A TANGIBLY INTANGIBLE JOURNEY:
Experiential Learning via Zen Philosophy & General Semantics

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A Cup of Tea

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era (1868-1912), received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor’s cup full, and then kept on pouring.

The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. “It is overfull. No more will go in!”

“Like this cup,” Nan-in said, “you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?”

(Reps & Senzaki, 1994, p.7)

This type of short story can be labeled in a number of different ways — koan, parable, metaphor, anecdote, narrative, allegory — to name a few. What one chooses to call it is irrelevant as long as the tale provokes thought. In fact, the words themselves are “meaningless”; the message they convey is what matters. The proposal that “meaning is the message” is as relevant to general semantics as it is to the study of Zen philosophy. After deep introspection, this

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insight provoked me to alter my approach to teaching and learning. That’s what this article is about.

Take a moment to “empty your cup;” set aside the luggage of symbolism and preconception and allow yourself to experience teaching and learning in a new light, as a process whose means and ends are one and the same. First, a brief description of the indescribable is in order, a comparison of Zen and general semantics.

Uncommon Common Ground

Mime Marcel Marceau, master communicator sans words, once posed a thought-provoking question, “Do not the most moving moments of our lives find us without words?” To those cognizant of the fact that Zen and general semantics must be experienced in order to be understood, a definition cluttered with words and subjected to over-interpretation is not helpful. However, in a literal and figurative sense, a grey area exists where Zen and general semantics affably co-exist, uncommon common ground where distinctions between the two are imperceptible. Perhaps when all is done and said, you too will be left speechless.

Zen is spontaneity in living. To look at the world as the Japanese master Nan-in suggests, without allowing thoughts to obscure the view, one must remain passive and ignore the natural urge to interpret using symbols and labels. Like thoughts, words tend to get in the way. Without them, birds are not birds, trees are no longer trees, nor are clouds called clouds, etc. Each entity is what it is at a precise moment, and that is all. One must see them for the first time, like a child, and view action with no expectations. The old adages “actions speak louder than words” and “words cannot express” assume new meaning in this context. That is the essence of Zen and the realization to which students of general semantics aspire.

General semantics looks at “language-as-behavior” and takes into consideration how language is used in relation to its influence on people. Furthermore, general semantics is the study of how we perceive, construct, evaluate, and communicate our life experiences. (Institute of General Semantics, 2005) Perception occurs through and is limited by the five senses, and “knowing” is limited by our awareness and memory of previous experience. (Hipkiss, 1995) As in Zen, words, as symbols of reality, can get in the way because true understanding is beyond words; enlightenment defies description because language is too restrictive to relate the experience.

To clarify the connection between Zen and general semantics, consider the example of driving a car over a familiar route, say to or from work. Directions
are not the only things committed to memory regarding this daily trip. Every bump, speed limit and pothole is also recorded. The driver may be preoccupied with pressing thoughts, listening intently to the radio, or even be engaged in conversation with a passenger. Still, without concentrating, one remains conscious of one’s surroundings and normally navigates the road flawlessly. Adjustments, from slowing to deliberate turns of the wheel are automatically made, without thinking, one might say. Each unconscious action occurs routinely, without fail, precisely when required. Although difficult to put into words, this occurrence is understood by those who have experienced it. Within this area of non-verbal experience, vague familiarity, or “second nature” — call it what you will — Zen and general semantics thrive.

Experiential Learning

My inquisitive nature coupled with an innate desire to learn led me to eagerly partake of general semantics, under circumstances analogous to this description from the Institute of General Semantics.

Perhaps it’s fair to say that many people ‘find’ general semantics out of a sense that their formal — and informal — educations have not completely prepared them for adjusting to the dynamics of a rapidly-changing world. In fact, many would say that they’ve felt a keen sense of having to unlearn much of what they’ve grown to ‘know’ as they learn from their own life experiences.

(Institute of General Semantics, 2005)

Once acquainted with Zen and general semantics, I was hooked, captivated by conceptualizations and techniques espoused by each philosophy, especially koans and the variety of interpretations their language elicits. Koans are invigorating because they force one to higher levels of inquiry and critical analysis. Best of all, answers are not always forthcoming, at times leaving uncertainty as the only viable solution. (More about koans later.)

