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ZEN IN THE WORKPLACE:
APPLYING ANTI-STRUCTURE
TO ENHANCE STRUCTURE

IS WORK A PLACE FOR ZEN?

This article at once builds on, and constructively criticizes, a wave of books linking traditional Zen Buddhist forms of discipline with training in the business world. Recent works portray Zen as a technique for achieving a professional leadership perspective that helps one become persuasive and effective in handling concrete everyday affairs of the business world. This trend is part of a broader level of interest in relating spirituality to the workplace environment. Managers and employees alike have been investigating various forms of mysticism, ranging from Kabbalah and Quakerism to Yoga and Zen, and reading books like *Jesus, CEO* and *What Would Buddha Do at Work?* According to an article in *The Miami Herald* (August 3, 2002), spirituality provides a common, uplifting perspective that offers peace and clarity of mind: "From Torah to yoga classes, professionals make time for quiet contemplation" (p. C.3). The article cited numerous cases of people feeling sharper and more relaxed as a result. One participant in meditation, an accountant, commented, "I center myself. It helps me achieve a balance within" (p. C.3).

The primary aim of works on Zen as well as other examples of mysticism from the East or West is to highlight how contemplation can ease tensions by fostering a sense of detachment that cushions the blows of disappointment and enables one to react with determination and self-discipline. The books on Zen, in particular, stress the practice of meditation, which produces a state of mind characterized by equanimity and neutrality, or open-endedness and even-handedness that allows for greater concentration and an ability to focus on tasks and accomplish aims. That is, the emphasis is on how to quell emotions and adapt to the structural demands of the institution to maximize efficiency.

For example, *Zen at Work: A Zen Teacher's 30-Year Journey in Corporate America* is a memoir of an individual who combined Zen practice with

a corporate career with IBM in a way that allowed him to ever deepen his religious practice and accomplish significant goals as an administrator. Also, *Work as a Spiritual Practice: A Practical Buddhist Approach to Inner Growth and Satisfaction on the Job* provides guidelines and exercises based on Buddhist training for conquering a variety of problems at work. In addition, *Zen in 10 Simple Lessons* contains a chapter on integrating Zen principles into daily business activity. Complementing this line of writing is a more specialized approach that demonstrates how a Zen outlook can illumine specific activities, ranging from *Zen of Groups: A Handbook for People Meeting with a Purpose* to *Zen Golf: Mastering the Mental Game*, as well as books on applying Zen cultural attitudes to other endeavors.

However, these works tend to overlook a very important side of Zen Buddhist literature and thought, which is crucial for understanding how to resolve conflicts and overcome crises in the workplace. In the spirit of a recent evaluation of working with diverse forms of “indigenous knowledge,” which refers to the “unique, traditional, local knowledge existing within and developed around the specific conditions” (Grenier, p. 1) of a cultural domain, it is important to clarify the role of Zen in its original context and not as appropriators wish it to be. The side that is neglected is based on attaining a transcendence of structure, or what can be referred to, by borrowing the term from cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, “anti-structure.” According to the Zen understanding, a realization of anti-structural behavior is essential not to escape or withdraw from, but rather to enhance and promote one’s effectiveness within the realm of structure. Therefore, in applying Zen to the workplace, there needs to be a balance between the structural (disciplined) and the anti-structural (transcendent), with the latter seen as preserving the former while the former is necessary but not sufficient to explicate the latter.

Great masters from the golden ages of Zen in China and Japan (especially the ninth to thirteenth centuries) perfected transformative self-awareness, attaining a state of mind based on confidence and a firm conviction accompanied by flexibility and the ability to maneuver. To cultivate this state on a permanent basis Zen masters set up monastic training systems that were as serious and rigorous as any form of discipline in the history of civilization.

But these highly disciplined masters could also be eccentric and irreverent to a degree verging on blasphemy. They displayed a keen sense of irony. Their words and actions expressed ecstatic freedom, breaking the grip of all

conventional forms of structure. There are countless examples in the Zen annals in China and Japan of outrageous attitudes and iconoclastic actions, such as kicking over objects, leaping from poles, slapping teachers and students alike, and even cutting off extremities. These sometimes extreme cases symbolize the need to stand outside conventional modalities and show that a creative approach to interpersonal relations preserves that productive tension between the elements of discipline and the opposing forces of irreverence.



