GENERAL SEMANTICS AND ZEN

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GENERAL SEMANTICS is a phenomenon of our Western culture. It is a symptom of the phase of self-correction and development through which our generation is passing. It is at the same time an attempt to manage the cultural mutation that is taking place.

Zen belongs to a different world. It is a refined product of Eastern culture. It is an attempt to stabilize in a theory and translate into a skill the human experience of living in conscious contact with oneself and with the world.

If the two disciplines are different, as we may well expect of ways of life that are so deeply involved with language, mores, and institutions, they also have a great deal in common. They both refer to some basic human experience, like birth, sex, or death, which each of them plays in a different key and with a different instrumentation. “The essentials of Zen are universal,” repeats Alan Watts. I agree with him. But I add immediately: the essentials of general semantics are universal as well. When we pierce through the veil of formulations and look at the hard-to-describe experience that Zen masters call the Way of Liberation, we cannot help but think of many Western theories that deal with similar phenomena. We think of existentialist philosophers like Sartre and Jaspers, of psychoanalysts like Carl Jung, of client-centered therapists like Carl Rogers, of metalinguists like Benjamin Whorf, of philosophers of science like Gaston Bachelard, of neurologists like Ralph W. Gerard.

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When Marco Polo visited far-off Cathay, the East and the West were, for all practical purposes, two different worlds, each going its own way in complete independence. Contacts between them increased gradually as time went on, but until recently the two cultures remained distant, each one being an object of curiosity for the scholars who belonged to the other.

Conditions are very different today. Western technology and Eastern philosophy are boiling together in the red-hot caldron of revolutionary change all over Asia. We don't really know what will come out of that ominous reaction of cultural chemistry. Shall we form a common precipitate with communism that is Western as we are, or shall we emerge as a distinct distillation of what is most potent in human values, thoughts, and energies? There are reasons to wonder.

While this portentous fusion keeps rumbling in the East, the scholars and the thinkers of the West become more and more concerned with the possible blending of the two cultures. Zen is a topic of the day. We see more and more books about it in the columns of the reviewers and in store displays; we attend lectures and we listen to radio broadcasts on "Philosophy, East and West"; we hear of study groups and of workshops open exclusively to those who are already familiar with basic principles. In advanced seminars of general semantics I find from year to year more and more participants who inquire about the relations between the silent level of Korzybski and the nonmental observation of Zen. On both sides of the planet, intellectually in our parts and politically in Asia, humankind is expecting a great change, a new era. Korzybski described to Irving Lee a "new kind of man." Northrop expects this new man to blend within himself the intuition of the East with the postulation of the West.

Stages of Western Culture

Professor Gaston Bachelard, of the Sorbonne, sees our Western culture as a process that went through four distinct transformations in the course of history, from homo sapiens to the scientists of the atomic age. He claims that
these stages of development are recapitulated in the same sequence by the individual as he grows from childhood to semantic maturity. In my own version of Bachelard’s scheme, I labeled these stages as follows:

1. The sensing, uncritical stage of the primitive and of the infant;
2. the classifying stage introduced by the Greek philosophers;
3. the relating stage of classical science from Galileo and Newton to the beginning of the twentieth century;
4. the postulating stage of relativity and indeterminacy in which we are now;
5. the unifying stage of immediate nonverbal cosmic experience. This last one is not restricted to our age, but we are just beginning to study it with the tools developed in the earlier stages.¹

I see general semantics as a discipline of stage 4, formulated laboriously in a logical emergence from stages 2 and 3. Many writers in the field are still calling it non-aristotelian, which means that, although it is in the Western tradition, it is not limited to the techniques of stages 2 and 3.

I see Zen as the art of taking a long jump from stage 1 to stage 5. There lies, it seems to me, the radical difference between general semantics and Zen Buddhism. The first is a product of our discursive, rational, and technically oriented culture; the second is a product of the intuitive, contemplative, and naturalistic culture of the East. Such a statement is an over-simplification, I know. But it has proved useful more than once when we started a discussion on the East-West situation in advanced seminars.

