

## **Background Ben Gendo Roshi – what led him to the path of Zen**

Ben Gendo Claessens Roshi (1956) grew up in the south of the Netherlands, amidst a Catholic environment. From a young age on he was puzzled and, in fact, pained by the suffering and conflicts nearby and far away in human lives and wondered if that was all there was to expect for in this life. During his time at elementary and secondary school he immersed himself into issues such as the religious conflicts in Ireland and in Israel and spoke about it in presentations in class.

## **His working life**

Ben Roshi studied at the School of Journalism in Utrecht (1976-1979), worked till 1986 as a reporter at newspapers and a roving editor for Reader's Digest and from then on till 2007 as a freelance journalist for special interest magazines in healthcare and management. In 1987 he got married, became father of three daughters. His work as a (freelance) journalist enabled him to work from home, participate in raising the children and doing the household as well as follow and investigate all issues that was of interest to him. From a young age on he travelled the world, Europe, Israel, New Zealand, the US and Sri Lanka. For NGO's (Mensen in Nood / Liliane Fonds) he travelled to Zaire and Thailand. Visiting the famous refugee camp Site II at the Cambodian border in 1987 he was gripped by the concept of freedom – what is true freedom? In 2007 he joined the holding KMM Groep as a communication advisor, became manager of one of its firms in 2011 and in 2020 owner of that same firm – a small publication bureau for vocational education. He retired in 2024 but keeps running his bureau, serving teachers and managers in education.

In 1985 he participated in a workshop of American Zen teacher Robert Baker Aitkin Roshi at the Kosmos centre in Amsterdam, the location where he, around that time, also practised aikido for three years and first met Zenteacher Nico Tydeman, but it wasn't until 1999 that he started his training with Tydeman Roshi at Zen Centre Amsterdam.

## **Nico Tenko Tydeman Roshi**

In the summer and autumn of 1998 he had several spiritual experiences that awakened the urgent need to seek a Zen teacher and so, early 1999 he started his training at Zen Centre Amsterdam (ZCA). He trained till 2011 with Nico Tydeman who, on his part received in 2004 dharma transmission from his teacher, American Genpo Dennis Merzel Roshi (a successor of Japanese teacher Maezumi Roshi). Ben Roshi was a member of the board of ZCA from 2002-2005. On december 30 2008 Nico Tydeman ordained him a buddhist and gave him the (Chinese) buddhist name Hui-Chao (*silent illumination*). At ZCA Ben Roshi gave his first workshops, among others on the mysticism of Dutch Etty Hillesum (1914-1943).



*Zen Center Amsterdam in 2000 (with in the picture Maurice Knegtel Roshi, Ben Roshi's future teacher from 2011 on).*

### **Guiding others**

In 2006-2007 Ben Roshi started his own Zen group in hometown Lelystad and in the same period, at the request of Benedict monk father Gerard Helwig (1921-2013) of the St. Willibrord abbey in Doetinchem, had begun guiding 4 to 5 Zen retreats in the abbey every year with 15-20 participants each. The abbey is one of the rare places in Europe where, since the seventies in the 20th century, Zen buddhist retreats are offered in a Christian setting. Father Helwig was around 1970-1975 a student of the late German Jesuit and Zen teacher Hugo M. Enomiya Lasalle. With father Helwig Ben Roshi studied from 2008-2012 the texts of Christian mysticist Jan van Ruusbroec.





*The Benedict abbey St. Willibrords with the various areas for spiritual practice, one of them, the attic Zendo, contains a Zengarden*

### **Maurice Genko Knegtel Roshi**

In 2011 his training got a new follow up when he, with Nico Tydeman's permission, joined Zen teacher Maurice Knegtel Roshi, then Sensei and also successor of Genpo Roshi. In 2015 Maurice Roshi ordained Ben Roshi in a Shuke Tokudo ceremony (*Unsui – Clouds and Water*) a monk. From 2015-2020 he was a boardmember of Izen Foundation, Maurice Roshi's Zenschool in Utrecht.

