"Take Korzybski’s general semantics seminar and you’ll find your world turned upside down,” said a friend half a century ago. I took her advice and found that her prediction came true. Years later, I read accounts of Zen students experiencing satori, or enlightenment, and testifying that their world was turned upside down. I’ve been wondering if practicing general semantics and practicing Zen result in a similar experience.

I have two main difficulties in trying to understand the Zen experience of enlightenment. One lies in the means Zen roshis use in preparing their “students” for having this experience they call satori. They work intuitively with individual students, using words and actions in deliberately nonrational, nonsensical ways. How does one get over this cunningly erected roadblock?

The second difficulty arises when satori experiencers discover they cannot lucidly describe their new way of looking at life. These people do not use logical, sensible statements. (By “sensible” I mean referring to what we can perceive through our senses.) The COIK principle (clear only if known) operates to frustrate the inquirer. Only if you have experienced Zen satori can you be sure you understand the roshi’s paradoxical descriptions of that state. A Catch-22 situation!

My experience with general semantics has dealt with activities

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easily known, perceived, and described. For example, I can recall my puzzlement as a student of English literature over conflicting judgments by learned critics. I would no sooner become convinced by the wonderfully logical arguments of Critic A concerning a literary work than I’d come up against Critic B’s quite different judgment of the same work. How was it that people of equal reputation for perspicacity and literary acumen could differ so much? They resembled those Hindu blind men describing an elephant.

My puzzlement had a parallel in Adelbert Ames’s experience as a novice painter. (Ames created the distorted room and rotating trapezoidal window experiments in visual perception.) As a student of painting, he would go with his classmates to a particular spot. They would all set up their easels and each would paint a picture of that scene. Invariably and puzzlingly, no two paintings were the same. Eventually, Ames discovered that his interest in the parameters of visual perception overwhelmed his desire to become a painter.

His analysis of these parameters revealed why each of us sees the world differently. Korzybski’s analysis of the neuro-linguistic, neuro-semantic factors in our “mental” pictures of the world also revealed why each of us lives in our own unique world of meanings.

Studying with Korzybski turned my world upside down. My belief in the one right way of perceiving and the one right way of understanding was destroyed. Now I hear Literary Critic A expressing a judgment and I say, “Ah, thank you, sir, for telling me your view of this novel.” Now when Astronomer X tells me what’s going on on Jupiter, I say, “Ah, thank you, ma’am. I shall, if you don’t mind, keep my ears open to hear what you say after you examine the data that Voyager II sends back.” And I shall react in a similar manner to what economists and dietitians tell me about the state of the world and the state of my digestion.

In my new world I hear Korzybski say, with a louche smile, “Whatever you say it is, well, it isn’t.” Its existence cannot be fully and hence truly described in words. Words do not have meanings; people have meanings for words. And each person’s meanings are shaped by unique neuro-linguistic, neuro-semantic factors.

I think of how I apply the word “reality” to the universe and our situation. I call the nonverbal part of Reality “Reality 1” and the verbal part “Reality 2.” Reality 2 exists in human minds. Reality 1 exists “out there.” Reality 2 cannot be identical with Reality 1 because Reality 2 is shaped by our limited brain, our limited senses,
and our limited language. My Reality 2 results from what I abstract from my environment. I abstract, or take in selectively, out of Reality 1 only what I’m capable of sensing, perceiving, understanding. Korzybski used the term “consciousness of abstracting” for being aware of this process.

Acquiring this consciousness of abstracting turned my world upside down. The world that the experts and I were talking about was inside the head of each of us. We weren’t talking about the world, Reality 1; we were talking about our picture of the world, Reality 2. Humpty-Dumpty knew this; he paid his words to mean what he told them to mean. No wonder Critic A and Critic B described the same novel differently. No wonder each painter painted a different picture of the same scene. Now that I was conscious of abstracting, these differences were understandable.

So, what has this to do with the satori, the enlightenment, that turns the Zen practitioner’s world upside down? Here’s my guess. Zen roshis put their “students” in various situations designed to weaken their belief that words (Reality 2) are identical with Reality 1. The students have to sit silently in zazen (meditation). They have to do the physical work around the monastery rather than spend most of their time listening to lectures. They may have to practice painting in the sumi-e fashion—black ink applied spontaneously with brushes to absorbent paper. They may practice flower arranging or judo or archery.

In Zen in the Art of Archery, Eugen Herrigel, a German professor in a Japanese university, tells how he experienced satori after practicing archery under the guidance of a Zen roshi. It wasn’t until he was able to purge himself completely of any verbal behavior while shooting that he experienced the feeling that “It shoots.” Something happened in Reality 1—the arrow was loosed and hit the bull’s-eye without Herrigel’s conscious willing of the act. In some inexplicable way, the bow, the arrow, his muscles, his eyes, the light, etc., etc., produced a hit. Reality produced a hit when Reality 2 was canceled out.

In Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, Shunryu Suzuki Roshi spoke of his training. “I discovered that it is necessary, absolutely necessary, to believe in nothing. That is, we have to believe in something that has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear” (p. 112). Along the same line, Lao Tzu, the founder of Taoism, wrote, “In the beginning of heaven and earth, there were no words. Words came out of the womb of matter.” In other words, Reality 2 appeared later than Reality 1 and
hence is different from Reality 1.

Forms and colors, to use Suzuki’s phrase, came later. Forms and colors exist in human heads and are described in words and other graphic (human-generated) symbols. If we want to get closer to Reality 1, we have to get behind the veil or shield or filter of symbols. We have to turn our world upside down. We have to give primacy to Reality 1 instead of to Reality 2. When a seeker after enlightenment sits in contemplation of the sand garden at Ryoanji and starts to talk, the roshi may yell, “Kwatz!” For perhaps the same reason, another sage would advise, “Don’t just do something, stand there,” or Alfred Korzybski would shout, “Shut up!”

Perhaps Zen enlightenment and Korzybskian consciousness of abstracting have a similar basis and a similar outcome. If I must use words—as I must in the present circumstances—I safeguard myself by being aware that I’m describing Reality 2, my picture of the world. When I’m engaged in transacting with the world in a situation that does not require the use of words, I can get closer to what I’m transacting with if I can shut up, both outwardly and inwardly. Short-circuiting Reality 2 may enable me to feel more a part of the web of life. The resulting ecological feel corresponds to what Lao Tzu may have had in mind when he wrote, “The sanest man lays down no law [Reality 2], takes everything that happens [Reality 1] as it comes, as something to animate, not to appropriate.”