Comparing Semantic and Zen Statements

There is no direct reference to Zen in Science and Sanity, nor in Manhood of Humanity. Korzybski abstained from commenting on the languages of other cultures (which he

loosely called “races”) and on their semantic implications. He wrote: “I do not know enough about the structure of languages of other races and their semantic reactions to speak about them.”² So, it is in vain that we look for a definite statement from the master himself. This time every general semanticist, even if he is the most tenacious keeper of orthodox tradition, has to take the risk of thinking for himself.

If we put side by side some statements taken from the two systems, their parallelism becomes evident. For instance, we read in The Way of Zen: “In Chinese, objects are events—our world is a collection of processes rather than of entities.”³ Listen now to Korzybski: “Further objective enquiry shows that the world and ourselves are made up of processes.”⁴

Elsewhere Watts writes: “The doctrine of maya is a doctrine of relativity. It is saying that things, facts, and events are delineated, not by nature, but by human description, and that the way we may describe (or divide) them is relative to our point of view.”⁵

On our side of the planet, this view is called the Whorfian hypothesis, accepted without hesitation in general semantics circles. “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare the observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds. We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it this way—an agreement that holds throughout our speech community, and is codified in the patterns of language.”⁶

Every reader of ETC. is familiar with Korzybski’s insist-

⁴ Korzybski, op. cit., p. 263.
⁵ Watts, op. cit., p. 40.
ence on the unspeakable character of what he calls the "objective" world and on the necessity to come into contact with it on the silent level. "Whatever we may say will not be the objective level, which remains fundamentally unspeakable... The term 'unspeakable' is used in its strict English sense meaning... Semantically this problem is crucial. Anyone who misses that—and it is unfortunately easily missed—will miss one of the most important psychological factors in all semantic reactions underlying sanity." 7

For Zennists, the contact with what they call the "Real" is described as "Correct Vision." "Silent observation, lucidity without ideation, attention without 'verbal thought,' vigilance in the moment, are the fundamental elements of 'Correct Vision.'" 8

Now, let us look at the differences. Here are some that strike me as important.

The Korzybskian notions of consciousness of abstracting, multiordinality, and self-reflexiveness are symptoms of our Western search for order, relations, and structure, and they are at the same time means for us to overcome these symptoms by guided awareness. In Zen, all this is useless labor. The Zen poet writes:

If you work on your mind with your mind
How can you avoid an immense confusion?

A Zen master is quoted by Watts: "Can thought review thought? No, thought cannot review thought. As the blade of a sword cannot cut itself, as a finger-tip cannot touch itself, so a thought cannot see itself." And Watts continues: "This nonduality of the mind, in which it is no longer divided against itself, is *samadhi*, and because of that fruitless threshing around of the mind to grasp itself, *samadhi* is a state of profound peace." 9

I disagree with the Zen master. If you describe a phenom-

7 Korzybski, *op. cit.*, p. 34.
enon by means of an analogy that reduces it to a lower order of dimensionality, to a less complex form, you must be careful not to ascribe to the phenomenon the limits of the analog that you chose. If you compare the mind to a sword, which limits do you take as descriptive of the limits of the phenomenon, the mind’s or the sword’s? Of course, a sword cannot cut itself. Such an achievement is beyond the limits of a sword’s capacities. But has the mind exactly the same limits as the sword? Is it true that thought cannot review thought as sword cannot cut sword? What are we describing here, the mind that is more or the sword that is less? What is the measure of what? If the sword is the measure of mind, then you reveal to me nothing that is specific to mind as different from sword. If sword is to mind as sword is to sword-plus, then the plus may well comprise that capacity for self-reflexiveness that the sword alone does not possess.

