

The *Zen* of Business

ANCIENT WISDOM TO HELP MODERN LEADERS LEAD
WITH INTENTION, CLARITY, AND PURPOSE



KEITH EDWARD ROBERTS III

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WILEY

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*For my sons, Gavin and Quinn.
This book is to show you it's possible
to live beyond your wildest
dreams while making the world
a better place.*

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Foreword

In today's fast-paced, hustle-driven business world, finding balance can feel like an impossible task. Many entrepreneurs and leaders chase success at the cost of their peace, relationships, and sometimes even their health. But what if success didn't have to come with sacrifice? What if there was a way to build thriving businesses while cultivating inner calm, personal growth, and a positive impact on the world? This book offers a path to that balance.

The Zen of Business is a timely guide for modern leaders looking to align their entrepreneurial ambitions with ancient principles that transcend the noise of current trends. In a world obsessed with quick fixes and surface-level solutions, this book digs deeper, providing readers with a tool kit grounded in Buddhist and Eastern philosophies that have stood the test of time.

The author, whom I deeply respect and admire, has a unique ability to bridge ancient wisdom with modern business acumen. His perspective isn't just insightful—it's necessary. He offers readers more than just business advice; he offers a philosophy for life, one that is rooted in mindfulness, compassion, and the recognition that true success is not just about what you achieve but how you achieve it.

Whether you are a seasoned entrepreneur, a leader navigating complex challenges, or someone simply looking for a better way to balance work and life, *The Zen of Business* will provide you with the tools to create lasting success in a way that honors both yourself and the people you lead.

I hope you find the same depth of wisdom and inspiration in reading this book as I have in my friendship with its author. His unique perspective, shaped by years of study and personal experience, is a gift to anyone seeking not just success but fulfillment.

This is not just a book on business; it's a road map for living with purpose, integrity, and impact.

—Bennie Fowler, Denver Broncos,
Super Bowl 50 Champions

Preface

It is absolutely possible to be a successful entrepreneur or business leader in a way that is positive for your karma, your employees, and the world. I wrote this book to help align core Buddhist and ancient Eastern wisdom into a toolbox for modern leaders. In today's hustle-preneur culture, it's easy to get lost in the hype of passing trends. Yes, a cold plunge is going to reduce inflammation and increase blood flow and overall cardiovascular health, but it's not a guarantee to make your business successful.

Rather than embrace the fad trending on social media this week, I want to provide you with a toolbox of ancient practices that modern science has proven to have profound benefits. When applied to business, these techniques produce exponential results in culture, productivity, innovation, and profits.

You do not need to embrace Buddhism to benefit from the following lessons. These truths are for anyone to understand. The practices can be adopted and applied regardless of the reader's spiritual beliefs.

Life is too short to learn everything through experience. I hope that this book helps you avoid some of the potholes I stepped into and empowers you to capitalize on the opportunities you encounter.

Introduction:

Becoming Zenman

From my first memories, I struggled with religion. I grew up in a tiny town in rural Indiana. When I was five years old, my father's cousin convinced my parents to have me accompany them to their church, followed by Sunday school. The church service didn't stick in my mind, but Sunday school did. The adult was telling the story of Adam and Eve's experience in the Garden of Eden to my class. As a curious child who was consumed with dinosaurs, I persisted in asking a series of questions that annoyed the parent leading the group. What had happened to the Mesozoic era in this story?

Eventually, she had me sit in the corner for the remainder of Sunday school. That was my last time being invited to join my relatives for church. I hadn't intended to be disruptive or disrespectful in any way. It was genuine curiosity. Even at the early age of five, I had seen dinosaur bones at the La Brea Tar Pits when we made the Griswold Family road trip to Disneyland that was a rite of passage for Gen X. The proof existed right there in the middle of LA. Dinosaurs are real, and I guess even at an early age, I was a fan of debating different ideas and beliefs.

Fast forward a decade to advanced biology class during my freshman year in high school, which reinforced my questioning

of the beliefs most of my peers embraced. I distinctly remember sitting next to my friend Mike—with whom I had played soccer for most of my life—just closing his book when we got to the chapter on evolution. Shutting the book meant he shut his mind to any ideas that differed or challenged the belief he was born into. I always struggled with the thought “What if I was born in the wrong place?”

Everywhere else in the world, billions of different people have the same devotion to their religion. Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and followers of every other belief firmly believe that the “others” are wrong and will suffer eternal damnation or whatever retribution their dogma dictates. As a little boy, this tormented me. I did not want to make the wrong choice when it came to something as crucial as my eternal being. Coupled with the learnings of evolution, this shaped me into a devout atheist. At that time, learning about evolution meant that I no longer had to find the right religion, and I embraced science. For the next four years, my belief was that of a devoted atheist with no need or desire for organized religion.

That was just the beginning of my journey.

