



Richard Rose and Zen

by [Admin](#)

Richard Rose sometimes referred to his teaching as Zen although he said the term could be misleading. He considered Zen to be among the highest type of spiritual system, which he called the Direct Path. At times Rose called his own system “Direct-Mind Science”.

His own personal experience of Enlightenment occurred spontaneously at age 30 during a psychological crisis that followed more than a decade of intense personal search.^{1, 2} This was in 1947, in Seattle, Washington. His search had included the practice of hatha and raja yoga, a celibate lifestyle, meditation, introspection, experiments with diet, hypnosis, conventional psychology, and investigation into various spiritual systems.³ Although he had studied Buddhism he did not practice Zen. He may have read D.T. Suzuki by then, although he said in a lecture that on his first reading of Suzuki he had discounted it as merely history and turned away from it.⁴

1. See [The Three Books of the Absolute](#) at Albigen.Com.

2. Rose preferred the term Absolute to describe the experience, rather than Enlightenment.

3. See [Related Teachings](#).

4. 1977-0311-University-Maryland-Baltimore [\[Wiki\]](#)

He struggled for years trying to make sense of what had happened to him in Seattle. In the 1950s he was gifted a copy of Richard M. Bucke's *Cosmic Consciousness*, where he learned that such exaltations and realizations had happened to other men, and that his was not just some strange lightning bolt that struck out of the sky.^{5, 6}

5. "Something snapped in my head and I went nuts – according to definitions. In other words, I blew through the top and I visited a dimension I couldn't describe." ~ 1979-0418-Direct-Mind-Approach-to-Absolute-OSU [\[Wiki\]](#)

6. More about Rose's post-experience search has been commented on by Alan Fitzpatrick in his article [Richard Rose and the Assimilation of his Enlightenment Experience](#) on this site.

Yet Rose continued to search, attend spiritual groups, explore phenomena, travel and look for individuals he felt were serious about finding true knowledge. One such acquaintance referred him to Alfred R. Pulyan, of Connecticut, with whom Rose corresponded in 1960-1961. Pulyan presented himself as a Zen teacher and said that he had received his knowledge/realization from a female Zen master in New York City. That he had a "lineage", although he said that having a lineage proved nothing about him.

The nature of the "method" used by Pulyan in his correspondence with Rose was confrontational, chiding, at times sarcastic, while at the same time sincere, sophisticated and erudite. This double-pronged

treatment seemed to exasperate Rose more than it guided him. The correspondence is preserved at SelfDefinition.Org as [Letters from a Zen Master](#).⁷

7. Scans are available at that website.

Rose said later that one reason for the confusion was that he had already experienced in 1947 what Pulyan was trying to communicate to him in writing thirteen years later. The correspondence shows misunderstanding on both sides. Pulyan felt that Rose's questions were naïve, and he summarily discounted the possibility that Rose had encountered any valid experience, after Rose tried to mention what happened to him in Seattle. So Rose had just let it drop.

After a period of illness that interrupted Rose's communication,^{8, 8a} he met Pulyan in Connecticut and this meeting resolved his doubts, not only about Pulyan but about his own personal experience. The general Zen anecdote of the teacher transmitting enlightenment to the student is modified in this case by Rose's prior experience. Please see [Related Teachings #pulyan](#).

8. See Rose's last known letter to Pulyan, dated May 13, 1961. "I am very weak and will not write much. ... My physical condition is deteriorating. ..."

8a. "I sat in a chair for a year." Date is uncertain. See 1991-Unitarian-Church-Raleigh. [\[Wiki\]](#)

However, this transmission, or meeting of the minds, is precisely what Rose refers to when he uses the word Zen: Transmission of

enlightenment is Zen, and without transmission there is no Zen. In other words, what is communicated between the parties is Being, not knowledge. That the only real knowledge is knowledge of one's being. When this experience is shared it is called transmission.

In 1974 Rose discovered writings by Ramana Maharshi which further confirmed the nature of his own experience – under a different terminology – as *sahaja nirvikalpa samadhi*.

Rose was clear on one point, that although his own experience of Being was spontaneous, he had learned Transmission and therefore Zen from Alfred Pulyan. Rose lays out the mechanics, magic and energy of this technique in his book *Energy Transmutation, Between-Ness and Transmission*. Rose also adapted Pulyan's use of confrontation as a way to break through concepts and conventional states of mind in the student. Rose became a master of the *Koan*, which he often expressed with humor. He said the true koan was one's own life and life circumstances, including one's "robot nature", one's ignorance, and near-helplessness in finding one's true nature before death.

