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Biography

A Heart Blown Open: The Life and Practice of Zen Master Jun Po Denis Kelly Roshi
Keith Martin-Smith
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"Kelly came back to the question again and again: what did it mean to be an American Zen Roshi nearing the twenty-first century?"

If Denis Kelly's life was made into a novel, no one would believe it, so the truth, told here as accurately as possible by author and fellow Zen Buddhist Keith Martin-Smith, must suffice: Kelly crossed every inner river, climbed every emotional mountain, slayed every psychological dragon, to arrive at a place of peacefulness.

Most of us imagine that a spiritual master would be a person of high moral integrity, likely celibate, and definitely vegetarian, someone who speaks in terse mysterious phrases and smiles a lot. Someone rather like the Dalai Lama, whom Kelly has met. Kelly had a habit, begun in grade school, of telling people in authority that what they said was "bull—" and he didn't spare the Dalai Lama that assessment. The assertion generally resulted in shock and expulsion, but not in the case of the Dalai Lama, who just smiled and told Kelly that his spiritual insight wasn't deep enough yet. Oddly, it was his tendency to blow up at authority that led to Kelly's heart being blown open, and to his becoming a spiritual master himself.

Kelly grew up with an abusive alcoholic father who savagely beat his sons while his mother turned a blind eye. This gave the boy a hatred of men in authority and a mistrust of all women that took him years to overcome. The only saving grace in his youth was a memory from infancy, of finding solace in a "sense of pervasive peace … a silence out of which everything arose." Because of that fleeting but seemingly endless moment, despite all the self-ruining experiences Kelly had to go through, he was drawn to meditation and to Buddhism.

Along the way to becoming a Zen adept, he was a wealthy drug dealer, a founding member of the California "family" that in the 1970s manufactured a notably pure form of LSD known as Windowpane. Kelly believed that enlightenment, that sense of peace he had felt as a baby, could be achieved through LSD. He traveled to India and met some interesting gurus, but

none who could disabuse him of the notion that satori, the goal of Buddhist meditation, was available through a chemical. He wound up in prison for that belief. Finally he agreed to bend himself to the discipline of Eido Roshi (who pronounced him to be “worth civilizing”), lived in a Buddhist monastery, and became Vise Abbot for a time.

Martin-Smith keeps Kelly’s story rolling on a fast track, just as the man’s life has been lived—the women, the violence, the good times, the regrets, the fear, and loathing, all are recounted. There is something in this book for everyone: spiritual seekers and unrepentant sinners alike will find Kelly’s ride hilarious, frustrating, poignant, and thoroughly human. The result of the journey is a new unique form of spiritual practice that Kelly, now a cancer survivor in his seventies who leads international workshops, calls “Mondo Zen”—“the radical invention that brought Zen into the twenty-first century and fully into the West.”

Barbara Bamberger Scott