

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

Robert M. Pirsig

*“Sometimes it’s a little better to travel than to arrive.”*

### THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* has been variously categorized as a fictionalized autobiography, an autobiographical novel, and a long, discursive essay. The text chronicles a journey that takes place at every level of the narrator’s experience: physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

**Setting:** The roads, highways, and countryside of the American Midwest and Far West in the late 1960s.

**Protagonist:** An unnamed first-person narrator, a former teacher of rhetoric and a student of philosophy, now a writer and editor.

**Narrative Structure:** The novel is divided into thirty-two chapters, most covering one day in the westward journey of the father and son and a married couple (who leave the journey before its completion).

**Conflicts:** The narrator’s journey can be seen as a search for unity in diversity, or for the reconciliation of opposites. The divisions or conflicts he wishes to resolve are both **external** and **internal**, and they exist on every plane of the narrator’s life. There is a dividing wall between father and son, between the father’s present self and his past self, and between numerous opposing ideas such as *classic* and *romantic*, and *technological* and *humanistic*.

**Resolution:** At the end of a long and dangerous journey, a twentieth-century odyssey, the narrator discovers that the only way he can live with himself and with his son is to embrace all that he is and all that he knows, regardless of what others may expect.

**Themes:** A search for meaning and identity is a perilous journey with many wrong turns and enemies to be defeated. Often the bitterest enemy is oneself, or some false self that one holds on to for too long. One must leave home and discover America in order to find oneself.

### SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The unusual structure of the book and the long passages of philosophical discourse will cause difficulties for many students. They may want to take notes on the main points of the author’s discourse or to use graphic devices such as flowcharts to show the relationships of the ideas. You might assure students that even if they don’t understand everything in the book, they will enjoy reading it and will learn a lot from it.

There are aspects of the novel that will appeal to students. Many will be immensely curious about a motorcycle journey through the West. Others will be interested in the motorcycle itself and the narrator’s explanations of how to ride and maintain it. The relationship between the father and the son will interest other students.

### BACKGROUND

**Chautauqua Movement.** A system of popular adult education that was begun in 1874, in Chautauqua, a town in southwestern New York State, by a Methodist Episcopal minister and a businessman. Originally meant to train Sunday school teachers in short summer programs, the movement expanded to include yearlong formal and informal lectures, discussions, and at-home readings on subjects ranging from the classics to cookery. From the early 1900s to the early 1920s, Chautauqua went on the road with lecturers setting up tents in small towns to give their audiences an experience somewhere between a carnival and an adult school with religious overtones.

**Phaedrus.** The name the narrator gives to his former personality, the self he believes he has left behind in a mental hospital. It is not his actual name, but one he chooses because of its meaning for him. Phaedrus was a character in one of the *Dialogues* of Plato (the great fourth-century B.C. Greek philosopher). In the dialogue called “Phaedrus,” the title character relentlessly questions the philosopher Socrates on the nature of rhetoric, madness, love, and truth—the same issues the narrator of *Motorcycle Maintenance* is tackling. *Phaedrus* also means “wolf” in Greek, and the narrator often compares Phaedrus’s existence to that of a wolf: isolated, aggressive, persistent.

**Zen Buddhism.** Buddhism is a spiritual philosophy founded in the sixth century B.C. in India. It later spread to China and Japan. *Zen* is the Japanese word for “meditation,” and that is precisely the path to truth that this branch of Buddhism stresses. Founded in China in the fifth century A.D., Zen rejects worship of deities, reading of scriptures, and performance of ritual. Practitioners wait for flashes of intuitive knowledge that come when the self is quiet and free of desire and distraction.

## MAIN CHARACTERS (IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE)

**The narrator,** a forty-year-old father of two sons, presently a technical writer and editor and a motorcyclist who loves to do his own maintenance.

**Chris,** the eleven-year-old son of the narrator, who is by turns excited, frustrated, bored, puzzled, and frightened by this journey with his father.

**John Sutherland,** a good friend and longtime cycling companion of the narrator, who rides with him and his son as far as Bozeman, Montana. In many ways, he functions as a **foil**, or opposite, of the narrator.

