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Zen and Management Education

by

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Abstract

Leadership and entrepreneurship professors routinely mention egolessness as a management virtue. Information technology companies use Zen imagery to tout the tranquility their solutions will engender. Lucent adopted the *enso* as its corporate logo. The vocabulary of Zen now pervades the Western business world. Is it a fad, or can Zen principles truly enhance management and management education? Which precepts of Zen are likely to lead to better management practice and which are not? Can *mushin*, the Zen aversion to over-intellectualization, be reconciled with the university's orientation to critical thinking? This paper calls on authoritative sources to answer these questions, and provides practical advice for inserting Zen concepts and exercises into MBA curricula.

Keywords: Zen, MBA, spirituality in management, managerial psychology, management education

*To achieve a certain kind of thing, you have to
become a certain kind of person. But then you will no
longer be attached to that thing.
Eihei Dogen (1200-1253)*

Introduction: Zen invades Western Management

Lucent adopted the *enso* (the ink-brushed Zen circle) as its corporate logo, and Vodaphone products sport a more stylized version of the same image. Information and communications technology companies use Zen imagery to tout the tranquility their solutions will engender, some even using "Zen" in product names.¹ Advertising firms (e.g., Commercial Zen, Inc., www.comzen.com) insert Zen in their corporate names, and Suzuki Corp. has named one of its cars the Zen.

Zen emphases on loosening the attachment to ego and on spontaneous action have found new proponents in the business world: Management professors have been quick to echo venture capitalists' maxim that egolessness is an

essential virtue for the entrepreneur, and Nike ads urge us "Just do it."

Thus does the moo of the cash cow echo the *mu* of Zen; the vocabulary of Zen now pervades the Western business world. The practices of Zen are beginning to do so as well. Conlin (2004) reports that meditation is now a common practice among executives, and is officially supported by an increasing number of corporate benefit and wellness plans.

The reasons for these phenomena make for intriguing speculation.² However, our priorities as educators are to distinguish the constructive contributions of Zen to management, to help students benefit from these, to prepare students to turn these contributions into better business practice, and to help students avoid the fuzzy thinking, cultural gaffes, and psychological risks that attend the misuse of Zen terminology and practices.

Zen and related meditative disciplines also present didactic tools that educators cannot in good conscience ignore. Conlin (op cit.) describes research at Harvard, Wisconsin, and the National Institutes of Health

confirming the formative effect of meditation on neural physiology. Conlin quotes Richard Davidson of the Wisconsin psychiatry faculty, who does experimental studies with Buddhist monks: “Modern neuroscience is showing that our minds are as plastic as our bodies. Meditation can help you train your mind in the same way exercise can train your body.”

This paper examines the nature of Zen (with special reference to Japanese Zen), the relation of Zen to management, and possible points of insertion of Zen into the management curriculum. It looks at the special teaching challenges implied by the unique experiential nature of Zen learning, and concludes with a summary of pros, cons, and cautions for making Zen a part of management education. It shows that Zen philosophy, practice and literature are relevant not only to b-school discussions of ethics and spirit, but can contribute valuable alternative perspectives to enrich discussions of a wide range of management topics.

The paper complements that of Weick and Putnam (2006), which emphasized *mindfulness* in the context of *organizational renewal*. Though both articles deal in part with questions of focus and distraction, this paper’s emphasis is on *attachment* and its impact on *the individual student and manager*.

Even before I can say it, it is no more.
Sengai

What is Zen?

The less said in answer to this question, the better; it is basic to Zen that a static verbal description is an insult to the fluid and ephemeral nature of the extensive world.

Zen stems from Buddhism, and is seen by some as the essential core of that tradition. Buddhism is based on “four noble truths”. These explain that human suffering is due to our attachment to attained, unattained, and unattainable things, and that suffering can be alleviated by overcoming these attachments. Guidance on how to do this is given in the “eightfold path”, which advises on thought, action, meditation, and compassion. These were realized and taught by Gautama Siddhartha, called the Buddha. (Buddha means “the one who woke up,” or “enlightened one”. These translations emphasize the increased awareness that results from meditation.) Zen especially focuses on meditation and action, the latter in the form of calligraphy, gardening, music, martial arts, and other pursuits that reflect the natural unfolding of reality.

Others maintain that there remains little formal connection between Zen and Buddhism. No less a Zen scholar than D.T. Suzuki (see Fowler 1999, p.158) remarked that, “Zen claims to be Buddhism, but all the Buddhist teachings are propounded in the sutras, and sutras are treated by Zen as mere waste paper, whose

utility consists in wiping off the dirt of intellect and nothing more.”

For limited purposes, one may think of Zen as a process of sitting still until one’s attachments go away. This is of interest for management because of the more effective action – and interaction – that a person without attachments is capable of.

*All people know this! When you strike a flowing river,
no trace remains in the water.*
Saigo Tanomo

Zen and Management

The following passage, involving the Zen master Takuan, the Japanese shogun Tokugawa Iemitsu, and master swordsman Yagyu Munenori, illustrates the relevance of Zen philosophy to politics, business, and decision making.

“I’ve followed the teachings of Takuan Soho,” answered Munenori, a reply that so struck Iemitsu that he... invited the priest to visit him in Edo in 1635. The shogun was intrigued with Zen as Takuan explained it to him. Because he was Munenori’s pupil and because Munenori was, in effect, a disciple of Takuan’s, Iemitsu the mighty shogun listened in humble silence while the priest and the swordsman talked. Zen is such a pragmatic school of thought that Takuan and Munenori could often include examples of how Zen philosophy could be applied to current politics and ordinary human affairs. On matters relating to taxation, military planning, or land use, Iemitsu benefited from the discussions of the two by learning to make the consistent, resolute decisions encouraged by the Zen mentality of the *bugeisha* [martial practitioners] and which were essential for the country to continue to prosper under his leadership (Lowry, 1985, p.127).

