

## Paul Gerstein, Zen Teacher, part 1

Many years ago, at the YMCA Training School (now known as Springfield College) a physical educator by the name of Luther Halsey Gulick, created a defining symbol of the YMCA. It was the inverted triangle and upon each of its sides stood the words spirit, mind and body. According to Gulick, “The triangle stood not merely for a symmetrical body, a symmetrical mind and a symmetrical character, but for the symmetrical man, each part developed with reference to the whole and not merely with reference to itself.” The year was 1891. Fast forward to the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the holistic conceptual triangle developed by Gulick remains as relevant as ever. Through the years, since its inception, it is safe to say that Y’s have placed greater emphasis on the development of the physical body, though programs for spirit and mind have always remained important.

Now as we begin the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a quiet phenomenon is growing in Y’s across the country, and that is the offering of significantly more programs designed to enrich peoples’ lives spiritually and mentally.

At the Westfield YMCA one such program that has been in existence nearly five years is the meditation program. About a year ago, the Y took a decidedly deeper plunge into the world of meditation with the arrival of Zen teacher, Paul Gerstein.

Paul, a Zen practitioner for the past four decades, has guided both beginning and more advanced meditators towards a deeper and broader understanding of what it means to fully embrace the present moment as it comes. With his unique personal background and penetrating understanding of Zen, I felt that this article would best be served by offering it in two installments. Today’s article offers some personal background about Paul and how Zen became an integral part of his life.

The day Paul and I met to talk in my office at the Y, he was dressed in blue jeans and a casual shirt, and as usual, his affable and unpretentious demeanor immediately evoked the feeling of meeting an old friend.

Born and raised in Newton, MA, Paul settled in the Valley area after attending medical school in Worcester. He has been a practicing emergency medicine specialist for nearly thirty years and currently works in the ER at Baystate Mary Lane Hospital in Ware, Mass. Living with his wife, in Amherst, they have two grown children and one grandchild. An athlete all of his life, Paul enjoys bicycle road racing, hiking and scuba diving.

### **Tell me what was it that stirred a desire in you to study Zen?**

**Paul:** I started doing Zen meditation—called “zazen”—around age 19. As a teenager growing up in the 60’s, there was a societal awareness at that time of a real change of consciousness, a doubting of the old way of seeing the world and of valuing things. This was fertile ground for the exploration—and pop-culture embracing—of meditation, consciousness-raising and Eastern ways of thinking. Although I had been raised in the Jewish tradition, my father had always encouraged me to question dogmatic viewpoints

and to be free to find out what was true via my own intellect and reason. So, it felt right for me to go with the flow of change at that time, though there seemed no special urgency to do so.

In this cultural environment, turning 17 years-old and looking forward to college, my father died tragically and unexpectedly in the winter of my high school senior year. His death propelled me into an immediate confrontation with mortality and the loss of whatever seemed so constant and dependable before.

About a year and a half later—having pondered and at times battled with my doubts about life's purpose and my own trajectory through it—I was on a cross-country road trip with friends when I was given a paperback book by Alan Watts (a popularizer of Zen at the time), called, The Way of Zen. I stuffed it into my backpack, promising my friend I would read it at some point. A week or two later, while stretched out in the back of a VW Microbus driving through hours and endless miles of featureless upper-Midwest plains, I took up the book and began reading it.

By only the third page, I was literally staggered that this was precisely what I had been looking for—the profound practice of my father's "permission to doubt", and yet in a most life-affirming and self-empowering way. Several months later, through a series of fortunate interconnections, I began formal Zen Buddhist study with roshi Phillip Kapleau, the author of The Three Pillars of Zen and founder of The Zen Center in Rochester, NY.

Continued fortunate circumstances led to my association, now more than 25 years ago, with my current and long-time dharma teacher, roshi Richard Clarke. Richard's first and only Zen teacher, by happenstance, was Philip Kapleau, as well, so this particular school of Zen practice has formed the basis of my own teaching approach. But to Richard I owe the bulk of my forward progress on the path, and his example I hope someday to approximate as a teacher.

This ends the first segment of our interview. The next article will delve into what the practice of Zen is all about.

The YMCA of Greater Westfield was founded in 1888. For more information on Y membership and/or programs or to receive a program brochure, please contact the YMCA at (413) 568-8631. You may also visit the YMCA website at [www.westfieldymca.org](http://www.westfieldymca.org).

Rosann Scalise  
January 7, 2010