Let us consider the following sequence in the classic expression of Zen spiritual development known as the *Ten Oxherding Pictures*, in which a young boy tames an ox symbolizing an untrained mind full of distractions and self-deception.¹ According to one of the main medieval editions of this illustrated series, in the ninth sequence, the trainee attains a state of transcendence represented by the empty circle. At this juncture, all conventional structures have been cast aside.

According to Zen, a hermit is able to overcome the vicious cycle of seeking to acquire what is desired and eliminate what is undesired. Instead of reacting out of unbridled feeling, he steps away from the scene, climbs to the proverbial mountaintop of comprehensive awareness, and gains a bird's-eye view of the situation.

There is a traditional koan, (records of an “encounter dialogue” that were first collected in medieval China and Japan see Heine), in which a single syllable answers the question, “What do you do after you climb to the top of a 100 foot pole?”, and the response is, “Jump!” However, this is the penultimate rather than the final sequence—the necessary condition but not the conclusion of the series in the *Ten Oxherding Pictures* known as “Returning to the Marketplace,” or reentering the world of structure in the mundane realm. This completes a dialectical pattern of transcendence in order to attain success within the conventional.



¹This is a series of medieval Zen illustrations of a boy chasing and taming a wild ox that symbolizes the process of seeking and attaining enlightenment by means of self-discipline and self-transformation. See *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, vol. 2, ed. Robert E. Buswell, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2004), pp. 621–622.

Breaking through structure involves taking risks but can be appropriate and lead to progressive interaction and growth, so long as it is not done to take advantage or reveal contempt, but is complemented by the display of genuine humility along with a willingness to undergo self-scrutiny. Yet, the anti-structural approach is unpredictable and has an edge of defiance that may result in excesses or be perceived as anarchic or arbitrary. Traditional Zen applied to the new frontier of the contemporary workplace, strives for a balanced attitude that strengthens rather than defeats structure by demanding discipline that inspires creativity and opens the opportunity for cooperative interaction.

Zen teachings yield several lessons for developing management or motivational skills, as one needs to:

- 1) Transform dysfunctional conflicts based on petty turf battles and ego-induced confrontations into mutually beneficial negotiations characterized by shared purposes and cooperation.
- 2) Develop an atmosphere that promotes and sustains spontaneity while also providing order, as in the traditional Zen monastic system, which is one of the most highly structured settings in the world, yet allows for outrageous, irreverent, even blasphemous behavior, as found among the creative geniuses of classical Zen masters.
- 3) Recognize when it is useful or necessary to break the rules and demonstrate distinctively innovative unconventional behavior, which is anti-structure.
- 4) Create appropriate conditions so that followers are at once severely criticized and inspired to challenge and surpass their leaders, who do their part to not just remain complacent but to develop and be willing to acknowledge the merit of disciples who surpass them.

SWITCHING HEADS AND CHANGING FACES

The key to understanding the calm composure coupled with spontaneous flexibility of the Zen mind is the koan. Dozens of koan collections were created from the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries. At that time, many brilliant though eccentric and unpredictable Zen masters emerged alongside widespread beliefs in the power of supernatural entities, like magical animals and ghosts, to control sacred domains. This period also saw the proliferation of art of war strategies for warriors based on the virtues of attentiveness derived from an advanced spiritual awareness.

Zen masters used the folklore and military imagery embedded in Chinese culture to make a point about the struggle to prove their spiritual ability through competitions, “Dharma (Buddhist law or truth) combats.” These are a special form of dialogue, based on the encounter model, which takes place between teachers and disciples as well as other kinds of rivals and trainees. The aim of the encounter dialogue is to pit mind against mind. Some of the main examples were composed to resemble ritual contests between shamans and gods (or demons). They often gave off an atmosphere of military intrigue, as Zen masters were compared to generals mapping their plans of battle.