Medieval Japan was fertile ground for the growth of Zen, and many schools were founded. Taoist scholar Alan Watts (1957, p.104) mentions that this was the first time and place (except for a couple of short-lived earlier instances in China) that it was possible and necessary to train large numbers of young monks at one time. Two aspects of this required managerial skill: Handling the large numbers of students, and influencing Japanese society to maintain itself as a cordial environment for the transmission of Zen. Like organisms and their ecological niches, Watts says, Zen and Japanese society co-evolved. In practical terms, “co-evolution” implies lobbying, public relations, advertising and politicking—all managerial tasks—as well as teaching and mentoring.

Though Western religions are clearly associated with the management of institutions, the mass education of

students, and influence on surrounding economies and societies, Western stereotypes of Zen tend exclusively to focus on hermits meditating under mountain waterfalls.³ The above examples show that on the contrary, Zen is relevant to, and historically connected with, a wide range of management disciplines. More such connections will be noted later in this paper.

As for Zen meditation, Conlin (2004) notes that it “enhances the qualities companies need in their human capital.” She mentions intuition, concentration, and tolerance for stress. We may add learning to manage loosely (not compulsively micro-managing), and commitment to employee development.⁴

A striking impression can be gathered from the sumiye school of painting. The spirit of Zen is marvelously expressed. The painting is executed on paper so thin that the slightest hesitancy will cause it to tear. The strokes are swift and decisive. They are final and irrevocable, like a castrated steer. There can be no retouching. The objects are always embodiment of movement depicting the becomingness of nature and the free expression of the intuitive spirit.

R.G.H. Siu (1958, p.73)

Zen Adds Value to Selected Curricula

In an influential article, Andrews and Tyson (2004) report on interviews with one hundred executives from global companies. They conclude from these talks that MBA grads need to be more “aware,” and that “MBA education must become more action-oriented, but also must find ways to nurture integrity, judgment, and intuition—a seemingly contradictory mandate that schools must nevertheless learn to prosecute.” Zen in the curriculum helps students and teachers reach both these goals, and, as we will see below, deal effectively with their “seemingly contradictory” nature.

The following sections touch briefly on the benefits of a “Zen and Management” module (which may be just a single slide or short discussion) in each of several areas of the management curriculum.⁵

The... aim of Zen is not to make foolproof statements about experience, but to come to direct grips with reality without the mediation of logical verbalizing.

Thomas Merton, in Wu (1995, p.4)

Critical Thinking and Decision-Making

Every statement in this paper is false.

It is easy to pretend to profundity by saying something like this. Yet each of us has heard opposite admonitions from two good teachers, and found each of their lessons,

regardless of how contradictory, to be a valuable learning in its own context. Any teaching is false because it fails to capture reality in its fullness. Every good teaching is a window onto that reality. The house of learning has many windows, each offering a different view of the same garden of reality.

Western “paradoxes” like that of the Spanish barber (In a town in Spain, the barber shaves everyone who does not shave himself. Who shaves the barber?) invite logical analysis. It is quickly evident, however, that logic will be of no use in solving a Zen koan like “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” The student must strike out in a direction perpendicular to the linear logic. Admitting that logic is not the key to all paradoxes frees students from “analysis paralysis.” This is advantageous in business where, rather than remaining too long tangled in alternatives, a manager needs to go ahead and make a decision.

The West values both analytic thought⁶ and decisiveness. Western business educators aim to help students become better at analytical thinking, more able to influence groups, and able to efficiently restrict the incoming flow of information. A Zen perspective would emphasize the student’s ability to

- Balance rational, non-rational, mental and physical means of apprehension;
- Blend seamlessly into a group;
- Distinguish decisiveness from ego-driven assertiveness; and
- Exercise less, rather than more, discrimination in the kinds of information stimuli he or she absorbs.

A further word is in order about analysis, data, deliberation and goals in decision-making. Zen philosophy does not encourage recklessness and anti-intellectualism, nor does it condemn thinking, nor encourage us to be reactive instead of proactive. All the splendid literature and architecture of Zen could hardly have been created, not to mention sustained for two thousand years, by anti-intellectuals. They were, in fact, created and sustained by people who planned and analyzed. They did not plan and analyze compulsively. They knew the value of thinking, knew the value of not thinking, and enjoyed both without attachment to either.

The saying “Zen rejects nothing” admonishes managers not to refuse questionable input *a priori*. Making her mind a swinging door (as Shunryu Suzuki, 1970, phrased it) the manager should accept all data, experience and advice with equanimity, trusting her enlightened self to let the useless bits pass through and the useful remain. In this way, she brings her finest critical faculties to bear on well-informed, conscious decisions.

Thus the Zen contribution to critical thinking and decision-making involves tolerating ambiguity (indeed, being comfortable with paradox); decoupling decision from ego; similarly decoupling commitment to goals from attachment

to the goals⁷; and suspending judgment of incoming stimuli—while making decisions that show no “slightest hesitancy” (Siu, 1958, p.73) and reflect “the power of thinking without thinking” (Gladwell, 2005, cover).

Ethics and Governance

Those who think of a religion as a system of beliefs should know that Zen encourages no beliefs whatsoever, and in fact holds that any beliefs or fixed ideas clog up the free-flowing process of enlightenment through interaction with the world. Furthermore, Zen philosophy does not include ideas of good and evil. This fact shocks Westerners who are interested in Zen but bring to it, due to their religious upbringing, an admirable impulse to be good people. Zen can, nonetheless, lead to moral behavior in the sense such people would understand it. How can this be?