**Sylvia Sutherland,** John’s wife, seems to hope that this vacation will revitalize their stale life and troubled marriage. Like the narrator, she enjoys the freedom and aesthetic pleasures of the back roads.

**Phaedrus,** name of the narrator’s former personality.

**Robert DeWeese,** an art instructor and abstract painter, a former colleague of Phaedrus.

## PLOT

### Part I

**Chapter 1.** On a warm day in July, the narrator and his son Chris and John and Sylvia Sutherland are cycling through the Central Plains, heading northwest from Minneapolis to the Dakotas. Enjoying the leisure the ride affords, the narrator proposes to conduct a series of “Chautauquas,” which he defines as “an old-time series of popular talks intended to edify and entertain. . . .” His first Chautauqua is stimulated by John’s refusal to learn how to tune his motorcycle. The narrator figures out that he and Sylvia hate technology and are trying to escape from or ignore its effects whenever they can.

**Chapter 2.** On the second day out, the four move from the Central Plains to the prairies of the Great Plains.

**Chapter 3.** The two cycles are speeding across the prairies; the riders are trying to reach a town before a thunderstorm hits. Then, as lightning illuminates a farmhouse, **symbolizing** a flash of recognition, the narrator realizes that “he has *been* here.” This is the first **allusion** to another character who has taken this route before. The narrator is shaken by this sudden return of memories and takes up the **theme** of ghosts. He explains to Chris that just about anything that cannot be measured with the senses and exists in the mind

only, such as theories or memories, can be considered a “ghost.” At night, the narrator admits that the ideas he has been discussing belong to someone named Phaedrus.

**Chapter 4.** The narrator begins this day’s Chautauqua with practical lists of equipment needed on a motorcycle trip. Then he talks about how each motorcycle has a unique personality.

**Chapter 5.** The riders leave the prairie, cross the Missouri River, and pass into bare, hilly land. The narrator further explores the **conflict** of values between John and him. He classifies their differences as a scientific/artistic split. He explains that Chris’s stomach pains were diagnosed as symptoms of mental illness, but the narrator cannot get himself to take Chris to a psychiatrist.

**Chapter 6.** The next day the narrator decides that, like a ghost, Phaedrus was never properly buried and that he will try to put him to rest by recording as much about his life and ideas as he can. He describes Phaedrus as a classical or analytical thinker who began to use his analytical mind to try to bridge the gap between the rational and the romantic. His ideas, however, were not understood by others, and he began to behave more and more eccentrically, eventually going insane.

**Chapter 7.** Now the riders are in hot semidesert country, and the narrator meditates on the presence of the Buddha, the godhead, or the ultimate principle of the universe, in motorcycle parts and in analytical reasoning as well as in the beautiful surfaces of Nature and romantic art. He explains that Phaedrus pursued the ghost of rationality in order to free himself and that by going insane, he achieved the freedom that he desired. Here, for the first time, the narrator explicitly reveals that he and Phaedrus are the same person but that electroshock therapy destroyed Phaedrus’s personality. The narrator now has a new personality and a very spotty memory of his old one.

### Part II

**Chapter 8.** The party awakes refreshed in Miles City, Montana. The narrator works on his motorcycle.

**Chapter 9.** Following the Yellowstone Valley across Montana, the narrator gives a detailed analysis of the two kinds of logic—inductive and deductive—and explains the essential steps in the scientific method.

**Chapter 10.** The valley is narrowing, and in a **parallel** movement on the intellectual level, the narrator is coming to the point in the course of Phaedrus’s ideas when he went beyond mainstream rational thought. He recalls that Phaedrus began college at about fourteen, studying biochemistry, and soon discovered that the scientific method could not produce the unchanging truth he was seeking. Pursuing his own concerns and neglecting his assignments, Phaedrus was expelled after a few years. He then kept his ideas to himself until he began to teach rhetoric at the college in Bozeman, where the narrator is now heading.

