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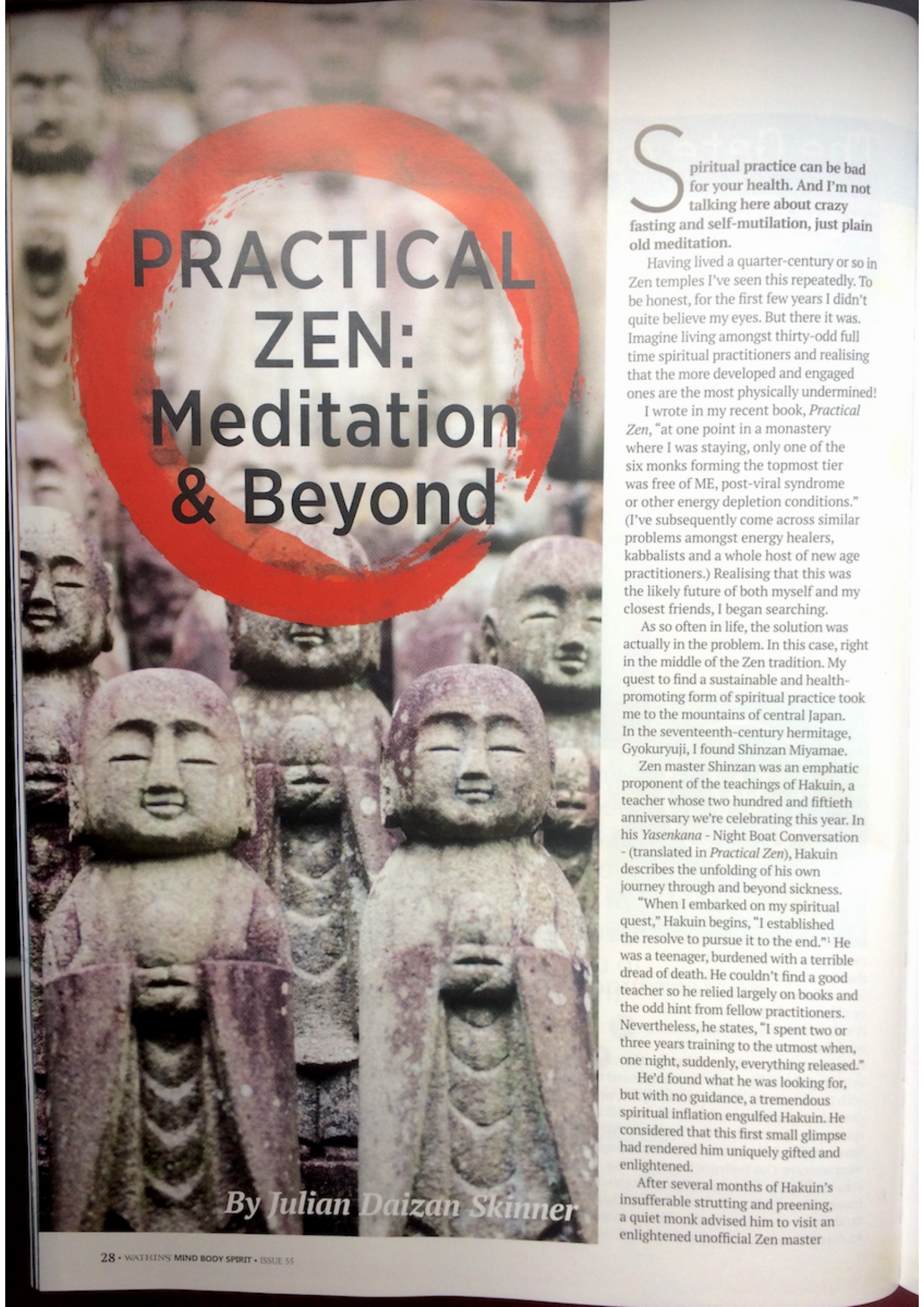
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# PRACTICAL ZEN: Meditation & Beyond

By Julian Daizan Skinner

Spiritual practice can be bad for your health. And I'm not talking here about crazy fasting and self-mutilation, just plain old meditation.

Having lived a quarter-century or so in Zen temples I've seen this repeatedly. To be honest, for the first few years I didn't quite believe my eyes. But there it was. Imagine living amongst thirty-odd full time spiritual practitioners and realising that the more developed and engaged ones are the most physically undermined!

I wrote in my recent book, *Practical Zen*, "at one point in a monastery where I was staying, only one of the six monks forming the topmost tier was free of ME, post-viral syndrome or other energy depletion conditions." (I've subsequently come across similar problems amongst energy healers, kabbalists and a whole host of new age practitioners.) Realising that this was the likely future of both myself and my closest friends, I began searching.

As so often in life, the solution was actually in the problem. In this case, right in the middle of the Zen tradition. My quest to find a sustainable and health-promoting form of spiritual practice took me to the mountains of central Japan. In the seventeenth-century hermitage, Gyokuryuji, I found Shinzan Miyamae.

Zen master Shinzan was an emphatic proponent of the teachings of Hakuin, a teacher whose two hundred and fiftieth anniversary we're celebrating this year. In his *Yasenkana - Night Boat Conversation* - (translated in *Practical Zen*), Hakuin describes the unfolding of his own journey through and beyond sickness.