In *The Way of Zen* (1957, p.52), Alan Watts explained it beautifully. Grasping is the outward manifestation of attachment. Zen, says Watts, teaches us that grasping at wealth, certainty, or advantage is fruitless, and most of what we in the West regard as immoral—theft, slavery, murder, etc.—is the result of grasping behavior. (Business people will appreciate that they are not advised against having wealth or acquiring it—just against compulsively clutching at it.)

The Zen practitioner lives in the present, but also accepts *karma*. Karma simply means cause and effect. In the West we consider the disregard of consequences as the very definition of evil. The awareness, arising from *zazen*, of the connectedness of things makes the practitioner sensitive to causes and effects and loath to disregard them. Compassion, then, is not a moral imperative, but a simple reality stemming from our interconnectedness, an issue of mental health rather than morality.

Teachers and students can find the radical differences between this view of ethics and those customarily taught in Western MBA classes to be a rich topic of discussion.

International Business

The spread of Buddhism from Nepal and India to China, Korea, Japan and Southeast Asia—and later to the Americas—makes an interesting story of “international technology transfer” in a non-Western context. (*Acts of the Apostles* can be read as a wonderful marketing case describing a very parallel process in the West.) Recently business scholars (e.g., Zanakis, Theofanides et al., 2004) have advocated such historical views of business processes and decision-making modalities.

Though Japanese Zen is virtually identical to Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism, and has similarities to Mahayana practices elsewhere in Asia, joint discussion of Zen and international business is probably most useful in the context of Japan studies. Understanding Japanese decision-making (*nihonteki keiei*) requires a certain comfort with

paradox. The Japanese ideographic language is less denotative than alphabetic languages like English, and Zen instruction favors contradictory *koan* like “What was your face before your parents were born”? Zen and Japanese language are two of the historic forces that created the modern Japanese worldview, which is characterized by a higher tolerance for ambiguity than we have in the West.

Students often ask something like the following: “I just saw a movie that shows the Japanese doing such-and-such. But another teacher told me that thus-and-so (which contradicts such-and-such) is prevalent in Japan. Which is true?” Almost as often, the accurate answer is “both are true.” However, it can be more helpful to students to distinguish the Zen, Samurai, and Kaisha (Z, S, and K) cultures and suggest that some behaviors are more closely associated with one of these cultures than with another, although all three shape modern Japanese life.⁸

Understanding what is distinct about Zen culture will help graduates to grasp the melded nature of the three modern Japanese cultures, and hence to conduct business in Japan more effectively. See Figure 1.

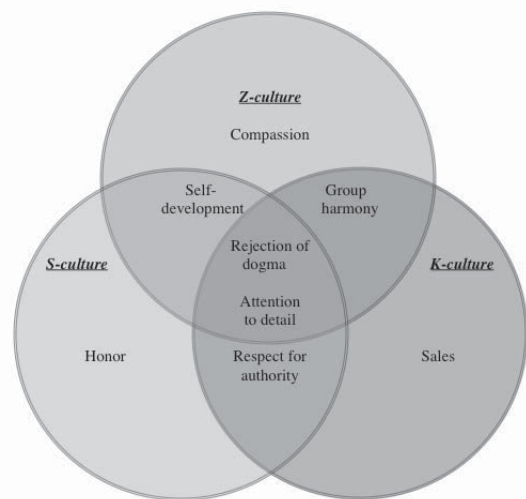


Figure 1. Some unique and shared characteristics of the three Japanese cultures

Though the three cultures overlap in some characteristics, and though they have influenced each other in historic feedback loops, they are distinct. The culture of the Japanese company (kaisha) features extreme rank-consciousness; the Z-culture does not. Nor does Zen embrace the blood vengeance that was accepted in S-culture. Traditional samurai, of course, disdained the merchant activity that characterizes today’s kaisha. The samurai, under the direction of their daimyo warlords, launched wars of aggression and engaged in assassination. The Z-culture, in contrast, taught never to harm another being except in the most dire self-defense situation.

In Figure 1, the characteristics shown as unique to each group imply additional, allied concepts. Zen compassion

signifies enlightenment and charity. Honor includes obligation, self-sacrifice, adherence to high standards, and even less attractive concepts like seppuku (ritual self-disembowelment). "Sales" signifies profits, market share, low-cost manufacturing, exports, and management practices. Respect for authority goes with loyalty to the daimyo and emperor.

*There is no other way but to meditate.
Sir Francis Bacon*

Managing Stress

Zen meditation changes the meditator's physiology, enabling him "to respond with equanimity to sources of stress. Meditation doesn't lobotomize meditators; it simply allows them to detach from their emotional reactions so they can respond appropriately" (Conlin, 2004).

Workplace stress has a dimension in social psychology as well as in physiological psychology. The etiquette of Zen practice speaks to the social psychology of stress, interpersonal harmony, and anger. One reason for rules of etiquette in Zen education is that Zen living has no rules. Living without pattern, premeditation, or rules requires great concentration. The manner in which students enter the zendo or classroom, or ask the instructor for help, is standardized so that fellow students are not distracted from their own training. (Needlessly distracting others is seen as egoistic exhibitionism.) In this way, etiquette and courtesy have great practical value.

