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*Dharma Road* is dedicated  
to cabdrivers and bodhisattvas everywhere.

## INTRODUCTION

### DRIVING WITH A MIND WIDE OPEN

“Hi. Where would you like to go?”

That’s what I always say to people when they get in the cab. It’s a friendly greeting that breaks the ice and gets things going on the right foot. I smile when I say it, and I turn partway around, make a little eye contact.

It’s a good question. Where do you want to go? Barton Springs for a nice, cool swim? Out to the Oasis to watch the sun go down over Lake Travis? Downtown, maybe to a club on 6th Street to hear some of that good Texas music we like so much here in Austin?

How about a journey of self-discovery? A ride down Dharma Road?

Tuesday afternoon I’m working downtown, checking the hotel stands, cruising the streets. Cab 119, ready to go. I load a woman at the Four Seasons, take her up to the capitol, then take two men from the Omni to the Doubletree. I take a radio call at Brackenridge Hospital and load an old man with a broken leg in a hard cast. He’s headed home to an apartment on East 5th, riding on a hospital voucher. He needs a lot of help getting inside. Then I’m back downtown, loading at the Hilton, taking a woman in a gaudy green pantsuit up to the university,

listening to her talk about how much she likes Austin, and saying, “Yes, ma’am, I like it here too.”

It’s a typical afternoon in the cab business. It’s a lot like yesterday afternoon. Or tomorrow. It’s a lot like your life. There’s always something going on, but in the end you wind up pretty much where you started.

Then again, it’s not typical at all. It’s unique. It’s a completely new day, one that will go by and never return. The people, the traffic, the sound and feel of the city. The way everything moves. It’s all new, and it will never be this way again. It’s all in how you look at it.

Cruising down Congress Avenue, I hear a whistle, see a man wave at me from across the street. I’m all over it. I make a tight U-turn and coast up to the curb in a New York nanosecond. Smooth. Three men in matching dark gray suits going to an office building north on the interstate. One of the men sits in front. He acts a little nervous, fidgety, like there’s an important meeting coming up and he’s spent the day drinking coffee to get ready for it. He’s ready now.

On the seat next to me there’s a well-used copy of Seung Sahn’s classic *The Compass of Zen*. It’s sitting on top of the pile of maps and guidebooks and the clipboard I use to keep track of my cab company paperwork. He picks it up, stares at the cover. “You reading this?” he asks.

“Yeah. It’s something to keep me occupied on those long waits at the airport.”

“You really understand that Zen shit? It’s pretty strange stuff, all that one-hand-clapping shit. That’s Zen, right?”

“Yeah, it is. It’s a *koan*, a puzzle.”

“And you get that?”

“Well, not that, no. Koans are pretty advanced, more for full-time monks. People with the time to put into it. You can’t really do that if you’re driving a cab ninety hours a week. But Zen’s not as confusing as people think. Most of it’s just an appreciation for everyday life. The basics are pretty straightforward—there’s some philosophy, meditation practice, ethics, that kind of thing. And then you can go on from there, build on that.”

He grunts, already losing interest, leans back over the seat, and jumps into a conversation about amortization depreciation allowance something or other, a topic that makes as much sense to me as the one hand clapping does to any of them.

When they get out, he hands me a twenty and says with a grin, “Good luck with that Zen shit.” Then he turns and trips over the curb, losing his briefcase as he throws his hands out to catch himself. The case pops open, and papers spill out across the stones.

That’s Zen, right there. That moment, the one you didn’t expect. The moment when you notice that your life is one little surprise after another. The moment when you realize that ordinary life isn’t ordinary at all.

Then again, maybe he shouldn’t have called it “Zen shit.” That couldn’t have been good for his karma.