We of the Western world have developed skills and techniques for self-reflexiveness. From the Socratic “Know Thyself” to the searching methods of psychoanalysis and to the revised ontology of existentialism, there has been a continuous effort of “thought reviewing thought,” of mind re-thinking itself. We recognize that there is danger in this. We know that the skill of philosophizing may take the place of the art of living. But we claim that the skill is not diametrically opposed to the art. We see them supporting each other, making possible a type of first-order experience that the exclusively naturalistic approach does not seem to duplicate. For us, human nature functioning in full awareness of its own reflexiveness is part and parcel of nature as process. Nature is not a symbolless void into which we must merge to enjoy internal peace; it is a challenge to an ever-active self that must live in creativity in order to be. We do not aim at self-surrender; we strive for self-management, and obliquely for the management of the forces of nature itself.

Western Prophets

We have our own prophets who arose occasionally and reminded us that our high regard for our own rationality
might become an idolatrous practice, and that our very expertise in discursive skills might defeat its own ends. Blaise Pascal, the mathematician-philosopher and mystic, was one of those. He made a distinction between *l'esprit de géométrie* and *l'esprit de finesse*, between what we may now call "playing with mathematical models" and "intuiting with creative insight."

Nietzsche was also one of those. He wrote: "We now need men... who are bent on seeking for that aspect of all things that must be overcome." 10 That aspect that we have painted on all things is the very intelligibility that we have projected upon them.

Such statements can be found almost everywhere in our scientific and philosophical literature. We develop methods and skills, but we are aware that the creative thinker, the first-rate artist, and the self-actualizing person have to reach the level of what Zen calls "the method of no method," where the individual gives himself, as it were, to the spontaneous rhythm of what is going on. This is what I mean by stage 5 of the epistemological profile. The general acceptance of the relativity of our postulates, as attained in stage 4, appears to me as the cultural preparation for that stage 5.

Among the prophets who have raised their voices recently, I want to mention three: Trigant Burrow, Pitirim Sorokin, and Carl Rogers.11

Trigant Burrow described our excessive rationality as a neurosis of the whole race. His therapeutic goal became, not the cure of the individual by returning him to "normality"—for "normality" was for Burrow the expression of the collective neurosis—but the return of man to biological integrity.

The man-made god that Burrow wanted to destroy was


11 When I mention these as "prophets," I do not mean that I accept blindly all the theories that they hold. I see them as voices that express some intuitions of our generation that I consider significant. This remark applies particularly to Trigant Burrow, and more specifically to Pitirim Sorokin.
the I, the person, the persona that struts on the stage of life and that we mistakenly accept as the authentic sample of man in his genuine nature. Listen to Alan Watts in this connection: "Zen points out that our precious 'self' is just an idea, useful and legitimate enough, if seen for what it is, but disastrous if identified with our real nature." 12 To continue with Burrow: he laid great stress on the physiological aspects of man's balance or lack of balance in his relations with his environment, and particularly with his human environment. He spoke of two opposite patterns of physiological reactions: (a) ditention, which is a symptom of the very separateness that it fosters, and (b) cotention, which restores the unity of the individual, the phylum, and the cosmos.

How do we induce cotention? Not by trying to talk ourselves into it, warns Burrow. "I am unacquainted with any recourse other than sticking to the effort—or rather to the effortlessness—to maintain a blank mind, to render null and void all that now represents one's social interest or motivation." 13

"Effortlessness in maintaining a blank mind," does not this remind you of Zen? "The person so released can step into the mainstream of life, for he is free from the barriers of self which heretofore stood in his way." 14

Pitirim Sorokin puts the accent on "the production, accumulation, and circulation" of the energy of altruistic love. "The greatest creative victories of man are in the field of beauty, truth, and goodness." These activities are transformable one into another, and they are manifestations of what he calls the supra-conscious.

