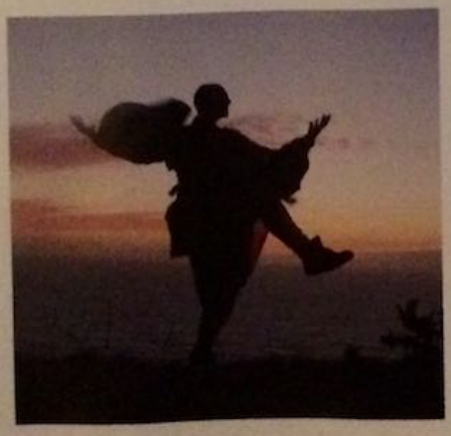
I'm aiming to help students find greater aliveness and vibrancy within an utter acceptance of their fundamental adequacy. Energy becomes a direct present moment experience and eventually the student's self-view shifts so that they see themselves as a dynamic arising within the moment by moment arising of the entire universe, rather than a solid and fixed lump. The Buddha's term for this shift is "entering the stream". Life is no longer viewed in terms of conflict. Internally and externally we see that this whole business is about kindness.

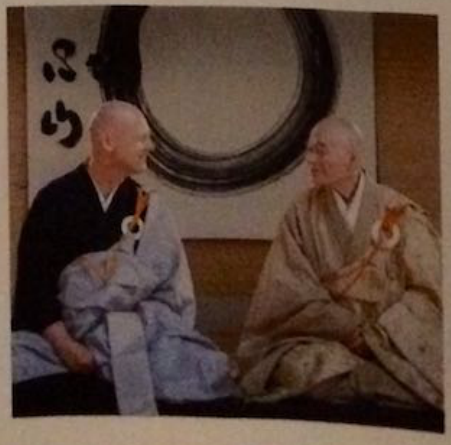
How would you reassure a total beginner

Don't worry. Your job is to tune into your body, to come home and respond to what arises. My job is to facilitate that. If we work together like this your unfolding will be unique to you and there's no comparison with anyone else.



"I like a saying that the Buddha frequently repeated that, "The Dharma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end." You don't have to wait for the good stuff. It's all right here if you only look."





What's the inspiration behind Zenways

When I came back from Japan, Zenways was the umbrella term I adopted for my sharing of the various ways of Zen I'd encountered over the years. I began training yoga teachers to help practitioners make a living and pass on to others what they were discovering on the mat. We have a parallel programme for meditation and mindfulness teachers. We have quite an active retreat schedule too. I'm incredibly fortunate to have come out of a spiritual tradition which marries human health and wellbeing to the development of consciousness. It's very grounded and practical. Hence, I've just written a book called Practical Zen.

What are your future plans

I've nearly finished writing another book on the health and wellbeing aspects of Zen meditation and mindfulness and I'll probably do a book about our approach to yoga. Also, for some years, I've been working with a charity involved in helping people in homelessness and prison situations, and some of my students have been doing parallel work and it seems to be getting to the point where we need to create our own charity in this area. And when I lived in Japan I had the opportunity to explore the tradition of mountain practice - the spirituality of wild nature, and I'm considering how this might translate into the western world.

What do you like to do when you are not doing yoga

I like walking, extended pilgrimage-style walks. I did one in Japan about a thousand miles long but these days I usually go out on the road for just a few days. I'm actually saying this on a three-day walk from Shrewsbury to Holywell in Wales. Pilgrimage is similar to being on the yoga mat in that it's an intensely physical process and things open up through that.

What's your own personal motto

I like a saying that the Buddha frequently repeated that, "The Dharma is good in the beginning, good in the middle, good in the end." You don't have to wait for the good stuff. It's all right here if you only look.

Any yoga tips for the rest of us

Trust your body. If you listen and allow, it will reveal a road of bliss and union (yoga).

Daizan's book Practical Zen is out in all good book stores on June 21. To find out more visit: zenways.org