Rose gives numerous practical explanations of his Zen-like style of confrontation in [The Monitor Papers](#) (on this site), which is a guide for practice used by the early groups. One section is specifically entitled "Confrontation".

Describing his system he says:

“As a psychological system it avoids excessive objective studies, by going directly to the mind with the mind, rather than by attempting to explore the mind with statistical observations of behavior.

“As a Zen system it is unique, because it avoids objective, or somatic techniques, that emphasize body action ... And it is unique in that it avoids postulating Satori or no-mind before such occurs.

“It is similar to ancient systems of Zen in that it attacks inconsistent states of mind, and works to remove them.”

~ *The Monitor Papers*

Consequently, Rose, because of his own realization and discoveries, as well his ability to devise effective teaching methods, showed little patience for mainstream and soporific styles of Zen: tea ceremonies, sitting in Zazen, chanting, reciting ancient koans or poetry. This extended to the writings of figures associated with Zen in popular culture such as Philip Kapleau and Alan Watts.

“Zen has a direct language to the mind; it doesn’t beat around the bush with objective behavior patterns of psychology. And yet it’s a pure psychological system; it’s a system of perfect psychology, of going directly into the mind – first to your own mind and then into other people’s minds, in transmission.

“Now there are many Zen systems that do not do this. I was acquainted with Sokei-an ^[9] and I’m acquainted with disciples of Sokei-an who got nothing from years of attending Sokei-an’s meetings in New York City and on the west coast.” ^[10]

9. (1882-1945) Mentioned by Pulyan in the letters of [9/23/60](#) and [11/14/60](#). Sokei-an’s focus was koan study and interviews with the teacher. [Wikipedia](#)

10. Ref. 1974-1023 Laws, Yardsticks, Exaltations. Columbus, Ohio [PDF](#) (23 pages, 140K) [\[Wiki\]](#)

Regarding sitting in meditation:

“I have a whole forest of oak trees back home that have been doing the same thing for about a hundred years, and they’ve got about as far.” ^[11]

11. Ref. 1974-1023 Laws, Yardsticks, Exaltations. Columbus, Ohio [PDF](#) (23 pages, 140K) [\[Wiki\]](#)

Rose gave many lectures specifically on Zen, as listed below, especially in the early years. In many other talks he discussed Zen principles such as Bodhidharma’s Four Precepts. But because of confusion in the public mind about the nature of Zen, from Rose’s point of view, he decided to eliminate the word Zen in the name of the early working groups, which were previously called the Pyramid Zen Society.

Later in his career, beginning about 1977, Rose began his

presentation of “The Psychology of the Observer”, which was a written lecture he gave in several venues and then published in a book by the same name. This work relied heavily on the system of triangulation that Rose encountered in the writing of Hubert Benoit’s book on Zen, *The Supreme Doctrine*: [12] the image of a triangle having positive and negative principles at the base, with a point of reconciliation at the apex. For the influence on Rose of Benoit, the illustrative triangles, and other Zen writings (including Alfred Pulyan) please see [Related Teachings #zen](#).

12. Full text: selfdefinition.org/zen/benoit/supreme-doctrine/

Anecdotally, Rose’s use of the term Zen is generally rejected by practitioners of mainstream Zen, who can be quite hostile to his teaching.

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A review of our database of Rose lectures shows the following titles that include the term Zen. For more on the subject you can search the Direct-Mind.Org transcription Wiki with the [topic search Zen](#) (about 75 matches).

1972 Zen and the American Mind *

1974 Zen and Esoteric Spiritual Paths *

1974 Zen, Spiritual Steps & Spiritual Systems

1974 Zen Buddhism and the Spiritual Path

- 1975 Zen and Esoteric Systems (series)
- 1975 Zen and the Western Mind *
- 1976 Definition of Zen
- 1976 The Spirit of Zen
- 1976 Zen and Esoteric Christianity
- 1976 Zen and the Goal of Christian Mysticism *
- 1977 Zen, Columbus, Ohio
- 1977 Zen and Common Sense
- 1977 Zen and Death
- 1977 Psychology of Zen, Science of Knowing
- 1978 Zen, the Most Perfect Psychoanalysis
- 1989 Zen Is Action
- 1992 The Absolute Experience-Zen *
- 1993 Zen Questions *

* = missing audio

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