A greater reason is that courtesy is the outward form of respect, and we hope to see students develop respect for the people they interact with. When we respect someone, we pay attention to his needs and wants, so that we can best accommodate them. As the Western phrase "to know him is to love him" implies, by paying attention and knowing our interlocutors, we come to feel compassion, and, if we are lucky, the universal love that is at the heart of all spiritual traditions. And surely, paying attention to customers' wants and needs is the essence of marketing.⁹

Some modern CEOs have legendary tempers. Apple employees call Steve Jobs' blowups "Stevetrums." The press says former Hewlett-Packard President Lew Platt didn't hesitate to loudly dramatize his irritation at bad performance. Considering what such CEOs are paid per minute, and the negative effect of their anger on morale, stockholders may well ask whether they're getting a positive return on their investments in executive tantrums. Vosburgh (1999) reports a 1996 survey finding that a quarter of U.S. employees are at least somewhat angry at work on a continuing basis. She mentions the cost of this, not just in lives, but in multi-million dollar court awards, personnel turnover, workers' compensation claims, and reduced productivity.

The news is replete with reports of murderous day traders and postal workers. In Medford, Oregon, a 27-year-old jobless man with an MBA blamed his college degree for

his murder of three people (Chi, 1995, p.4). "There are too many business grads out there," he said. "If I had chosen another field, all this may not have happened." Each such news item shows the result of cherishing anger until anger takes over, explodes, and harms more than one person.

A classroom analysis using Zen principles of ego and non-attachment would conclude that while feeling anger is not a problem, being possessed by anger is a problem, and an avoidable one. Talking to an employee about her temper has legal implications for the employer. Zen expertise can augment a firm's legal expertise by helping managers help the angry person see her ego involvement in the situation. This can defuse the anger or even turn anger into laughter. It helps employees keep their own egos out of the interaction; when one has nothing to prove and nothing to defend, one cannot be provoked. (A similar approach can improve the employee assessment/review process, which is often polluted by the manager/reviewer's own problems with ego maintenance.)

*Everything the same; everything distinct.
Zen proverb*

Creativity

Often, corporate (or classroom) culture manifests itself as a communal belief that some course of action is impossible. Many of the impressive mind-body effects practiced in Zen are quite simple but outside the experience of the majority. It is easy in a classroom to get a student opinion leader to state that a given task can't be done. In one of my own classroom demonstrations, if there is someone in the class built like a football lineman, I'll ask him to hunker down in a defensive posture. I then ask the opinion leader to move the athlete by pushing on his shoulder. Usually, the student can't do it. Other students, if they can be persuaded to try, will also certainly fail to do it. To finish the demonstration, I show that it can be done easily. To persuade the students that there was no "cheating," I teach them to do it too. The students take the point that business opportunities are missed if we too easily accept the social consensus that an action is impossible.

Tatsuno (1991) ventures that Zen precepts and practice can lead business people to greater creativity. Creativity is a necessary precursor to continued industrial innovation. Zen principles promote creativity by giving practitioners insight into and control over the social and psychological habits that can prevent a direct, spontaneous and creative response to a situation or problem.

Because creative generation of alternatives is a necessary precursor to making a decision (the cutting away of all but one alternative), the creativity module ideally precedes the critical thinking and decision-making module. The Zen approach to creativity aims to free the mind from the constraints of disciplinary boundaries, cultural assumptions, and one's own prior habits.

Negotiation

Gresser's (1996) method of Zen negotiation involves listening to one's body. Different parts of the body are sensitive barometers of fear and other emotions. By thinking of various aspects of the negotiation situation and "listening to the belly"¹⁰ throughout, the negotiator can identify what's really bothersome about the progress of the negotiation, isolate it, and work on his attachment to it, deciding whether it is essential to the negotiated outcome or a dispensable point.

One eminent teacher of Zen martial art describes his style in this way: If your attacker says "North!" you don't say "South!" You say, "Yes, I see why you think north is so nice. Now have you ever tried south?"¹¹ This is not just a metaphor for physical technique, but suggests a "verbal judo" that is effective in negotiation and conflict management in the business world.

Samurai during [Japan's] warring stage were in daily contact with questions of life and death, of intention and concentration. They saw in the meditative discipline of monks a kind of dynamic calm and courage that they needed as soldiers. Monks, also, saw in the warriors the same intense energy and single-minded commitment that was necessary for their own spiritual training. Through their interchange, the martial arts in time became viewed as potential tools for spiritual development; they became known as Budo, martial ways.
Fumio Toyoda

Change Management and Managerial Psychology

A typically blunt Zen master would assert that fear of change is a symptom of exaggerated and misplaced attachment to a status quo, and that fear of small changes is a deliberate mechanism for distracting oneself from a bigger fear, the fear of facing one's own death.

Human living things have a unique plasticity, an extreme ability to adapt our knowledge, attitudes, body, brain, and capabilities. We prove it by occupying more ecological niches—caves to condos, cattle ranches to corporate cubicles, and Sahara to South Pole—than any other higher organism. As examples earlier in this paper have shown, it is not even necessary to move to a new environment; we can change our own neural connections and biochemistry simply by choosing to do so. To be human is to choose to be better or worse, and then to go ahead and change for the better or change for the worse.

We sympathize with those who fear adapting to a new job, or fear using new equipment on the job. We wonder who could have molded such fearful people, and why. A Zen perspective on change management forces a question rarely seen in the literature, namely, what kind of management causes employees to fear change more than they fear numbing changelessness?

In an MBA class I asked, "Is fear of change fear of death, in disguise"? The very idea made most of the class uncomfortable. Nervous laughter rippled across the room. Clearly the Zen view of change management is a subject best approached with great caution and tact. Nonetheless, it leads to very useful discussion opportunities:

- A downsized executive goes to an outplacement consultant, who counsels him on the stages of grief, as if downsizing were a death sentence. In the Zen view, this is precisely wrong. A chance to change is a chance to live.
- An executive's denial of her own mortality is a principal obstacle to succession planning in the firm. Loosening her attachment to a controlling role will enable the executive to give a less-experienced apprentice a chance to succeed or fail independently.
- Still another executive has never developed interests outside the office, and he has not come to grips with his mortality. As a result, he is hanging on long after he should let go. He identifies himself with his job. As retirement looms, he panics because he understands he doesn't know who he is. His business decisions, previously often brilliant, are now entwined with ego maintenance, and they suffer in quality. He snipes at co-workers and subordinates, and increasingly says "I..." when he used to say "This company..." Zen psychology diagnoses this executive as showing attachment to a false sense of his identity, and prescribes contemplative work on his attachments.

