

## Grassroots Zen: Community and Practice in the Twenty-First Century

**Manfred Steger**

**Perle Besserman**

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*Grassroots Zen is an enlightened, pragmatic guidebook that will deepen and enliven spiritual practice.*

In *Grassroots Zen*, Perle Besserman and Manfred Steger offer an interpretation of Zen that is approachable and uniquely American. Where Zen is sometimes perceived as hierarchical, prescriptive, and austere, they offer a Zen experience that is passionate, accessible, and deeply grounded in the here and now.

This husband-and-wife scholarly team has led Zen groups in Princeton, Honolulu, and elsewhere, and for them Zen is all about community and practice. They frequently cite classic spiritual texts, but their interpretations are handled with a light touch. Their “grassroots” Zen is closely aligned with traditions in China, where spiritual practice was open to farmers, laborers, businessmen, and many others, not exclusively to monks or higher castes.

The authors emphasize the importance of “sitting” at least thirty minutes a day to meditate and focus the breath, and they apply the Zen values of compassion, mindfulness, clarity, and balance in practical ways:

*When meditation reveals to us that we ourselves are no other than the noisy neighbor next door, the homeless woman in the park, or the spotted owl, social and ethical engagement become second nature. This is the kind of Zen practice that is synonymous with ‘life Zen practice’ in the world we occupy right here and now.*

Organized into sections on Time, Space, Motion, and Aspiration, the book is compellingly readable. As the authors share their experiences in establishing local Zen communities, for instance, they are refreshingly candid about why some of these communities thrived while others withered, reviewing what they learned from each experience without judgment.

This book offers profoundly useful commentary on the challenges of our time—the everyday challenges we face in our work, relationships, health, and other areas, as well as broader societal issues such as hunger, the environment, and the lure of materialism and smartphones. The authors believe the awareness that comes from a sincere Zen practice will inspire, even require, action while at the same time maintaining a careful balance between immersion and detachment, between caring deeply and letting go.

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KRISTEN RABE (May/June 2017)

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