Of course, words are the most practical method of communication. But language is a powerful force the use of which has intended and unintended consequences. My purpose is to make one wary of the power that we give to language. Too often, we become victims of the language trap, where words are deemed more significant than what they represent. Learning becomes detached from meaningful experiences, which are typically lost in the shuffle. This trend is especially true in education — where quantity is habitually stressed over quality, and textbooks, lectures, and relentless testing still hold sway — antiquated traditions that I am determined to modify in my own teaching.
After recognizing the associations between Zen philosophy and general semantics, I concluded that bringing aspects of each discipline into my teaching style would make me a more effective educator. I wanted to give students a chance to excel in a unique learning environment, one full of possibilities unfettered by formal educational constraints. Therefore, I endeavored to create conditions that were conducive to experiential learning. Students responded enthusiastically! Details about how this was accomplished are outlined in this article.

**Hands-on, Minds-on Learning**

In order to spark and sustain their interest, I invite my students to “practice what we preach” as often as possible. Likewise, they are encouraged to ask questions and conduct further explorations. My teaching methodologies are structured around central tenets once commonly referred to as the Socratic method and the “learn-by-doing” approach. Although the premise is similar, I’ve combined and repackaged these educational practices under an updated moniker: **Hands-on, Minds-on Learning**. [See also the April 2005 *ETC.*] Mutual respect and high expectations are the norm in this highly-charged atmosphere of discovery. When these conditions are realized, motivation dramatically rises and compelling experiences abound, many with lifelong repercussions.

For students and teacher alike, entry into this sphere of learning is a welcome change from the rigors of traditional educational practices. For that reason, I feel excited to share elements of an Asian unit I’ve developed and honed throughout my teaching tenure, particularly its Sino-Japanese components. My enthusiasm stems from the fact that this unit prompted for me an educational epiphany, and forever transformed teaching and learning practices in my classroom.

**Metaphorical Pathways**

In each phase of the Asian unit we walk metaphorical pathways, roaming between concrete and abstract concepts; students must think “inside and out-side the cranium” on a variety of mental planes. In this case, metaphors, begging the pardon of grammarians, are “anything that transfers and translates the abstract into the concrete, thus making the abstract more accessible and memorable.” (Best, 1984, p.165) When engaged in this mode of transference, students find their comfort levels challenged and they are nudged to new cognitive possibilities.
Once the “basics” about Chinese and Japanese cultures have been taught, students are ready for the “real experience” to begin. A wide spectrum of Sino-Japanese cultural staples, from tangrams and origami to calligraphy and haiku to Zen koans and meditation, are introduced in three phases and examined through unique means. A combination of extraordinary student interest and overwhelming positive feedback has propelled these six areas to the forefront of the Asian unit.

Just as traditional cultural practices span cultures and time, so too do they spill into different subject areas, including but not limited to philosophy, art, mathematics, language arts, world history, psychology, and sociology. Each realm of study offers material and activities that are useful to educators and pupils. As with any task, some students find certain phases more difficult than others, but I believe that everyone benefits from the experiential learning prevalent in the Asian unit. Two historical traditions native to Asia, tangrams and origami, promote critical creativity by engaging practitioners in thoughtful hands-on manipulation. As our tangibly intangible journey unfolds, pieces of the puzzle begin to fall into place.

**Phase One**

**Tangrams**

A tangram is a Chinese puzzle made by cutting a square-shaped paper or cardboard into seven distinct pieces, or tans. Tans are of the following shapes: a rhomboid, five triangles of various sizes, and a square. I suggest the pieces be laminated for repeated usage. To complete puzzles, students must recombine all seven tans to form specific figures. Through trial and error, they arrange tans until a figure, such as a cat or tree, is replicated. Students may even try to recreate the original tangram square, which can be tricky.

Taking it to the next step, the students are challenged to form specific objects or animals based on their own volition, without the aid of patterns. Comparisons of the results often lead to interesting discussions about the myriad ways objects can be depicted in both abstract and concrete formations. This lesson works as an individual or group assignment.