The supra-conscious of Sorokin is antipodal to the Freudian subconscious. Between the two is the social unconscious, made of the patterned assumptions of the culture and of the

12 Watts, op. cit., p. 120.
language forms that we have internalized. The supra-conscious is the realm of intuition by which "the person (creator or cognizer) and the intuited object tend to become united into one whole in which there is no separation between the subject (person) and the object. . . . The supra-conscious intuition delivers to us the unmediated, adequate knowledge or experience . . . instead of the mediated, inadequate, and always uncertain cognition or idea derived through sense organs or logical reasoning." 15

Let us turn now to a quotation from a recent article on Zen. "To Zen, the problem of the subject-object relationship, central to modern Western epistemology, appears to leave the matter of unity untouched. . . . It is not the assumption, but the experience of unity, that brings integration. Such an experience rests upon another order of knowing, essentially esthetic, intuitive, or spiritual in quality." 16

Finally, Carl Rogers. In the American Psychologist of July 1955, he describes what he calls his "rigorous objectivity" as a scientist and his "almost mystical subjectivity" as a therapist. He reports an "increasing discomfort" at the distance between these two selves.

He solves his problem by integrating science and experience. "Science is not an impersonal something, but simply a person living subjectively another phase of himself. . . . It is rooted and based upon the immediate, subjective experience of a person. It springs from the inner, total, organismic experiencing which is only partially and imperfectly communicable. It is one phase of subjective living." 17 So is therapy. It works, not by thinking problems through to a logical solution, but by immersing oneself into the live situation and taking the psychological risks that this involves. Experimentalism and what Zennists call "pragmatic spirituality" "co-

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17 Rogers, op. cit., pp. 277, 278.
incide in their insistence that the desired actuality is realized by way of experience.”

Personally, I cannot accept a system, aristotelian or non-aristotelian, as a substitute for the unifying-creative experience itself. Stage 4 is, for us Westerners, a good preparation for stage 5 experience, but it is not to be identified with it. By presenting mathematics as the most valuable creation of man, Korzybski remained at that level of postulating. By stressing silence at the experiential level, he bids us jump to stage 5.

Zen as An Alternative?

Is ZEN the better alternative for us in our Western world? I am not ready to say yes. Zen is a human experience, a way of life, that our brothers who live in the East have developed and practiced. But, as one of its best-known exponents puts it, “It must be seen against the background of societies regulated by the principles of Confucianism, with their heavy stress on propriety and punctilious ritual. Zen might be a very dangerous medicine in a social context where convention is weak, or, at the other extreme, where there is a spirit of open revolt against convention ready to exploit Zen for destructive purposes.”

Zen is part of a neuro-linguistic world that is very different from ours. To compare Zen to general semantics—or to any other Western discipline, for that matter—we have to take these two worlds into account. Are they comparable in size, in comprehensiveness, and in potentialities?

In the field of technical hardware we are—or we were until very recently—very far ahead. Our technology is still holding the whole planet within its nets.

What of our cultural achievements? We have tried to impose them by our missionaries, by our propaganda, by social-uplift missions well supplied with funds and technical gadgets. But there is something about culture that is not mechanical, something that we cannot install as we do power plants, railroads, factories, medical clinics, airlines, or radio

\(^{18}\) Curran, op. cit., p. 12.

\(^{19}\) Watts, op. cit., p. 143.
networks. It has to fit with the living complex of traditions, mores, and institutions that have expressed for centuries the relations that other people of the earth have discovered and/or established between themselves, and between themselves and the cosmos.

Our own cultural world is still aristotelian for the most part. The non-aristotelian orientation of our foremost scientists has not yet penetrated the lower layers of our population. Are the common people of cultures outside the Indo-European linguistic group locked as we are within the symmetrical patterns of aristotelian logic? According to Professor E. A. Lanier, a general semanticist who sent me a private communication from Nanzan University, in Nagoya, Japan, in 1955, they are not. He said: "Based on insights derived from a study of gitaigo words, keigo, and other nth dimensional aspects of the Japanese language, and a comparative study of the basic abstractions from, and assumptions about, the nature of the Japanese and English languages," we may come to the postulation "that speakers of Japanese, Chinese, and the so-called 'primitive' languages like the American Indian (these, at least) may actually live emotionally, logically, and visually (if not, heretofore, consciously and intellectually) in a neuro-linguistic universe that approximates the constructs of modern science." "In the East, life is not 'sicklied over by the pale cast of thought.'"

