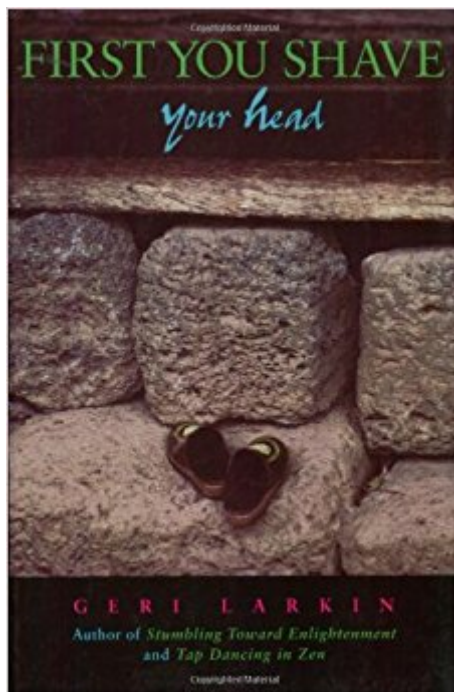


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First You Shave Your Head



Synopsis

When STUMBLING TOWARD ENLIGHTENMENT and TAP DANCING IN ZEN author Geri Larkin is invited on a pilgrimage to Korea with her Buddhist master for thirty days of practice, she is thrilled, flattered, and utterly freaked out. And so begins another life journey along the spiritual path of one of our favorite authors. Larkin's account is by turns hilarious, heartbreaking, exasperating, and exhilarating, and is told with her usual charm and grace. Part travelogue, part spiritual journey, FIRST YOU SHAVE YOUR HEAD is a lighthearted collection of Buddhist practices and principles that won't fail to inspire and amuse.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

When a Zen master invited Geri Larkin to join him on a spiritual pilgrimage to Korea, she had a spiritually incorrect reaction. One might think "that I would be swept away by emotion, stunned at my good fortune," writes Larkin in First You Shave Your Head. Instead, she obsessed over the mandate that she shave off all of her hair. "If I was going to be a card-carrying pilgrim, then I had to peel my fingers off of my last scalp of identity--my hair," writes Larkin, whose other popular works include Stumbling Toward Enlightenment and Tap Dancing in Zen. This self-effacing, witty narrator speaks with an unabashedly, all-American frame of mind, helping Westerners see themselves walking the Buddhist path. As Larkin treks through the mountains and monasteries of Korea, she shares her pangs of hunger and her fear of the unknown as well as the bliss of "magic moments," such as drinking green tea in a hermitage that was carved into a cliff. This travelogue shows us what it means to journey toward enlightenment with humility, or at least good sense of humor. --Gail

Hudson

First you shave your head but that's far from the worst of it. According to Larkin (Stumbling Toward Enlightenment) in this account of a month-long Zen pilgrimage in Korea, you also slog through the mountains in summer's heat and pelting rain, carrying knapsacks of books. You bathe and wash your clothes always the same set only once every ten days. You contend with biting insects, constant dirt, and primitive sanitation. As described in this spiritual travelog, Larkin's pilgrimage with her teacher and two fellow Zen monks resembles U.S. Army basic training. A Michigan-based teacher of Zen Buddhism, Larkin tolerates constant harassment, inadequate sleep, and hurry-up-and-wait all for the stripping away of the ego. There are compensations, of course: beautiful countryside and temples, generous people, kindly monks, a stiffening of the backbone, and learning one's strengths and weaknesses. If you're up to the challenge, perhaps this "muscular" Zen is for you. If not, read this book anyway. It's marvelously entertaining and enlightening. There's even a recipe for kimchi. For academic and public libraries. James F. DeRoche, Alexandria, VA Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. I read it cover-to-cover in the week after receiving it and was helped by it. Geri has the unique distinction in my experience of relating her own experience on her path rather than pointing to an idealized or abstracted one. I found that to be very accessible and easy to relate to. As a bonus, I learned a lot more of the history of Korea than I had known and developed a greater respect for the Korean people. I am disinclined to analyse or critique Geri's experience. I believe it was hers, or as close as a story can come to capturing it, and I am the better for her having shared it with me. Her story works its magic by you walking alongside her rather than her pointing out the way. I recommend this book.

Actually, I LOVE this book: Zen pilgrimage and Korean Dharma history to boot (just my thing). Traveling with Larkin is like coffee with your best friend just outside the Zen hall -- as close (and enjoyable) as you can get without going in and actually sitting down on a mat yourself. The only reason I didn't give it five stars (and I almost gave it three) was the back cover, upon which the marketing folks at the publishing house wrote something to the effect of Larkin being the first Western woman to have been honored with a pilgrimage through Korea's temples. Not only is this untrue, but NOWHERE in the text does Larkin herself make such a claim. What she DOES say is simply that her and traveling buddy Haju (also a WOMAN!) were the first Western women some of

the Korean monks had ever seen -- which I'm sure was true. Kind of a big difference there. Either someone at Celestial Arts accidentally misread Larkin's text, or they hoped to sell more books by stretching the truth. Either way is a little disrespectful not only to Larkin, but to the women who made the journey before her.

We have these crazy minds that are constantly searching out solutions, questions, judgments, directions, plans, and a billion other noisy functions. But every now and again, every little once in awhile we have those here-and-now moments. Just-this! I'd go hiking with Geri... anytime.

In many ways I agree with the previous review, although I draw slightly different conclusions. Often when I travel to other countries (even without an occasionally raging zen teacher; and even without having to constantly worry about the sometimes shifting protocols of new monasteries), I find myself fantasizing about a good omelette or NPR. That's true whether or not I'm trying like hell to be a solid, present little zen practitioner. And actually, that's true on zen retreats, & it's true when driving to the grocery store, for that matter. In the interest of disclosure (and also because it colors, I think, my review of this book) I've sat retreats lead by Larkin. What I appreciate most about her way of practicing, as well as about her work in this book, is precisely her willingness to reveal herself warts and all. Perhaps because she's as dead serious as it comes about doing prostrations every morning and sitting her heart out, I don't take her mentions of Martha Stewart and fantasies of spas as anything more than utter honesty. If anything, I think it indicative of the HEALTHY state of evolving Dharma in the west. I'm personally very tired of elevated zen masters in their elaborate robes who never admit to any kind of frailty and yet maybe sleep with their students on occasion (however "celibate" we're supposed to believe them to be), or flat-out abuse their students in the name of "correction." And even these zen teachers, I should add, warrant our compassion and understanding (if not the acceptance of such behavior), precisely because the point is no one is perfect. Ever. Never has been; never will be. Another way of saying it is everything is perfect, flaws and all (although we need not get hung up on this, as this has been the exact justification for the abusive behavior of many teachers, zen and otherwise: "oh, it's all just a teaching"). It takes great courage, I think, to be willing to present one's flaws as further teaching, to not hide them. And in the end, for us as practitioners, practice becomes attainable (not easier, none more shallow, but real and workable and honest) when we aren't made to mimic imitations of perfection that do not and have never existed. There's a distinction, I think, between authority and authoritarianism, and while the previous reviewer laments a growing "anti-authoritarianism" in western Dharma practice, I view it

as long overdue.

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