Finding Entrepreneurship

The first time I remember hearing the word “entrepreneur” was two years before my evolution breakthrough in seventh-grade economics class. I clearly remember the teacher’s definition of an entrepreneur as “someone who would face multiple failures in life before possibly reaching any success.” He went on to expand on how it was a life of hardship that could lead to financial ruin and despair. In my day, the “safe” path was the corporate job; to be even more specific, I was meant to be an engineer. That was my introduction to the world of entrepreneurship, and rather than

convincing me to take the safe path in life, it had the opposite effect. I knew right there that I was going to be an entrepreneur.

Ever since I was a boy, the best way to motivate me was to tell me I couldn't do something. That is one of the most common characteristics of founders. We see a challenge not as an obstacle but as an opportunity.

I remember a poster of Robert Frost's poem "The Road Less Traveled" hanging in my grandmother's bedroom. The final stanza has been burned into my subconscious.

*Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

That stanza struck a chord in me that has resonated since, especially "**I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.**" The idea of taking the road less traveled was only reinforced by my middle school economics teacher telling the class, "You can't build your own business—you will fail," which was all the motivation I needed. That 12-year-old kid decided then and there that I would own my first business before my 30th birthday.

That might sound like an audacious goal for many people, while for others it might appear conservative. For the contingent that feels the goal was too lofty, I would offer this perspective from Michelangelo: "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it." **Aim for your dreams, and even if you don't reach every goal, life will still be extraordinary.**

The other half who see starting their first business by the age of 30 as a conservative goal could have a skewed perspective by looking at Steve Jobs, who was 21 when he co-founded Apple

with Steve Wozniak in his garage, or Larry Page and Sergey Brin, who started Google at the ripe old age of 24. Most successful startup founders are between 35 and 45 years old. Our society today focuses so intensely on the unicorns that most fail to see the significant number of failures.

Singles and doubles win ballgames. You have a much lower probability of success and are likelier to strike out if you swing for the fences every time you come up to bat.

The same is true in business. Consistent results create profitable businesses and companies that are better positioned for acquisition if that is the end goal. Don't misinterpret this as avoiding all risk or playing too safe in business and life. By all means, set lofty goals; just ensure they're plausible. It's better to make some progress than to strike out because you are trying to hit a grand slam or even worse because you need to. A couple of times in my business, I had to sell a job to make payroll, which was a horrible place to be and which I hope you never experience personally.

Not only is this a terrible mindset when entering a business negotiation, but it also decreases the probability of closing the sale. We have a saying in poker: **Scared money never wins.** Desperation is an unattractive quality both for a potential mate and in business dealings. Even at the energetic level, it's much better to come from an abundance mindset than a scarcity belief.

Finding My Path

My introduction to Buddhism came much later. Fast-forward to my first semester in college, and I met a man who would change my life forever. College for me was a small art school that specialized in photography and motion pictures called Brooks Institute in Santa Barbara, California. To be completely honest, it was heavenly. To this day, after being fortunate enough to

travel all over the world, Santa Barbara is still hands down my favorite place on planet Earth.

The program at Brooks was intense but considered the best in the world. To pay for living in one of the most beautiful and hence expensive cities in the country, I worked six days a week as a bartender at night. This meant too many late nights with excessive alcohol consumption. Additionally, I smoked a pack or more of Camels a day—a stark contrast from the man who would change the course of my life for the better.

One of my classmates was a monk named Lopsang. He worked directly with the Dalai Lama, who sent him to the United States with the goal of attending a series of higher-education institutions. Lopsang was the first example that I was awake to of “when the student is ready, the teacher will appear.”

Although Brooks was a melting pot of artists from all over the globe, Lopsang stood out among the class. Most of the students dressed like a grunge band from Seattle, and we had a solid contingent of expedition-ready photo-vest-wearing classmates, but Lopsang was the only one in saffron monk robes. During break I would grab whatever soda had the most caffeine in the vending machine and chain smoke two cigarettes. I used to light the second smoke from the cherry of the first while polluting my body with hapless disregard. After observing me for a few weeks, Lopsang started asking questions, like “Why do you prefer breathing cigarette smoke over the beautiful ocean air?” To which there really isn’t an intelligent response. Instead of feeling like he was passing judgment, his questions made me contemplate the choices that had become unhealthy habits.

Our conversations deepened throughout the fall as Lopsang introduced me to concepts that intrigued rather than polarized me. The first was moderation. Buddha learned that excess isn’t the path to Nirvana, just as self-deprivation isn’t the path to enlightenment. As a chain-smoking bartender, my life was far

from moderate. Although I didn't shift to Buddhism before Lopsang left for the next college, he was instrumental in helping me find my path. Before departing at the end of his time at Brooks, Lopsang shared ideas that lit a fire in me to shift from a life of excess to one of clarity and moderation.

Over the course of the next few years I dove deeper into Buddhism, eventually shifting from atheism to taking refuge in what are known as the three jewels: Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. In the early '90s, it was a lot less common for a Westerner to completely embrace Buddhism than it is today. I can't tell you how many family holidays devolved into a heated debate because I didn't follow the traditional path of Christianity or, more importantly, "didn't believe in and fear God."