In december 2019, during a traditional two day Shiho ceremonie (Denkai/Denbo), Ben Roshi received dharma transmission and the dharma name *Ekaprājna (One breath)* from Genko Roshi, thus becoming his first successor and the 83th in the lineage of Taizan Maezumi Roshi.

The lineage dates back to the era of Gautama the Buddha in India, in the 5th Century BC. From there buddhism took roots in China by merging with Taoism (4-6th century), was transmitted to Korea and Japan from the 8-9th century on and found its way to the US and finally to Europe (20-21th century).

On January 19th 2025 Ben Roshi was given Inka, the 'Final Seal of Approval' and in that event received his third Dharma name, Gendo (*Esoteric way*). *Maurice Genko Knegtel, Roshi (r) and Ben Gendo Claessens Roshi (l) (pictures: Dorette)*



[Inka given to Ben Claessens](#) | See also (in Dutch) [Nieuwsbrief ENSŌ | ZEN CIRCLE januari 2025 – Zen Cirkel Lelystad](#)

## Teaching

To this day Ben Roshi guides Zen students in courses, workshop, in person and in retreats (St. Willibrordsabbey). His dharma or line of teaching is 'Bring together what never was divided in the first place'. It is a koan that can be practised anywhere, in all circumstances.

In his approach he emphasizes on one hand the natural causes of suffering (birth, death, sickness and old age) and, on the other hand, selfinflicted suffering as a result of (among others) ignorance, greed, hate and, going against the natural movement of constant change, clinging on to thoughts, emotions and possessions and identifying oneself with all that.

He highlights the importance of bringing the sacred to life in daily life by the practise of 'just letting' (gelassenheit – Medieval mystic Meister Eckhart), not 'feeding' all that enfolds and comes in the mind. Thus, emptying the mind and, eventually, experiencing the endless, bottomless, unborn Light in which the oceans and mountains, the stars and the moon appear *and* dissolve. Wé, you and I, appear and dissolve, at the very same moment, here and now. Life and death are inseparable, they are manifestation of Light, our true nature. The experience of 'body and mind dropping, dropping body and mind' (Dogen Zenji) is the experience in which this becomes crystalclear. By the way, it shows that, in the end, there is nothing there to be dropped after all.

He says: 'It is the defilement of our human mind, by clinging to a dualistic approach, that prevents us from experience the great Truth, the Way, the Light of the endless mind that leaves no one nor anything out or behind. But mind you, also the dualistic mind is manifestation of this Light! So beware! Practise! Experience! See!'

Each one of us manifests the eternal Light, every moment, it is our source. But the way *how* depends on us as a person, our capability of being really present (or not), our courage to look in the mirror and recognize and acknowledge our own flaws. 'We can not ignore who we are, our ego', he says, 'We therefore need to acknowledge our scars in life, and we all have them, we can not bypass them. They define us, in patterns and conditioning, in how we act in daily life. In our practice we literally bring them into the Light and only then, when they are fully acknowledged we can release the energy that is contained in there, sometimes for the better part of our life.'

He emphasizes the meaning of 'heart' in Asian philosophy, as referring to the mind. Opening your heart, clearing the heart or being pure of heart has in his teaching the meaning of being open minded, not defiling the mind and to *live* the heart.

One of the pillars in his teaching is our need to experience the unbreakable interdependence with all and everyone. Each step we take depends on it. He often asks his students just to lay out what comes from and is offered by others in food, clothing, housing, transport, communication etcetera.

And last but not least is our gratitude to our own family who made this life possible and contributed to it. He says: 'It was the deep pain of my mum who brought me to Zen. And it were the women in my life, from very young on, who became my angel guardians'.

He wrote several books on Zen, Christian mystics and a book on Mahatma Gandhi. Go to [Publicaties – Zen Cirkel Lelystad](#)



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