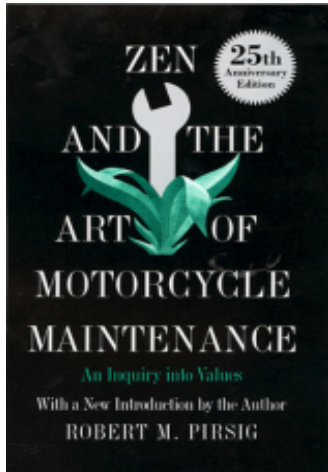


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# Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values

by Robert M. Pirsig

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## About the Book

Few books transform a generation and then establish themselves as touchstones for the generations that follow. *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE* is one such book. Years in the writing and rejected by 121 publishers, this modern epic of a man's search for meaning became an instant bestseller upon publication in 1974. Acclaimed as one of the most exciting books in the history of American letters, it continues to inspire millions of readers. This 25th Anniversary Edition features a penetrating new Introduction by Robert Pirsig, in which he reveals his original intention about the book's controversial ending, as well as important typographical changes reflecting his ideas.

An autobiography of the mind and body, the book is a narration of a motorcycle trip taken by a father and his 11-year-old son; a summer junket that confronts mortal truths on the journey of life. As the miles pass, the mind expands, and the narrator's tale covers many topics, from motorcycle maintenance itself through a search for how to live, an inquiry into "what is best," and the creation of a philosophical system reconciling science, religion and humanism.

Unwanted and unbidden is the narrator's confrontation with a ghost: his former self, a brilliant man whose search for truth drove him to madness and death. This ghost, Phaedrus, haunts the narrator as he and his son visit places where they once lived. And, too, he confronts his deteriorating relationship with his son, who has himself been diagnosed as suffering the beginning symptoms of mental illness.

*ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE* speaks directly to the confusions and agonies of existence. In his intimate detailing of a personal and philosophical odyssey, Robert M. Pirsig has written a touching, painful and ultimately transcendent book of life.

## Discussion Guide

1. ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE is at once the story of a motorcycle journey across the country; a meditation on values and the concept of Quality; and an allegorical tale of a man coming to terms with his past. Discuss which aspects of the novel you found most compelling, and why.
2. Discuss Pirsig's Author's Note. What does he mean when he says "much has been changed for rhetorical purposes?" Is he saying the book is fact or fiction? How does his use of a first-person narrator make this a complex question? What is the relationship between author and narrator?
3. Discuss ZMM's epigraph: *And what is good, Phaedrus, And what is not good -- Need we ask anyone to tell us these things?* How does this query resemble a Buddhist *koan* -- a paradoxical or nonsensical question that emphasizes the process of meditating on the question rather than the answer? Why do you think Pirsig chose this excerpt to introduce the book?
4. At the beginning of their trip, the narrator and John have a conversation in which the narrator refers to education as "mass hypnosis," citing as an example the fact that Newton's law of gravity is nothing more than a human invention, as are laws of logic, mathematics, and ghosts. Why does this dialogue take place at the outset of the novel, as opposed to somewhere in the middle or the end of the trip? How is Pirsig preparing the reader for the novel's future scenes?
5. In setting out the topic for his Chautauqua, Pirsig compares the current consciousness to a stream overflowing its channels, causing destruction and havoc as it searches for new ones: *"There are eras of human history in which the channels of thought have been too deeply cut and no change was possible, and nothing new ever happened, and 'best' was a matter of dogma, but that is not the situation now. Now the stream of our common consciousness seems to be obliterating its own banks, losing its central direction and purpose. . . . Some channel deepening seems called for."* (p. 16). Can you explain this metaphor? What sorts of change is he referring to? What does he mean by "channel deepening?"
6. As a writer of technical manuals, the narrator decries the current situation in which the idea of who a man *is* has become separated from what he *does*. He claims that in this separation are clues to "what the hell has gone wrong with the twentieth century." How does this concept fit in to what you know of Zen Buddhism, which celebrates the oneness of the universe? Do you feel at one with your occupation? Explain why or why not. If not, what is keeping you from feeling connected to what you do for a living? Would you feel more satisfied, or be a better worker, if you did feel that connection?
7. The narrator divides human understanding into two categories: romantic and classical. Discuss the distinction between the two. How do you fit into either of these dichotomies? Give examples that illustrate the tendencies that make you, personally, either classical or romantic.
8. How does Pirsig introduce and develop the character of Phaedrus? Can you rely on the narrator to offer an accurate picture of Phaedrus's insanity? Do you think Phaedrus really was insane?
9. What do you think of the narrator's son, Chris? Does he seem troubled, or merely a typical boy impatient with his

father's behavior? Who do you think is a better father to Chris -- Phaedrus or the narrator?

**10.** Why do you think the narrator refuses to complete the trek up the mountain, despite Chris's disappointment that they won't be reaching the top? Is the threat of a rock slide real? Is he afraid to "meet" Phaedrus? Is he making a statement about ego relative to Zen philosophy? What is happening in the Chautauqua at this point in the book?

**11.** Discuss the climactic scene --- a confrontation between Chris and the narrator that takes place on a foggy cliff overlooking the ocean. Where is Phaedrus? What does this scene reveal about all three characters? How does this scene change your interpretations of the events that have lead up to it? What is the significance of Chris and his father removing their helmets for the remainder of the journey?

## Author Bio

Robert M. Pirsig was born in 1928 in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He studied chemistry and philosophy (B.A., 1950) and journalism (M.A., 1958) at the University of Minnesota, and also attended Benares Hindu University in India, where he studied Oriental philosophy. He was the author of *ZEN AND THE ART OF MOTORCYCLE MAINTENANCE: An Inquiry into Values*, and its sequel, *LILA: An Inquiry into Morals*. He passed away on April 24, 2017 at the age of 88.

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