Combining the Business and the Spiritual

Over the past few decades, it's become mainstream and even hip to use "Zen" in marketing or the nomenclature of companies like Zendesk, Zenfolio, ZenPayroll, and Zenefits. At the time of this writing, there are 724 active trademarks containing the word "Zen" registered with the United States Patent and Trademark Office. That wasn't the case when I started my agency. I had been doing freelance creative work at night while grinding it out during the day at a mind-numbing, soul-sucking job designing reports for a market research firm. When the opportunity presented itself in the form of a severance package, I made the decision to start the business the seventh-grade version of myself had vowed to do before turning 30. At the time, I was 26. Since the entire company consisted of a Buddhist creative guy building websites under the stairs in his loft, the name was "Zenman."

The first year was lean, but I managed to make a little more than the corporate cubicle job paid. It consisted of any work

that I could generate by rubbing two sticks together. It required becoming a salesperson, which is the opposite personality type from creatives, while simultaneously building a portfolio of work to show potential clients. In the early days, it was truly the Wild West of the web. Amazon was still losing money in 1998, a significant percentage of businesses didn't have or even think they needed an online presence, and the most visited website at the time was AOL.

Acquiring new clients in the early days required some out-of-the-box thinking. Denver was in a booming development stage at the time, with lofts, condos, and apartments being built all over town. I would drive around taking down the phone numbers of any development that didn't have a website on their signage. Then I'd pretend to be someone from New York or San Francisco moving to Denver who had heard of their project and, of course, ask for the domain of their website to learn more about the development and available units. When they responded with a lack of a website and offered to mail brochures, I would politely decline and occasionally question how serious the developer was if they didn't have a site. After a series of these calls over a few weeks, I would show up at the sales office to pitch a website. This was just one of the different techniques I applied in the early years.

Through two decades of highs and lows, Zenman grew into a globally recognized leader in the digital space. Our clients included an airline, several Fortune 500 companies, rock stars, and a unicorn (Ibotta, a startup that achieved a billion-dollar valuation) that we helped from inception to a two-billion-dollar publicly traded company. During my years running the agency, Zenman had some incredible runs of success, along with our share of dark times that nearly killed me. After 23 years in the game, I made a choice to get off the treadmill and start living my *Ikigai* (reason for being).

The process wasn't easy, but life has little ways of nudging you in the right direction if you don't fight the universe. I had a moment of clarity in 2017 when the realization hit me that the business that had been built through blood, sweat, and tears throughout my entire adult life was a machine that traded my time for money. I was selling the only finite resource in my possession....my time.

That day, there was a shift. I stopped designing and marketing products for other people. My passion and skills went into designing tools that helped people reach their full potential. The first product was the OAK Journal, a 90-day structured journal designed around my daily, weekly, and quarterly routines. As I started building and selling direct-to-consumer products, two things happened. First, the OAK Journal made it into the hands of several leaders all over Asia, and I was invited to do a speaking tour in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam. But they didn't want to hear me talk about the latest online trends; the request was for the methodology shared in the tool I had created.

The second was even more serendipitous. At a leadership conference in Peru I met a man from Argentina named Dani. One day he called me out of the blue to say that he wanted to buy an agency in the United States. My response was to start to tell him about the different agencies I knew in town, but he cut me off to say, "No, I want to buy your agency."

A few months later, Zenman was acquired by an exceptional organization. The merger took care of our clients and gave me an off-ramp that allowed me to transition into the next chapter. A year later, my earnout was finished, and after a sacred mushroom journey in Joshua Tree to cut any ties my ego had to the agency, I closed that door, enabling me to walk through the next one.

Now I spend my time writing books or keynote speaking. On the way to a recent event in Lake Tahoe, I was driving from

Colorado to Nevada. My oldest son had just graduated from eighth grade, and his Continuation Ceremony was held in the evening, the night before I was scheduled to speak. The timing meant that there were no available flights, so I drove through the night to make it to my talk. Just before sunrise, I fell asleep and my 4Runner crossed the middle line and scraped a truck and trailer coming the opposite direction head-on at 70 mph. Both tires and rims on the driver's side exploded on impact as they stuck out a couple of inches from the body of the truck, and it tore the door handles off. It was a miracle the crash wasn't a head-on collision that would have likely been fatal. The accident left me in shock for two days, but miraculously I walked away without a scratch. It took a series of cabs, flights, and hitched rides, but somehow I managed to make it to the event to do my first keynote in a clinical state of shock.

On the flight home, the second miracle occurred. I received a message from an acquisitions editor at John Wiley & Sons that this book was a green light. Maybe there was a reason the accident wasn't an inch to the left, which is why I am still here. Perhaps it was to share some of the concepts that have helped me through my entrepreneurial journey to help you, dear reader, find and live your Ikigai.

PART

1

Begin

“Each morning, we are born again.
What we do today is what matters most.”

—Buddha