

# Speculative Realms

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 19, 2010

## The Chess Game: How to Stop Playing with People's Lives and Your Own Life and Become a Buddha at the Same Time

by Gary Haden

I don't know.

Do we have a right to play with other people's lives? Do we have a right to play with our own lives?

Every now and then I dig out the old buck-and-a-half philosophy paperbacks I've collected over the years. They're short. Like poetry books. They all seem to come from the seventies, when I was in my teens. I guess the counterculture had had it with long winded treatises. They preferred koans and acid over encyclopedias and bottles of brandy.

Although, personally, I could do with a little of both.

This story comes from a little book from 1970 called the *Gospel According to Zen: Beyond the Death of God*. It was borrowed from a previous book by Trevor Leggett entitled *A First Zen Reader*.

It is called: "The Chess Game."

"A young man who had a bitter disappointment in life went to a remote monastery and said to the abbot: 'I am disillusioned with life and wish to attain enlightenment to be freed from these sufferings. But I have no capacity for sticking long at anything. I could never do long years of meditation and study and austerity; I should relapse and be drawn back to the world again, painful though I know it to be. Is there any short way for people like me?'

"There is,' said the abbot, 'if you are really determined. Tell me, what have you studied, what have you concentrated on most in your life?'

"Why, nothing really. We were rich, and I did not have to work. I suppose the thing I was really interested in was chess. I spent most of my time at that.'

"The abbot thought for a moment, and then said to his attendant: 'Call such-and-such a monk, and tell him to bring a chessboard and men.'

"The monk came with the board and the abbot set up the men. He sent for a sword and showed it to the two.

"O monk,' he said, 'you have vowed obedience to me as your abbot, and now I require it of you. You will play a game of chess with this youth, and if you lose I shall cut off your head with this sword. But I promise that you will be reborn in paradise. If you win, I shall cut off the head of this man; chess is the only thing he has ever tried hard at, and if he loses he deserves to lose his head also.'

"They looked at the abbot's face and saw that he meant it: he would cut off the head of the loser.

"They began to play. With the opening moves the youth felt the sweat trickling down to his heels as he played for his life. The chessboard became the whole world; he was entirely concentrated on it. At first he had somewhat the worst of it, but then the other made an inferior move and he seized his chance to launch a strong attack. As his opponent's position crumbled, he looked covertly at him. He saw a face of intelligence and sincerity, worn with years of austerity and effort. He thought of his own worthless life, and a wave of compassion came over him. He deliberately made a blunder and then another blunder, ruining his position and leaving himself

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defenseless.

"The abbot suddenly leaned forward and upset the board. The two contestants sat stupefied.

"'There is no winner and no loser,' said the abbot slowly, 'there is no head to fall here. Only two things are required,' and he turned to the young man, 'complete concentration, and compassion. You have today learned them both. You were completely concentrated on the game, but then in that concentration, you could feel compassion and sacrifice your life for it. Now stay here a few months and pursue our training in this spirit and your enlightenment is sure.'"

—Robert Sohl & Audrey Carr, editors. "The Chess Game." [The Gospel According to Zen: Beyond the Death of God](#).

The youth stayed the few months and was enlightened.

Sometimes the game of life requires too much of you. When you play games, someone's head might roll. Then someday a better player comes along and it's your head rolling around in front of you.

And then some people get sick of that game and they follow their heart.

And in the process they find their soul.

Isn't it pretty to think so?

Posted by Gary Haden at 7:10 AM 

Labels: [Bozotopia](#), [Gameplaying](#), [Special Compartment in Hell](#)

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