Welcome to Dharma Road. It’ll be a fun ride. Think of it as an introduction to Zen practice for people who live in the real world. People like us. We’ll go over the basic ideas of the dharma—the teachings of the Buddha and the others who have followed in his path. We’ll talk about morals, meditation, mindfulness. Just the fundamentals. And we’ll get started on the day-to-day practice

of Zen. This can be pretty serious stuff, but it doesn't have to be. We'll take it easy, make it as clear and concise as possible. And we'll take it out on the streets, see how Zen practice applies in everyday life. We'll try to have a little fun, a few laughs. Because if you're going to put in a sixteen-hour shift behind the wheel, you'll need to have a sense of humor. Maybe we'll even figure out how to make a few dollars along the way. Just like the cabdrivers do. And after that we'll sit back, do a little speculating about what it all means. It'll be quite a ride.

People think of Zen as mystical, inscrutable. Pretty strange. But the basic idea behind Zen is simple: We experience the world through a filter of expectations and preconceptions built up over the course of our lives. As a result, we fail to see the world as it really is. With the help of a program of morality, meditation, and mindfulness, we can overcome this veil of delusion and see through to our own true nature. We can learn to see the world directly and to understand our own place in it.

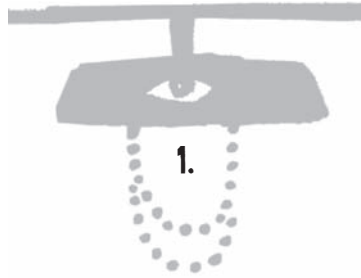
Simple, isn't it?

It's simple if you only read about it, but in the end you'll have to do more than that. Zen isn't something to read about, it's a way to live. To really understand what's going on here, you'll have to take it into your life and see where it leads you. All I can do is show you the road, fill you in on a few of the moves. The rest is up to you.

Don't worry too much about the cabdriving. You don't have to learn all the streets. Maybe you've already got a career. You may be a doctor, a lawyer, an Internet billionaire. Maybe you're a secret agent battling to prevent a vast ultra-conspiracy from achieving total world domination. Maybe you've put too much into your

career to throw it away for this. That's all right. We can't all be cabdrivers. You'll see that life on the streets isn't so different from your life. We all have stress, distractions, delusions. We all get lost sometimes. And we can find ourselves if we try.

So here we go, off on an epic journey of everyday discovery. A sightseeing trip for the soul. Don't forget to buckle up.



## START YOUR ENGINES

Every journey has to start somewhere. For most people taking up a spiritual practice, the starting point is a personal crisis of some kind. It doesn't have to be something dramatic. We're simply unhappy with the way things are and we want to try a different way of living. So we find a new job, a new girlfriend, move to another city. Or we look into a spiritual practice.

If things are going well and we're happy with our lives, we probably won't want to change anything.

It was like that for me. I'd quit drinking, cut way back on some other things. I thought my life would change for the better, and in some ways it did, but I just felt empty. Getting rid of bad habits wasn't enough for me. I had to replace them with something better. So I signed up for an adult education course: Introduction to Zen Buddhism. It could have been Santeria or Channeling Your Inner Space Alien. I didn't put a lot of research into it. I got lucky. A very nice woman taught the course at her suburban home, with meditation practice in her

basement *zendo*. She was a great teacher, and the class immediately became the high point of my week. It was a perfect way to get started.

Buddhist history is filled with stories of Zen masters who forced their disciples to wait by the gates of the temple for years to show their determination before they could begin practice. One disciple is said to have cut off his arm and presented it to the master to gain admission. They don't do that now. In major cities, people can walk into a Zen center, get some basic instruction, and start attending functions. Usually there's not much training. Maybe a brief lecture, some instructions on *zazen*, the Zen style of meditation. Then the newcomers join the activities and figure it out as they go along. Outside the cities, people with an interest in Zen might form their own *zendo* and help each other to learn. Others just buy a few books and a cushion to sit on and start out on their own. In the end, it doesn't really matter. You get out of it what you put in. No matter where you start, it's up to you to make it work.

It's the same with cabdriving. You're on your own, and you can do what you want. You can sit at the airport and wait for the money to roll in, and when it doesn't you can blame the company for not training you well enough. Then you can give up. But if you make the effort, it can work out well for you even without any real training. And you might have a good time doing it. It's not how you start—it's how you proceed.