**Origami**

Origami is a type of sculptural representation defined primarily by the folding of a medium, usually paper. *Oru* means “to fold” and *kami* refers to “paper.” With every fold, two-dimensional pieces of paper are transformed into
three-dimensional objects. Whether moveable or stationary, intricate configurations ranging from birds with flapping wings to sailboats that float can be constructed in this art form. Teachers, provide explicit instructions based on student needs; some figures have complicated patterns and are extremely difficult to reproduce. We begin with templates that are easier to assemble; students should work at a pace that allows them to steadily progress toward more difficult origami projects. The old adage “practice makes perfect” is appropriate for this exercise.

**Critical Creativity**

At all ability levels, the above ancient traditions represent a practical marriage of mind and hand by offering challenging learning activities that engender discovery. We can also relate mathematical principles to the numerous geometric shapes produced with tangrams and the three-dimensional figures found in origami. Shapes and forms made from arranging tangram puzzles and the folding of paper sculptures enhance spatial visualization skills and tap into numerous geometric concepts such as ratios, proportions, congruence, similarity, and symmetry. In this manner, connecting students to history via mathematics assures both subject areas are viewed in multi-faceted ways. Patterns for both activities are available on the internet and can be found in guides sold at bookstores. Tangram and origami artistic creations might even be used as physical representations of poems, both abstract and concrete, composed in Phase Two of the Asian unit. Enjoy superb imagery as we tangibly wend our way through the intangible realm of haiku.

**Phase Two**

**Haiku**

Haiku is the shortest form of poetry known in world literature, but its three little lines of 5-7-5 syllables are capable of expressing deep feeling and sudden flashes of intuition. There is no symbolism in haiku. It catches life as it flows. There is no egotism either; haiku is practically authorless. But in its preoccupation with the simple, seemingly trivial stuff of everyday life — a falling leaf, snow, a fly — haiku shows us how to see into the life of things and gain a glimpse of enlightenment. (Schiller, 1994, p.140)

When students, or anyone for that matter, write haiku, they come to appreciate how challenging it is to compose meaningful expressions in such a limited amount of space. That is the essence, the Yin and Yang of haiku. The very syllabic restrictions that make it so difficult to create are the impetus for some
of the most beautiful poetry ever written. That is why one only truly appreciates the craft by writing in the genre.

Fortunately, even those reticent about poetry, be it student or teacher, are willing to give haiku a try. Best of all, once students realize they can do it, they keep on writing, composing poem after poem. Below, haiku penned by a few of these student poets offer their own “glimpse of enlightenment.” In the spirit of Schiller’s remarks about egotism, the authors will remain anonymous.

Choice
Butterfly pauses
Considers alternatives
Settles on zephyr

Raindrops
each sense is caressed
the soul is immersed in peace
life is replenished

After the Storm
Splashed across the sky
Watercolor masterpiece
A bow of hope reigns

Dawn
Delicate fern stirs
Fronds bathed in early morn dew
Curled tendrils unfurl

When it comes to haiku, the experience is well worth the effort and it yields wonderful results. These poems “capture the moment” and evoke vibrant images of distinctive features in nature. Each verse “paints a picture,” and transports the reader to a minds-eye viewpoint. Therein lies the beauty of haiku.

Encourage students to read their poems aloud. Vocal nuances coupled with carefully planned pauses infuse even more meaning into these shared expressions. Finally, provide students with the opportunity to write their poems in calligraphy, another ancient practice that offers keen insight into Sino-Japanese cultures.

Calligraphy

Perhaps the foremost art form of China and Japan, calligraphy combines skill and imagination in “painted” expressions. The Japanese call it shodo, meaning “the way/path of writing.” Ideograms, characters representing ideas or words, are used in conjunction with symbols that correspond to letters. To actual calligraphers, the first brush stroke is the final brush stroke; in fact, it is believed that written words actually acquire the character of their composer. Calligraphy utilizes the artistic concept of “empty space.” Certain areas of compositions are intentionally left untouched to complement what is written. There are many websites related to Chinese and Japanese calligraphy. Two that provide assistance with scripts are:
Extremely complicated systems of calligraphy have evolved over the centuries, so educators are advised to keep this lesson simple. Suggested materials include rice paper, India ink, brushes, and patience. As this lesson unfolds, students will make mistakes and work at a snail’s pace, exactly as novice calligraphers do. However, through meticulous repeated applications of brush to paper, concepts conceived in the mind will materialize on paper. Once again, practice makes perfect. Often, the care taken in writing haiku is reflected in this artistic process. Some rudimentary guidelines include:

- Vary the line thickness and thinness
- Make straight lines strong and clear, curved lines delicate and mobile
- Be consistent regarding the amount of ink applied with the brush
- Maintain a natural balance within each character and in the overall composition
- No alterations or “touch ups” are permitted

**Layer of Authenticity**

Composing haiku in authentic Japanese and/or Chinese calligraphy characters adds a layer of authenticity to the Asian unit. Participants acquire knowledge at their own pace, which enables them to make connections on their own terms with cultures considered less foreign than before.

This lesson, taught in a world history class, has numerous cross-curricular ties to language arts and art classes. As we venture further, similar interdisciplinary opportunities await. The most compelling phase of our tangibly intangible journey finds students pushing the limits of understanding in the surreal world of Zen koans and meditation.

**Phase Three**

**Zen Koans**

One of the most tantalizing lessons I teach is centered on Zen. As explained earlier, this is a concept not easily defined, one that is abstract and concrete, frustrating yet delightful, perplexing and enlightening all at once. When students ask what Zen is, I share the following story:
A fish went to a queen fish and asked: “I have always heard about the sea, but what is this sea? Where is it?”

The queen fish explained: “You live, move, and have your being in the sea. The sea is within you and without you, and you are made of sea, and you will end in sea. The sea surrounds you as your own being.”

(Reps & Senzaki, 1994, pp.284-285)

Once student appetites have been whetted, I explain that there is no clear-cut definition for me to spoon-feed them. The challenge of Zen is to observe what has always been looked at and see it for the first time. Zen happens, and though omnipresent, must be sought in order to be experienced. The answer then to the query “What is Zen?” lies within each individual, patiently waiting to be discovered.

Details about the origin and philosophical principles inherent to Zen are presented and discussed in the context of other Asian traditions we have studied. Students are provided with some fundamental principles, such as Zen’s symbiotic relationship with nature and the definition of a koan. Essentially, koans are “cases” solved through profound contemplation; they are designed to immerse individuals in thought, and thus help them become conscious of the ultimate reality.

Next, a packet of Zen Expressions full of short stories, quotes, koans, proverbs, and maxims is distributed to the students. Each expression, and there are well over 200, will be read aloud, pondered, and speculated upon by the class. At this juncture, students are introduced to Hutchinson’s Strategy of Inquiry, a set of guidelines designed to ensure successful analyses.

- There are no incorrect responses; share your thoughts; all opinions are important
- Be open minded and flexible; agree to disagree; listen to every interpretation
- Accept the fact that you will not understand each expression; if you don’t get it, that’s all right; give the words time to sink in
- Make connections; whenever possible, relate expressions to personal experiences
- Decide which interpretation makes the most sense to you
- Meanings change as you mature
“If students can think of a way to personalize an unfamiliar proverb, then they can understand the metaphor and perhaps glean some knowledge of the culture.” (Pugh, Hicks & Davis, 1997, p.125) That’s my goal. Once it is accomplished, the resulting conversations are always phenomenal, full of astute observations and surprises. I can honestly say that the most intellectually stimulating discussions I have had with sophomores were centered on Zen-inspired topics. And you never know who will “get it” and who won’t, as some are more perceptive than others when it comes to interpretation. What’s great about studying Zen is that aptitude levels are insignificant; all participants are welcome. Zen-related expressions can be found in a vast array of books and websites devoted to the ancient practice. The following samples demonstrate how ancient prose blends seamlessly with modern passages.

**Short Koans**

What is the color of wind?

What is the sound of one hand clapping?

**Longer Koan**

Two monks were arguing about the temple flag waving in the wind. One said, “The flag moves.” The other said, “The wind moves.” They argued back and forth but could not agree. Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, said: “Gentlemen! It is not the flag that moves. It is not the wind that moves. It is your mind that moves.” The two monks were struck with awe.