Cross-Disciplinary and Multiple-Perspective Projects

Mitroff and Linstone (1995) advocate using "multiple perspectives" to solve management problems. The title of their book, *The Unbounded Mind*, suggests the Zen view of non-attachment to specific perspectives. An anecdote will illustrate the benefit of non-attachment to disciplinary boundaries.

In the 1980s, I was employed in industry. Company software developers called on my research department to solve a problem in computer graphics. We had to use methods of trigonometry, analytic geometry, and plane geometry to find the pixel coordinates of the desired screen images. The software developers, both mathematics Ph.D.s, were surprised that we found a solution. "We tried to do it all analytically," they said—whatever that means! The tools needed to solve it were simple, but the trick lay in combining several tools and methods. The developers had been trained in, and got stuck in, a single methodology, crimping their ability to solve problems.

Non-attachment to techniques and perspectives implies at least two lessons worth bringing home to students:

- Business schools teach certain techniques. But the student is still a human being. She has access to

those techniques, but also to her artistic, rhetorical, analytical, athletic, research, and interpersonal talents. The awakened manager does not define herself by a menu of professional tools. She feels free to draw on any of her human talents to solve whatever problem is at hand.

- As the business world continues to increase in complexity, the Zen manager will feel comfortable assembling cross-functional teams to address complex problems, unafraid of embarrassing revelations of his ignorance and unafraid of sharing credit for success.

Other Curriculum Areas

The above is not an exhaustive list of possible insertion points. Others include:

- Zen and environmental management (see Phillips, 2003, pp.111-114).
- The Buddhist concept of *sangha*, the community of like-minded seekers, is pertinent to modern team-building and social networking techniques.

In their efforts to pass beyond the intellect, the Zen Buddhists have emphasized the experience of the moment. Deliberation should not be permitted to interfere with the immediacy of the response. Just as the sound does not wait to issue forth when the bell is struck, man should develop that consciousness of mind that focuses infinite experience into instant intuition. The spontaneity of reaction is stressed continuously by the Zen master to his disciples. In the art of fencing the counter movements must be made without slow logic or hesitant reasoning. The intuition springs forth as a wordless and thoughtless message translated into integrated and immediate action.

R.G.H. Siu (1958, p.73)

Zen in Management Education

We now move from particular course topics to a broader discussion of teaching and learning Zen management concepts and skills, and their benefits for the total management curriculum.

Modes of Teaching: Experiential vs. Literary

The word “application” reveals the fundamentally deductive orientation of Western learning. Application is the putting into practice of a theory or idea. The understanding of the idea comes first. This is the antithesis of the Zen view of education, which starts with practice, and in which understanding arises from long practice.

There are two possible ways to study Zen in Western business schools. The first, to read sutra, doctrine and

commentary, will be the most comfortable for professors not trained in Zen. The second way, involving experiential learning, requires a teacher who has had long training in Zen. There are no shortcuts, and a weekend workshop will not prepare a professor to teach experiential Zen.¹² In most cases, then, the experiential option involves inviting qualified guest speakers to visit the class.

The good news is that the classic Zen experiential learning cycle (SHOW the technique; allow the student to TRY the technique; CORRECT the student’s mistakes [or respond to the student in a way that gets him “unstuck” from an unproductive mindset]; allow the student to PRACTICE the technique at length; REPEAT) is engaging for the student and results in excellent retention.

Intellectualization

Zazen leads to “no-mind” (*mushin*). The common meaning of the word *meditation* is contemplation, e.g., contemplating a work of art, or the grandeur and mystery of the universe. Zazen is not contemplation, and so, zazen is not meditation.¹³ It is not even introspection. Zazen is *just sitting*.

Zazen does not involve contemplating nothingness. Zazen is less than contemplation, and more. Based on the cumulative evidence of thousands of person-years of zazen practice, it can be predicted that eventually the practitioner will experience not thinking about anything. This aspect of *mushin*—accepting sensory input without judging, classifying, analyzing, arguing, over-reacting, attaching, or getting distracted—is a liberating feeling, and a powerful tool for seeing one’s attachments clearly and for quickly cutting to the essence of a decision situation.

As one sits, thoughts come and go. They should be allowed to come and go. Thoughts have no mass, and unless put into action, no force. So thoughts cannot “carry one away.” When he realizes they cannot, the Zen practitioner has begun to develop the strong *center* that the twentieth-century Zen master Shunryu Suzuki (1970) likened to a swinging door that remains in one place while letting thoughts pass.

Guilt about one’s thoughts is pointless. There is harm only when one is the prisoner of his destructive thoughts. By cultivating the swinging door, the practitioner makes sure he is never the slave of his thoughts.

The practitioner will find that awareness and focus grow from just sitting.

Thus, too much intellectualization retards the expansion of awareness, even while expanded awareness becomes a powerful mechanism for managing the intellect.