Cabdrivers usually start out when things are going wrong. Most of them show up at the cab company as a last resort after other things have fallen through. No one writes *cabdriving* in their high school yearbook next to

*career path.* They just need a job, any job, to see them through until something better comes along.

That was how I started. I'd worked for an environmental organization for a number of years only to find myself unemployed, broke, and without any real prospects. I knew I'd face some very hard times if I didn't come up with something fast. There was an ad in the paper. I didn't really put a lot of research into it. I went in. I got lucky. Two days later, I was a trainee. That's right, a cabdriver trainee. I was so proud.

The company training program goes on for hours, but most of it is just common sense. The cab business is pretty simple. People get in the cab, tell you where they're going. You drive them there, they pay what the meter says (plus a nice tip), and get out. Then it starts all over again. There's a dispatcher on the radio, putting out calls using a simple set of procedures. You can take calls, letting the calls lead you around. You can sit in cabstands at hotels and restaurants or in a long line at the airport. You can cruise around downtown, see what happens there. You can work the late-night business, covering the clubs downtown. And you can watch the veteran drivers, see how they do things, learn what you can from them.

In Austin, some drivers own their own cabs and pay a weekly fee to one of the companies to cover insurance, permits, and dispatch service. Other drivers lease their cabs. Between the payments and the cost of gas, it can cost a driver more than a hundred dollars a day to stay on the road. That's not easy to make up. A lot of drivers wind up falling behind on their payments and find themselves out of the business. You have to stay focused,

and you have to put in the hours. The company training program doesn't really dwell on any of this. If the rookie drivers knew what was coming, they'd probably make a run for it while they could.

Something good about the cab industry: since the drivers are paying the company, rather than the other way around, it's fairly hard to get fired. It happens, but you have to really mess up. In one of the Austin cabdriving legends, a driver managed to run over a passenger who'd gotten out of his cab. Then he drove away. He got fired, but it took the company a week to make the decision.

That story may or may not be true. No one really knows. There are a lot of stories around, and some of them must be true. The streets are paved with urban legends. But the point is, if you've driven a cab, you know: it could happen. It's a pretty strange business.

But then, most businesses are pretty strange. Once you get inside and see what really goes on, you wonder how anything useful ever gets done. Everywhere I've worked I've seen colossal screw-ups, gross incompetence, and outright larceny. Everyone laughs about it over an after-work beer, and nothing ever seems to really change. If you've ever had a job, you know: the working world is a circus. And the clowns are running the show.

Here's another cabdriving story: One night a driver got a package delivery from the airport going to a hospital. It was a cooler, like you'd use for beer. It was kind of a long drive, and he was tired, so he stopped off at home, figuring he'd get some sleep and finish the trip in the morning. After all, it was just a package. You guessed it. There was an organ in the cooler. The cab company had to send another driver to wake him up, collect the

cooler, and bring it to the hospital. This sounds crazy, but I'm pretty sure this one actually happened. (No, it wasn't me, and hey, thanks a lot for thinking that.)

For my training, I watched a fifteen-minute video on the proper way to deal with customers. It starred a cab-driver who was polite past the point of being annoying. He looked like a dorky Richard Pryor character from an old movie. He was actually wearing a tie. Then I went out with a veteran driver to spend part of a shift on the streets with him, learning the ropes. He laid rubber getting out of the cab lot.

And he wasn't wearing a tie.

Of course, out here on Dharma Road, we're not really focused on making money. And we're not worried about the inner workings of the cab industry. It doesn't really matter what kind of work we're doing. Most of us are putting a huge chunk of our lives into our jobs, so we'd better get something out of them besides a paycheck. On Dharma Road, we're in this for spiritual growth. Development. Enlightenment, even. We're here to learn something about the way our lives move along these streets, how to make them move more smoothly. How to make them lead somewhere.

We're here to experience our true nature.

Okay, that's enough of the driver training. Now let's get to work.