**Quotes & Sayings**

We shape clay into a pot, but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want. —Tao Te Ching

The map is not the territory. —Alfred Korzybski

What happens to the hole when the cheese is gone? —Bertolt Brecht

Be master of mind rather than mastered by mind. —Anonymous

Wisdom is like a mass of fire — it cannot be entered from any side. Wisdom is like a clear cool pool — it can be entered from any side. —Nagarjuna

One of the most intriguing aspects of Zen is the Yin-Yang effect, or tension of opposites, as depicted in Nagarjuna’s expressions about acquiring wisdom. So often, what I refer to as “anti-koans” refute what other koans impart. Whether written as advice or as deliberate attempts to incite critical analysis, “anti-koans”
force one to consider divergent possibilities, and thereby foster enlightenment as “cases” are resolved.

After the expressions have been scrutinized, students pair up and complete the following assignments:

1. Write a koan.
2. Compose a short story whose moral relates to a Zen proverb.
3. Compare and contrast Zen expressions; identify three sets with opposite connotations, (koans & “anti-koans”).

As the conversation moves onto paper, students continue working in the spheres of synthesis and evaluation in Bloom’s Taxonomy. When finished, these novice Zen scholars are incredibly eager to share; enthusiasm remains high as students, transformed into teachers, learn from one another.

**Unforeseen Consequences**

As mentioned earlier, when it comes to Zen one never knows where discussions will lead. For instance, at first glance Brecht’s saying about the hole in the cheese may appear light-hearted. However, I won’t forget one student, Larry, who saw something more in this particular adage. Larry compared the cheese to his grandfather and the hole to the love between them. When his grandfather died all that remained was love, intangible yet real. Larry went further and compared his sorrow to “an invisible hole in my life that cannot be filled.” The reaction to this young man’s interpretation was stunned silence. For Larry, this metaphorical notion became “… a tool of insight. It provides … a perspective for comprehending something unknown by comparing it to familiar objects and experiences.” (Pugh, Hicks & Davis, 1997, p.18) I believe that his fellow classmates saw this “C” student in a different light after hearing his heartfelt interpretation.

In another example, three students were so enthralled with Zen philosophy that they co-authored an editorial column in the school newspaper called *Zen There, Done That*. In it, they wrote interesting koans, some serious, others humorous, which dealt with topics of concern to teenagers. Extremely popular, these articles sparked Zen-related school-wide deliberations each time the newspaper was published.

Those are just a few unforeseen consequences the Asian unit has generated. There are many more. Most assuredly, educators who incorporate Zen into their curriculum will appreciate all this timeless practice has to offer. The final leg of
our tangibly intangible excursion requires a stretch of the imagination, as we explore a mysterious state called meditation.

**Meditation**

Ultimately, the five senses are experienced in the “mind” or “consciousness.” Only when the senses are heightened can one connect with nature and appreciate all life has to offer. The purpose of meditation then, is to get in touch with the chi, or inner-self, by probing deep into the psyche. By awakening sensations and raising the level of inner-consciousness to its fullest, one can “mentally” control how the world is experienced.

We structure this phase with the following guidelines. Begin with a briefing on meditation. There are many different styles that can be practiced and just as many psychological profiles debating their effectiveness. Try to avoid this quagmire; a complete historical synopsis on meditation is not necessary. Remember, the main thrust of the Asian unit, especially in this phase, is to allow students to “feel” connections. Those desiring to learn more will do so following the meditative session. Numerous print and internet resources exist to aid in this endeavor.

A proper environment must be created in the classroom, one conducive to full relaxation and intense concentration. Arrange seats so plenty of space exists between them. Allow students to assume comfortable positions. Some may desire to sit or lie on the floor; let them. If at all possible, avoid peripheral noise; interruptions of any kind make meditation difficult. Soft lighting and soothing music create an ideal atmosphere. A student provided me with Zen-inspired instrumental melodies that are wonderfully effective. Sounds of nature, such as chirping birds or ocean waves can also be used, but students generally prefer gentle music.