Zen and Learning: Development of the Student

When the era of the daimyo ended, the *ronin*—samurai without sworn masters, underemployed or unemployed and penniless—faced philosophic as well as economic

distress. Former U.S. Ambassador to Japan Edwin O. Reischauer writes:

Another great transition in early seventeenth century Japan was in the nature of leadership. With peace restored and major warfare at an end, the dominant warrior class found that military prowess was less essential to successful rule than administrative talents.... Disciplined self-control and education in a society at peace was becoming more important than skill at warfare. (Yoshikawa, 1995, p. xv)

In a process much like today's re-schooling of laid-off workers in the U.S., Reischauer notes, many samurai undertook a deliberate self-transformation in order to master the new imperatives. The effects of this historic event are still seen in Japan's educated and flexible corps of workers and managers.

Students will benefit from discussing how the discipline and non-attachment of the samurai facilitated this self-transformation, and how these might apply to their own lives. Discussion can be extended to other areas of self-development and career development:

- *Efficiency and discrimination vs. no-mind and non-attachment.* Zen teachers note that beliefs are fixed ideas that will go away as a result of Zen practice. Yet it is inefficient in management to operate without at least provisional beliefs, i.e., to have to reconfirm everything one reads or hears. We tend to assign levels of reliability to different information sources. The main thing, from the Zen perspective, is to be aware that we are playing the probabilities, and not to grasp at certainties that do not exist.
- *Success vs. excellence.* Leonard addresses the difference between success and excellence (Leonard, 1991, pp.xi-xii; see also Boswell, 1990), warning against "the prevailing bottom-line mentality that puts quick, easy results ahead of long-term dedication to the journey itself." According to Leonard, success is characterized by a climactic moment. Its pursuit can lead only to an addiction to bigger and better climaxes. Mastery, in contrast, is a never-ending process with many plateaux and local peaks, but no climax or terminus. The path of mastery is goal-less, and so eliminates the tension between means and ends. There are no ends in an endless process, and means can only be defined in terms of ends. Therefore, mastery implies a concentration on the process itself; a Zen-like experience of the moment, that leads to learning and self-discipline. Leonard applies the Zen saying, "When you get to the top of the mountain, keep climbing," to managerial and personal growth. Students should examine and discuss their attachment to the climactic moment of success.
- *Integrity.* "Wear a lot of hats"? complained the over-

tasked manager, "I have to wear a lot of *faces*. And I hate it. I wish I could be the same person at work, at home, and with friends. I want my life to be all one piece, not a lot of fragments working against each other. How can I make choices and decisions without feeling torn"? How can one integrate the values of Zen—physicality¹⁴, the reality of life and death, the imperative for sincerity and generosity—with the suit-and-tie pursuit of advantage in the business world? Parts of the answer have to do with living in the moment, without attachment to might-have-beens, and with loosened attachments to the large and small rewards that might lead to sacrificing work for family or vice versa.

· *Happiness.* Cutting away attachments does not turn one into an unfeeling robot. On the contrary, because the ego is an imaginary wall between our "individuality" and our fellow humans, loosing the attachment to one's own ego enables a more selfless love for others. Advanced practitioners of Zen may have attachments, but these are deliberate and not compulsive.

Sheldon, Elliott, Kim and Kasser (2001) showed that it is not money, popularity or luxury that makes people happiest. Instead, feelings of autonomy ("feeling your activities are self-chosen and self-endorsed"), competence ("feeling you are effective in your actions"), relatedness ("a sense of closeness with others"), and self-esteem are the greatest contributors to happiness (Sheldon et al., 2001 p.36). Zen is one (certainly not the only) clear path to autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The Zen perception of non-separation between oneself and the rest of creation can be a rich source of self-esteem.

· *Self-knowledge.* It has been wisely noted that in business negotiations and crises, the participant who knows himself will prevail. Zen provides ample opportunity to wonder, "Who am I?" Some students define their identity in terms of doing ("I play music," or "I sell computers.") Others define themselves by what they experience; sensory input is essential to their identity, and the TV is always on. Artists define themselves in terms of their creations, and hypochondriacs in terms of their ailments. Still others define themselves by their family relationships, their hometown, or their tribal affiliation.

Zazen takes the student/manager away from the doing and experiencing modes, and causes her to examine how central these things really are to her identity. Only the individual can know what is essential to her selfhood. As she cannot recognize the essential while clinging to the non-essentials—her tensions and pretensions—a path of non-attachment is the best way to find out who she is.

*All the troubles of man come from his not knowing
how to sit still.
Blaise Pascal*

Summary: Non-Attachment, Decision-Making, and Pros and Cons of Zen in Management Education

Different aspects of the Zen experience appeal to different students and teachers, and strike them as relevant to different aspects of management. In this author's experience, however, the notion of non-attachment connects powerfully to management decision-making. This summary will illustrate that connection, and conclude with a list of additional pros and cons intended to help faculty decide whether and in what ways to insert Zen education into the management curriculum.

The connection of non-attachment to decision-making is not immediately clear to students. It is reasonable for them to ask, "In the MBA program, I am taught to be analytic about decision making. I study alternatives, gather market research, listen to my advisory board, and try to make a decision that balances consensus with the kind of forcefulness that will make me stand out among my peers. If Zen means to act without premeditation, what can it possibly have to do with decision making"? The next sections will answer this question.