**Chapter 11.** The travelers are in sight of the mountains now and feel exhilarated. They are heading for Bozeman through Yellowstone National Park. The narrator recalls a powerful **image** of a shining wall across a misty harbor, like “a gate of heaven,” which Phaedrus saw while in the army in Korea. This vision marked a breakthrough in Phaedrus’s thinking. After that, he became even more determined to find an intellectual bridge between Western and Eastern thought.

**Chapter 12.** Now in the mountains, Sylvia and John seem happier than they have been in years. The narrator notices that his own unconscious moods are often reflected in his son’s behavior. The four are heading for the home in Bozeman of DeWeese, a former colleague of Phaedrus at Montana State.

**Chapter 13.** The group is approaching Bozeman, and the narrator is growing increasingly tense.

**Chapter 14.** The party reaches Bozeman.

**Chapter 15.** John and Sylvia leave. The narrator goes into the building where he once taught and remembers a **climactic** moment when an older colleague said she hoped he would teach Quality in his class. From that day on, he and his students were involved in an intense pursuit of the answer to the question *How do we know what is good?*

### Part III

**Chapter 16.** Chris and the narrator rise early and begin a hike up the mountain. The narrator points out how mountain climbing has been used in Zen literature and in all religions as an **allegory** for scaling spiritual heights. He applies the comparison to Phaedrus, who saw the exploration of Quality as a pass through the spiritual mountains.

**Chapter 17.** As the hike continues, Chris becomes tired but refuses to admit it. The narrator’s Chautauqua recaps how Phaedrus experimented with eliminating grades in his rhetoric class and how students then had no choice but to make Quality judgments for themselves.

**Chapter 18.** Again in a **parallel discourse**, the pair continue their physical climb, and the narrator continues his elaboration on Quality, insisting that its reality can be recognized but not defined.

**Chapter 19.** The narrator has a dream in which he and Chris are separated by a glass door that Chris is asking him to open. The narrator concludes that the look he sees on Chris’s face both in the dream and in life reflects a wish to get closer to his father, combined with a fear that it will never happen. In the Chautauqua, the narrator wrestles with the dilemma of whether Quality is a subjective or objective phenomenon. The **climax** of his thinking occurs when he sees that Quality precedes subjects and objects and is actually the source, or creator, of the other two.

**Chapter 20.** The narrator is puzzled by his telling Chris that he will *meet* him at the top of the mountain. He would like to think that they are already together.

The narrator begins to worry about the possibility of rock slides and avalanches (**symbols** for loss of control) and, to Chris’s disappointment, decides that he doesn’t want to continue to the top right now. He admits he is afraid of what or who may be waiting for him up there. Then the narrative of Phaedrus’s search for Quality is resumed, reaching its summit when he realizes that the Quality he has discovered is the same as the “great central generating force of all religions.”

**Chapter 21.** Chris, feeling competitive with his father, begins sharing the load of baggage as they descend.

**Chapter 22.** The next day, father and son leave Bozeman and head west. The narrator explores the thinking of the French philosopher and mathematician Henri Poincaré (1854–1912).

**Chapter 23.** Again the narrator dreams of that recurring **symbol**, the glass door, which separates him and Chris. This time, a shadowy figure commands him not to open the door. Then he shouts to Chris that he will meet him at the bottom of the ocean.

**Chapter 24.** The narrator awakes disoriented from his dream but soon gets Chris and himself on the road. Chris begins a letter to his mother. As they move down from the higher elevations, the narrator begins a more down-to-earth Chautauqua about the relationship between Quality and caring in everyday life and the fact that “stuckness,” or frustration, can be an opportunity for creativity and craftsmanship. He is now covering new ground and does not know where he is headed.

**Chapter 25.** The pair move through a narrow, hot canyon in Idaho. The narrator explores the importance of peace of mind in art and science and concludes with his belief that the world can best be changed by each individual seeking this inner peace.

**Chapter 26.** The narrator wakes early on a cold morning and launches into a long discourse on “gumption,” a kind of enthusiasm or courage that he thinks is needed for living deeply and well.