"When I embarked on my spiritual quest," Hakuin begins, "I established the resolve to pursue it to the end."<sup>1</sup> He was a teenager, burdened with a terrible dread of death. He couldn't find a good teacher so he relied largely on books and the odd hint from fellow practitioners. Nevertheless, he states, "I spent two or three years training to the utmost when, one night, suddenly, everything released."

He'd found what he was looking for, but with no guidance, a tremendous spiritual inflation engulfed Hakuin. He considered that this first small glimpse had rendered him uniquely gifted and enlightened.

After several months of Hakuin's insufferable strutting and preening, a quiet monk advised him to visit an enlightened unofficial Zen master

called Shoju Rojin, at that time living in obscurity in Northern Japan.

Expecting that the teacher would ratify his understanding, Hakuin travelled to see him.

Upon stalking in to present his realisation, Hakuin was promptly rebuffed. On succeeding days the teacher repeatedly rejected Hakuin's attempts to gain his approval. In my experience of this situation, 99% of the time the student marches off and simply considers the teacher "blind". Hakuin was more fortunate. After the teacher resorted to throwing him into a muddy puddle, he came to his senses sufficiently to approach humbly with a willingness to learn.

Re-engaging with his meditation practice and redoubling his efforts, Hakuin in short order achieved a deeper understanding, climbing out of the pit of pride. But he only spent eight months in total with Shoju Rojin before resuming life on the road. A satisfactory explanation for this brevity has not been forthcoming but it was to prove problematic.

His health began to suffer. "Before a month had passed, my heart over-heated and scorched my lungs. My legs felt as cold as icy snow. I constantly heard noises in the ears as if I was walking along a river valley. My liver felt weak; I was afraid of everything. My spirit was distressed and weary. Whether sleeping or awake, I saw illusions and visions. My armpits were constantly drenched with sweat and my eyes continually filled with tears. I searched out famous doctors and Zen teachers in every part of the country, but found no relief."

The text goes on to say that he eventually heard about a hermit living in a mountain-cave to the north east of Kyoto. Desperate, he struggled up into the mountains and begged for help. After initial resistance, the hermit diagnosed Hakuin's malady and prescribed a series of meditative and energetic practices to restore his wellbeing.

“It was vital to create the bodily and energetic structures that enabled the practitioner to live out those insights and make a difference in the world.”

JULIAN DAIZAN SKINNER

After spending three years intensively putting into practice the hermit's guidance Hakuin completely recovered.

In later years, his own quest over, Hakuin taught in a tiny village temple at the foot of Mount Fuji. Life was rough and poor for the gathered students living in and around the temple. Many began to get sick. Hakuin shared with them what he had learned from the hermit, combined with the more traditional insight

practices of Zen. He created a format he called "The two wings of a bird".

It was not enough to develop life-changing insights, he reasoned. It was vital to create the bodily and energetic structures that enabled the practitioner to live out those insights and make a difference in the world. The system worked brilliantly. Within a few generations, Hakuin's descendents dominated the Japanese Zen world.

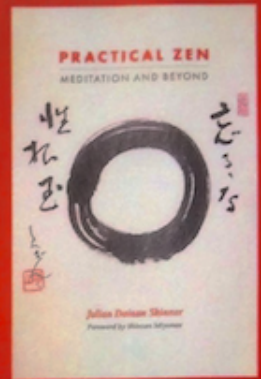
My teacher, Zen master Shinzan brought together Hakuin's structure with the practices and teachings of a slightly earlier Zen teacher, Bankei (1622-1693), whose realisation had also included a dramatic healing.

I was named my teacher's successor and returned to the west in 2007. Over the past decade the two wings is the core of what I have been teaching. Despite the fact that Zen has been known about in the western world for over half a century, nobody else seems to be sharing this dimension.

Although created for monks two and a half centuries ago, I'm continually struck by how relevant it is to modern life. One of my students spoke of how "Many of us spend long hours looking at screens, both at work and in leisure time. Those of us in the city are constantly bombarded with sensory stimulation. When I look back, it's no wonder I got so frazzled."

To make the system digestible I developed an eight-week programme with weekly meetings and 30 minutes daily practice homework.

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PRACTICAL  
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That way we could tease out and explore each element of the two wings, spending a week practicing it, before combining the whole thing into an integrated practice. Other practitioners wanted to learn how to pass these practices on. I developed a training course and now we have over a hundred teachers in the UK and throughout the world.

I wrote *Practical Zen* for people who couldn't get to a live teacher. In the book the eight-week, daily practice format extends out to 100 days. All the practices are audio-recorded and placed on a private website supporting the book.

My hope is that, should you wish, you can discover along with Kim Bennett, one of the western students whose story appears in the book, "...everything released. It was so simple. Everything I'd been looking for was *here*."

Wishing you grounded and powerful insights and transformation in your life. 🌟



#### MEET THE AUTHOR

JULIAN DAIZAN SKINNER began full-time monastic Zen in 1989, and has since practised and received Dharma transmission in the Soto and Rinzai traditions and been named successor of Zen Master Shinzan Miyamae, founder of the Zendo Kyodan Lineage.

On the web  
[zenways.org](http://zenways.org)