Attachment

As conscious managers, we work on becoming aware of our attachments. In this way we are able to overcome them –including our attachment to ego, and our clinging to the very idea of seeking enlightenment. We are already

Table 1
The Multi-Dimensional Responses of the Conscious Manager

The conscious manager who...	... may answer the question this way:
<i>...attends to detail but looks at context; tries to see the big picture</i>	<i>How does XyloCorp fit into our portfolio? Our workload?</i>
<i>...doesn't believe everything he or she is told</i>	<i>It sounds good? Who thinks so? What biases could there be in the numbers?</i>
<i>...rejects easy labels</i>	<i>What specifically sounds good? What are the downsides?</i>
<i>...constantly hones personal skills</i>	<i>I read about a new financial metric we might try to apply before deciding...</i>
<i>...is committed to lifelong learning – for everyone in the organization</i>	<i>Did you give the new analysts a shot at this contract?</i>
<i>...exercises respect and compassion (but not indulgence) in all dealings</i>	<i>Do the terms give us an advantage and let Xylo save face?</i>
<i>...is flexible but not wishy-washy</i>	<i>The team needs to be on board for this to work – have everyone either sign on or sign out by tomorrow noon.</i>
<i>...spares no effort to match the right people with the right jobs</i>	<i>Who on our team can work within Xylo's culture?</i>
<i>...lets employees put their best foot forward</i>	<i>Pat R. has a knack for communicating with the Xylo crew. Pat's hitting the ceiling at his present post. Put Pat on the Xylo liaison team.</i>
<i>...controls the organization loosely</i>	<i>Reassure Xylo we are buying them for their strengths; we will not be stifling them.</i>
<i>...gives employees the chance to stretch themselves</i>	<i>Who at Xylo is ready to play in a bigger pond after the acquisition?</i>
<i>...tries to see the adversary's point of view</i>	<i>How is this purchase going to be viewed by our competitors? By the Antitrust Division?</i>
<i>...shows a creative imagination</i>	<i>This combination could lead to products for the home improvement market, where we have never been before?</i>
<i>...is focused and steadfast in pursuit of a mission</i>	<i>How can we factor that into the price calculation?</i>
<i>...uses all the tools at his/her command</i>	<i>The contract looks good as a stand-alone, but does it move us in the direction we need to go?</i>
	<i>How does this feel in your gut? How can we make the press excited about this? What would make our employees rally behind it? Etc....</i>

Note: Reproduced with permission from Phillips, 2003, p.126.

enlightened, after all. It is only our attachment to distracting irrelevancies that prevents us from understanding this, and prevents us from consistently taking enlightened action.

How can a manager become aware of attachments? Through meditation, through mindful practice, through the support of other students of conscious management, through challenges and tests, and through instruction from a qualified, compatible teacher.

The Zen koan “What is the sound of one hand clapping”? illustrates. If we believe the syntax and semantics of the question must shape our answer, we are stuck in paradox—visualizing one hand making a clapping motion, even as we realize there can be no sound without two hands. Our feet are glued to the floor by our *belief* that we should give a straight answer to this question about hands, and by our *attachment* to its grammatical pattern. A student “passes” the koan by transcending this attachment.

When the question is “The XyloCorp contract sounds good; shall we sign it”?, the awakened manager does not consider “yes” and “no” to be the entire range of possible answers. The characteristics of the Zen manager, listed in the left column of Table 1, each a consequence of non-attachment, suggest a range of responses, illustrated in the Table’s right column.

Seen in this way, a decision point is not an opportunity to exercise ego. (The best decision may be “let Chris decide” or “let’s keep an eye on it and see how it plays out.” That is, to decide not to decide.) By perceiving and overcoming attachments, a decision maker generates creative alternative actions, makes mission-oriented decisions uncluttered by ego-stroking, and does not feel that answers must be shaped by the way a question is asked.

Immediacy and Focus

Another part of the connection to decision-making has to do with immediacy and unpremeditated response. How can we eliminate alternatives using strokes that are “swift and decisive, final and irrevocable”¹⁵, making a decision that “focuses infinite experience into instant intuition”?

One can amass substantial (though not infinite) experience through years of practice. This includes one’s own years on the job, plus the enormous amount that can be learned by talking with peers and mentors, and by reading. A key to internalizing experience is paying full attention. This oft-repeated Zen advice simply means, eat when you are eating, study when you are studying, walk when you are walking. Not paying full attention means being discourteous and easily distracted. A person who is easily distracted is easily manipulated, and cannot develop the depth of character that produces good decisions. Zazen, martial art, and other practices that demand full attention help develop a focus that cannot be distracted.

Zen in the Curriculum: Advantages

This paper has for the most part taken a position in favor of Zen in the management curriculum, and noted several benefits. This section will note only a few more:

- Zen has a comfortable appeal for people of all backgrounds, whether they question the dogma of their home traditions or not. In part, this is because Zen does not attempt to replace these with new dogma.
- The Zen educational tradition has always emphasized egalitarianism. Its teachings are open to any interested person. Moreover, in contrast to many Western traditions, the esoterism of Zen is open to everyone. There are no secret techniques.
- Zen’s focus on enlightenment encourages decisions that value learning as an outcome. This is thoroughly modern, well in tune with the learning organization in the information economy.
- Students reach a heightened appreciation for Zen once they realize its precepts do not imply a retreat from the world of commerce; with Zen, one becomes “unattached, not disconnected” (Mitsuda, 1998).
- Today’s businesses emphasize rapid innovation and technology transfer. It is recognized, however, that technology changes faster than managers’ and customers’ attitudes change. To help businesses profit from innovation, business schools will have to give increasing teaching and research attention to people’s ability to change. This paper has documented Zen’s special strengths in this regard.

Take what you need and leave the rest.
The Band

Zen in the Curriculum: Disadvantages and Cautions

Other aspects of Zen may alienate or fail to connect with important market segments, student types, or industry supporters of the university.

- Lexus’ high-tech advertising campaign sold more than 16,000 cars in its first year. Infiniti, launched in the same year, based its campaign on the widely ridiculed “Zen, rocks, and flowers” commercial in which the car itself was not shown. Consumers, apparently confused by the ads, shied away from Infiniti showrooms. Infiniti sold only 1,723 cars that year, and has been struggling to reposition itself ever since (Lev, 1989).
- “Today, most students are concerned with finding financial stability and material gain. Against this trend, Zen education encourages students to seek spiritual stability” (Mitsuda, 1998).
- The song lyric¹⁶ “take what you need and leave the rest” reflects a philosophy that is very Zen but quite contrary to today’s shareholder-based theory of the firm.

