

## Empathizing (Zen Buddhism)

### Do What Is Right in Front of You

You may want to have the students look at the Joshu quotation on page 161 in the student book before they read the chapter. Then have them look at it again after having studied the chapter. Both times, they can analyze its meaning and describe how they think it might apply to their own lives, if at all.

### A Modern-Day Koan

Here is a riddle that functions much like a Zen *koan* in that it requires a radical shift in how we think if we are to solve it correctly: How can you get ten horses into nine stalls? You cannot have more than one horse in a stall, nor can they rotate in and out of the stalls. Invite the students to consider the puzzle, and see if they can solve it.

The solution is that you draw nine boxes on a piece of paper to represent the nine stalls. Then you can write one letter in each box: T-E-N-H-O-R-S-E-S.

### The Unmediated Reality of Our Experience

The reality of sheer experience, unmediated by thinking or symbols, is central for Zen. Ask the students to reflect on times they may have had such an experience. In our word-based and thinking-saturated culture, many may not have experienced this. Invite the students to look at something—a flower, a tree—without having any thoughts. Then discuss how our minds keep *thinking* about objects—coming up with descriptions, judgments, commentaries about it—which stands between us and the raw experience of whatever we are looking at.

### Mindful Eating

This is a good exercise to help the students get a sense of what Zen is like in practice. Provide enough small food items—dried fruit works well and avoids most potential allergy issues—for each student to have some. It is easy and hygienic to place the foods in small paper cups for distribution. Lead the students through a set of instructions similar to the following, allowing plenty of time in between instructions:

- Holding the [food] in your hand, look at it. Just observe; try not to think about it. Look at it as if you were seeing it for the very first time.
- Smell it, breathing in its aroma deeply. Notice the various layers of its scent.
- Now contemplate how this [food] came to us. Think about all that needed to be right in order for you to be sitting here with this [food].
- Place the [food] in your mouth. Don't chew yet; just let it be there. Notice how it feels, the beginnings of tasting it, how its texture changes.



- Chew it slowly, noticing how it changes, how its tastes and textures change.
- Finally, when you're ready, swallow it. Notice how its taste remains in your mouth.

The students can discuss the experience in small groups if they wish, or with the class as a whole.

## Zen Buddhism in the United States

Zen is the most common form of Buddhism in the United States, so it will likely be possible to locate a guest speaker who can share his or her experience of Zen practice directly with the class. If that isn't possible, it is helpful to know that Zen Buddhists sponsor a variety of social service agencies throughout the country. Have the students visit these websites to learn about some of them. The Zen Hospice Project seeks to bring the insights of Zen into caring for the dying ([www.zenhospice.org](http://www.zenhospice.org)). The Greyston Foundation creates jobs and provides an integrated approach to help individuals and their families become self-sufficient ([www.greyston.org](http://www.greyston.org)). The Upaya Zen Center has a chaplaincy training program that prepares people for board certification in chaplaincy as well as other types of spiritual care ([www.upaya.org](http://www.upaya.org)). The Prison Meditation Project reaches out to prisoners ([www.prisonmeditation.org](http://www.prisonmeditation.org)). Many students are drawn to service to others, and seeing the ways in which Zen Buddhism promotes service helps to build empathy and a sense of kinship.