Once a tranquil mood is established, begin reciting from the dialogue that follows. There are many versions of meditation scripts to choose from; this one was composed with my students in mind. Be sure to speak in calm deliberate tones, yet loud enough for your voice to be heard over the sound effects. While reading, ad-libs and significant pauses, denoted by commas and spaces, should be used to enhance the experience. Estimated time is 20 to 30 minutes.
Meditative Expressions Script

Assume a position of maximum comfort.
Close your eyes. Prepare for a journey, an odyssey within your essence.
Take deep breaths. Slowly inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale, in, out.
Scan your body for tension along this path to ultimate relaxation.
Start at your toes. Sense their existence, feel each point where they connect to your feet.
Allow your mind to become aware of the curves in each foot.
Slowly, move from the toes to the heels. Feel the pressures rise and disperse.
Turn the corner. Enter the realm of your lower legs.
Ankles become one with calf muscles.
Feel the bones within, the muscles gently pulsating. Relax, let the tension slip away.
Climb over the kneecaps and appreciate the contours of your patellas.
Let the spirit move into your thighs. Feel the sensation coursing through your blood.
Let any remaining tension melt away.
Surge upwards to where the lower half joins the upper portion of your body.
Remember to breathe in proper proportion to your journey. In, out, in, out, in, out.
Now focus on your fingertips. Sense their existence and feel the tingle within.
The gentle vibrations glide upwards, past your wrists, on a course destined to meet at your elbows.
Permit the biceps in your upper arms to relinquish their strength and lie at ease.
Navigate the subtle curves where arms connect to torso.
Become aware of your heart; tune in to the rhythm, allow your spirit to sense each throb as the organ pumps, the heartbeat beckons.
Allow the pulsation from the lower levels of your being to flow into the upper body’s current; the two are now one.
Feelings are now surging through your chest, fill your lungs with air, feel them expand; slowly release the air from your chest cavity.

The current courses upwards, flows through your neck and discovers your head.

Tingling sensations permeate the cranium, can be felt on the outer edges of your earlobes.

Move deeper inside. Taste your teeth with the tip of your tongue. Touch your cheeks from within.

Your lid-covered eyes now play a secondary role to your ears, which are tuned to serenity.

You have arrived, arrived at the center of all thought, reason, and feeling, the receptacle of knowledge, the fabric of your soul, the essence of your being.

Breath: in out, in, out, in, out, in, out.

Find peace in this aura of total relaxation.

Let your spirit go, traverse the follicles of each hair on your head.

Leave the ties that bind you to this earthly body behind.

Set your spirit free.

A Moving Force

Before students are debriefed, I ask them to record details of the experience while the sensations are still fresh in their minds. And then we talk. Each meditation session I have conducted has yielded impressive results. Several students report feelings of total relaxation and serenity. Others say they were cognizant of tingling sensations in their extremities while “traveling” to those parts of the body. Some confess to tuning my voice out completely, embarking instead upon a self-guided mental tour of their bodies.

Most students consider the experience transcendental, and believe they have achieved true awareness of their inner-consciousness to some extent. Also, a feeling of empowerment emanates from the discovery that thoughts can be controlled in this manner. Most agree meditation is a worthwhile endeavor and express interest in continuing the introspective practice. In the sense that “… an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and pur-
poses … every experience is a moving force.” (Dewey, 1938, p.38) Moving indeed, in every way possible.

Feel Their Essence

Without a doubt, concepts inherent to Zen and general semantics have had a positive influence in my classroom. An environment filled with challenges generates an atmosphere of discovery. When students consistently make relevant connections through diverse experiences, learning is more meaningful and longer lasting. These conditions are wonderfully met in the Asian unit.

Ancient cultural traditions “spring to life” and are better understood when students can “feel their essence” by practicing what is preached. Ultimately, this exploration of Sino-Japanese cultures cultivates appreciation, respect, and acceptance, not only for people, but for ideas too. These are lessons I am certain will endure for a lifetime.

Our tangibly intangible trek has been memorable. But remember Alfred Korzybski’s warning: “the map is not the territory.” Words contained in this article are meaningless in and of themselves. In order for their essence to be understood, the language must be put to the test. Hands-on, Minds-on Learning is the key. Try it! After all is done and said, experience is the best teacher.

REFERENCES