### Part IV

**Chapter 27.** The chapter opens with a description of a dream the narrator is having. In it he is lunging in the shadows for a figure who has been preventing him from opening the glass door and reaching Chris. Then he is awakened by the actual Chris who is frightened by his father’s dream talk. The narrator explains that the figure he is struggling with in the dream is himself, the Phaedrus part that has come back.

**Chapter 28.** This chapter begins with a **flashback** to a time when Chris was six years old and Phaedrus was driving aimlessly around their hometown, unable to find his way home. The narrator feels he must protect Chris from the truth about Phaedrus but senses that they will have to talk at some point.

**Chapter 29.** Now in California in a motel, the father and son are at a low point.

**Chapter 30.** Chris and the narrator are now riding in the rain on the freeway, and in the narrative of the past, the **theme** of the descent into madness is brought to its conclusion. After humiliating the department chairman in front of his class, Phaedrus leaves the University of Chicago in disgust, using the **metaphor** of the lone wolf. He stops talking altogether and after a while sits motionlessly in his apartment, unaware of himself or his surroundings. He is viewed as insane and is committed to a mental hospital where electroshock therapy obliterates his memory. At this point in the motorcycle journey, Chris has a kind of breakdown of his own. He cries and cries and asks why they seem to be going nowhere. He speaks of how much better things used to be, and finally, the narrator understands that he is mourning for Phaedrus—that they both are. This marks the **turning point** in the **conflict**, or misunderstanding, between father and son.

**Chapter 31.** Chris, in a despondent mood, walks close to the edge of a cliff overhanging the ocean. Then he demands to go back rather than forward until the narrator decides to tell him about his insanity and his current fears that he will go insane again. Crying, Chris asks why his father would not open the glass door (in the mental hospital), and suddenly both understand that their separation was something that was forced on them by others and that Phaedrus was not really insane. The conflict between them has been **resolved** now that they understand the past.

**Chapter 32.** In an effortless ride on the last day of their trip, the narrator realizes the depth of his relationship with his son, understanding that it was concern for Chris that motivated him to get himself out of the hospital, and that Chris alone has kept faith with Phaedrus. The narrator's search for his identity, a major **theme** of the novel, is **resolved** at last when he accepts that Phaedrus and he are one. At last he has found the unity he has been seeking in his psyche and in his relationship with his son.

## APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research might focus on the following activities.

### 1. Looking for Parallels

In almost every chapter, a metaphorical connection can be made between what is going on in the narrative of the motorcycle journey and in the narrative of

Phaedrus's life and thoughts. Students can discover these parallels by discussing the figurative implications of details like the following:

- the weather
- the landscape
- the conditions of the road
- the presence or absence of people

### 2. Evaluating the Questions and the Answers

An admirer of the *Dialogues* of Plato, Pirsig believes people learn by asking and answering questions. Students may want to discuss these and other questions:

- Why are John and Sylvia unhappy with their life? How does the motorcycle trip change them?
- Was Phaedrus insane?
- What does Chris want? Does he get it?
- Are there any divisions still remaining in the narrator's life at the end of the novel?

## MEET THE WRITER

**Robert M. Pirsig** (1928– ) was born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, and the details of his life coincide with those of the narrator of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), his first novel. Like the narrator, Pirsig had two sons (the older one named Chris) and was given electroshock therapy after a nervous breakdown. In the Afterword to *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, written in 1984, Pirsig revealed that his son Chris was murdered. He was attacked by two unknown assailants after leaving a Zen center in San Francisco, just two weeks short of his twenty-third birthday. Shattered, Pirsig and his second wife tried to make sense of the tragedy, finally finding some solace in the birth of their daughter, Nell. In 1991, Pirsig published a second novel called *Lila: An Inquiry into Morals*.

## READ ON

**Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods*.** A famous series of philosophical essays growing out of the author's stay at Walden Pond in the 1840s.

**Walt Whitman, *Song of Myself*.** Long poem, first published in 1855, telling of Whitman's universalist and egalitarian philosophy.

**William Least Heat-Moon, *Blue Highways: A Journey into America*.** A search for discovery along America's rural highways.

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