Zen is a hard, demanding path. A rich Zen psychology diagnoses common obstacles and, often through parables, offers guidance. The parables pull no punches; usually they are anything but comforting. Responsible managers, however, must face disturbing issues. The cold, clear psychology of Zen helps managers avoid the denial, ego-stroking, and euphemisms that do nothing to help solve a problem.

There seems no question that there is an element of faddishness underlying the proliferation of Zen terminology in today's business. (The elegant esthetic of Zen—the same quality that makes Zen imagery desirable in advertising— attracts dilettantes who lose their enthusiasm when they reach the demanding part of the path.) It is also reasonable to hypothesize a cyclical effect: In times of rapid and complex change, the Zen koan may appear superior to linear logic (which works well in stable times) as a sense-making strategy. However, in any time or place, applying Zen principles to management will produce, at the very least, a valuable counterpoint to more conventional desiderata, and at best, better decisions made with more speed, less anxiety, and fewer regrets.

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Footnotes

- 1 ZENworks Linux Management, the PHP-ZEN toolbar for Internet Explorer, and the Creative Zen Micro MP3 player, to name but a few.
- 2 Perhaps more creative executives in communications fields are expressing their fascination with Zen. Another reason may have

to do with the increasing complexity of modern business and technology, a complexity that makes it less and less expressible in linear language (Churchill, 2004) and more prone to the seeming paradoxes which Zen treats with such sophistication (Ambler's 1996 book *Guide to Marketing from Advertising to Zen* notes that marketers, in particular, live in paradox). A third reason may involve recent proofs in Western medicine of the physiological benefits of Zazen meditation, and a fourth is the general momentum of the spirituality in the workplace movement. The clever juxtaposition of *moo* and *mu* is due to Mike Holderness (<http://www.poptel.org.uk/nuj/mike/articles/gdn-moo.htm>). *Mu*, a syllable of negation, is the proper Zen response to any *idée fixe*.

- 3 One source of Western misconceptions about Zen stems from the "beat Zen" of Casady and Kerouac (Kerouac, 1971). Beat Zen embraces randomness, nihilism, and casting one's fate to the wind. Real Zen is about enlightenment, compassion, creativity and discipline.
- 4 Buddhist tradition features the Bodhisattva character, an enlightened individual who, realizing the futility of grasping at the world, nonetheless does not abandon the world. Compassion, without attachment, motivates the Bodhisattva to commit to helping others reach enlightenment. A manager's devotion to employees' skill acquisition and career development is similar.
- 5 The author has developed slides and discussion questions for several of these curriculum areas, with the support of the Global Business Center and the Center for International Business Education and Research (CIBER) at the University of Washington. Copies of this curriculum are made available through UW-CIBER without charge for academic use. Other supplementary material including an annotated bibliography, a sample exercise, and a sample short business case have been omitted from this published article but are available upon request from the author.
- 6 Among other reasons, because of Descartes' "I think, therefore I am." To Zen practitioners, Descartes' statement invites ridicule; for them, *being* consists of balancing rational, non-rational, mental and physical means of apprehending the unfolding of the *tao*. In this way, Zen anticipated current discussions of "tacit knowledge" in management (see e.g. Delcambre, Phillips and Weaver, 2005). These discussions have been difficult in academies dedicated to classic Western liberal education, within which only verbally or mathematically articulated propositions can be considered "knowledge."
- 7 Where Weick and Putnam (2006) consider commitment "irrevocable" and equate it with "clinging," the present paper distinguishes mindful commitment from obsessive-compulsive commitment.
- 8 The number of Japanese who pursue esoteric Zen is tiny. Japanese companies do send employees to Zen temples for meditation retreats, but this, according to Professor Kunio Goto of St. Andrew's University, is for "psychotherapy," not for the pursuit of enlightenment. The free expression of creativity can be seen as eccentricity, especially in Japan. It is tolerated when displayed by Zen priests, but not among the general population, where group harmony is the paramount value.
- 9 Several marketing scholars (e.g., Fricke 2007, p.1) urge us, "Love your customer!"

10 A phrase Gresser uses in his seminars.

11 Frank Doran, in a 2003 seminar, Milwaukie, Oregon.

12 Zen tradition emphasizes teaching by example. Mitsuda (1998) notes the classic story of the lesson in which the Buddha did not say a word, but instead held up a flower. Only one person, Kasyapa, understood. Kasyapa did not utter a word, but only smiled. This is the Zen "belly to belly" transmission that bypasses the rational mind. The present author has seen dedicated groups of beginners, in the absence of an experienced teacher, make some progress by teaching each other. However, such unsupervised activity may create a liability issue for the university.

13 English provides no better translation than "meditation," however, so for convenience's sake, earlier sections of this paper treat zazen and meditation as synonyms.

14 Physicality in business deserves its own discussion. Airline executives must think about how flight crews can handle incidents of "air rage" and subdue fractious passengers without endangering others and without courting lawsuits. Those who run controversial organizations, for example, agencies that draw protests because of environmental, labor, family planning or globalization issues, must have policies and training programs that deal with physical confrontation.

15 Unlike sword cuts and brush strokes, most decisions are not irrevocable (the growing branch of management science called "real options" attests to this). But a manager's words when he announces his decisions *are* irrevocable, and should be chosen with care.

16 "The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down." Written by J. Robbie Robertson; performed by The Band (1970) and by Joan Baez (1971).

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