The relation between this general outlook and the interpretation of the Zennist "Void" given by Robert Linssen becomes obvious. "The notion of the 'Void' often gives rise to confusion. There are many who interpret it literally and try to realize 'emptiness of mind' by means of intense concentration. Such vacuity is absolutely negative and does not contain any possibilities of revelation. Mental activity is part of the process of life. So the aim should not be to suppress it but to assign it a different method of functioning which shall be in keeping with the profound nature of things." (Italics mine.)20 The nature of things, for us aris-

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20 Linssen, op. cit., p. 194.
totelians, is still more or less consciously the classical "prime matter" and the "form" that makes each thing what it is, whether we talk of an electron or a mountain. "So with SAE (Standard Average European) people the philosophic 'substance' and 'matter' are also the naive idea; they are instantly acceptable, 'common sense.' It is so through linguistic habit. Our language patterns often require us to name a physical thing by a binomial that splits the reference into a formless item plus a form," writes Benjamin Whorf.21 For the Hopi, the profound nature of things, as experienced in their "thought-world" is not the resultant of our matter and form; it is something mysterious to us, which Whorf describes as "eventing," "phasing," and such.22

In Japanese, mental activity has a method of functioning different from ours and different from that of the Hopi. According to Dr. Lanier, "In the East, the world within which man lives and moves and has his being is apparently perceived as a great indeterminate aesthetic continuum of space, intersected and cut up by 'objects' or 'things' of beauty, large and small, of different shapes, sizes, colors, hues, and textures, which form varying and ever-changing patterns of space between them, clearly seen as entities of Beauty (for which there are words in the vocabulary). The whole is set in a background of space which is a thing of beauty in its own right. In terms of Western logic 'the beauty of empty space' is for practical purposes a non-sense expression; it is a basic principle of Eastern aesthetics—which is the same as saying that it is a basic principle of Eastern life." From this viewpoint, the logic of the "Void" and of its contemplation beyond attachment and identification becomes quite acceptable.

Are these non-aristotelian logics more inclusive than the aristotelian logic that gives shape to the "thought-world" in which we live, move, and have our being? Dr. Lanier is inclined to think so: "Just as the Aristotelian logic is a special case of the all-inclusive non-Aristotelian logics (as

21 Carroll, op. cit., p. 141.
22 Carroll, op. cit., pp. 142, 147.
the Euclidian geometry is of the non-Euclidian geometries, and the Newtonian physics is of the non-Newtonian physics) so the particular structure of the world which characterizes the Western languages and culture is but one special case of the more inclusive worlds of the non-Aristotelian languages and cultures of the East."

He continues: "The West is stymied by the symmetrical patterns of Aristotelian logic, by the values in which it cannot see, cannot understand, cannot enter into the structures of the East, because it cannot pierce the walls of its own culture." (Italics mine.) "Conversely, however, the Language-Logic and the Thinking-Feeling structures of the East, and the cosmological visual world to which they are geared, offer no essential barrier to an understanding of those whose neuro-linguistic system comprehends within its delicate complexities the Western—and perhaps—other structures and points of view."

General semantics is an attempt to "pierce the walls of our own culture." From our own Western ranks an advanced party of mathematicians and physicists have made their way through these walls. There are social scientists who keep busy widening the breach, so that the common people may pour out of the confining fortress and establish their homes in the lush valleys of non-aristotelian systems.

A conscientious study of Zen belongs to this program of liberation.

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**Theory**

Shall we leave it up to Freud
As to what brought forth this void;
Or be considered odd
And leave it up to God?

_Lillian Rudolph_

_Denver, Colorado_