Koan records capture conversations and nonverbal exchanges that show how masters sought to break through barriers of language and hierarchy imposed by social, religious structures. The encounter dialogue evokes what Zen calls, “Strange deeds and extraordinary words.” Genuine creativity that derives from intuitive awareness beyond logic cannot be contained within the regulated use of words that reflects mainstream organizational structures. Originality explodes in ways that disrupt the conventional.

In a fascinating example, master Pai-chang requires his two leading followers, the head monk and an upstart named Kuei-shan, to compete (Aitken, pp. 241–247). The winner of the contest will be awarded the prize of the abbacy of his own mountain temple. Master Pai-chang puts his disciples in a double bind, asking them to describe an object, “Without calling it a pitcher and without not calling it a pitcher.” This type of absurd command compels a disciple to go beyond ordinary words and yet communicate in a spontaneous, convincing fashion. One must react immediately and without hesitation, letting nothing interfere with an instinctive response. Generally, no one beats the master, yet he is the first to admit defeat if defeated.

The head monk’s answer to the question about the pitcher is, “It can’t be called a wooden clog.” He gives a response that is just as absurd as the query, yet his reliance on language misses the mark. The upstart Kuei-shan’s response is to kick over the pitcher and simply walk away from the scene. His demonstrative gesture prevails and he will lead the new monastery.

Kuei-shan’s gesture is one of the most renowned cases of an anti-structural expression in Zen annals. It shows a willingness to break from conventional hierarchy and patterns of discourse. To stand out one cannot simply do the same as everyone else. There must be the courage to try new approaches that might be perceived as offbeat or “crazy.” This is the risk of daring to be innovative. It is not an end in itself and is effective only as long

as one integrates individuality and eccentricity with a commitment to teamwork and the completion of group goals. Failure to seize the opportunity to be uniquely inventive will eventually defeat communal achievements.

The narrative shows that when both words and non-words fall short of communicating, a genuine sense of self-confident creativity beyond speaking and silence, based on integrity and inner discipline, allows for innovation in breaking the mold of hierarchical structure. Before doing things this way, it is necessary to have exhausted other avenues and to be certain about the merits and reasonableness of one's approach. Kuei-shan's act of breaking down structures, which gains him a leadership role in the monastic system, works because it takes place at the appropriate time in the right context, without seeming arbitrary or rebellious.

The following anecdote illustrates how Kuei-shan's anti-structural behavior can be applied to a contemporary context. Suppose a vice president is concerned with a department that has not been producing, and invites two managers, one with seniority and rank and the other more junior but known for creativity, to compete to become the next director. The vice president proffers the challenge, "Show me your plan to save money without cutting the budget and without not cutting the budget!"

The senior manager responds by talking about "making sacrifices," but in the final analysis offers a recommendation that calls for budget cuts. The fatal flaw in his plan is that he assumes he has authority over areas where he will most likely meet resistance. The junior manager on the other hand, makes an outrageous gesture of tearing up the ledgers in front of the vice president. Her plan wins and she gains the promotion. By consulting with other colleagues from the unit, she creates a teamwork effect built on a general support for common goals that projects areas of savings and growth, inspiring colleagues to sacrifice in the way the senior manager had envisioned. As indicated below, the senior manager demonstrates an over-attention to the realm of structure, while the junior manager applies anti-structure to preserve and enhance structure.

Senior Manager (Structure)

*No ambiguity
Conservative
Conventional*

Junior Manager (Anti-Structure)

*Flexibility
Adjusts to shifting circumstances
Bold, forward-looking*

According to one of the commentaries from a Zen koan, a Zen master's anti-structural activity is characterized by "switching heads and changing faces, as he stirs up waves even though there is no wind." Bold moves and maneuvers are necessary in crossing over imaginary, invisible lines into an open arena where integrity and commitment rather than hierarchy determines power. Genuine authority is not revealed in particular words, thoughts, symbols, or deeds, but through the overall way a person speaks, thinks, and acts.

Because the mind that has attained anti-structure is able to react in various ways, Zen masters are thoroughly unpredictable and unflappable; they keep rivals wondering what is going to come next. By maintaining a flexibility that transcends particular words and constantly adjusts methods for dealing with people and circumstances, Zen can be characterized as achieving a "strategy of no strategy." In some koan cases, the master gives opposite or ever shifting responses to the same behavior, such as answering "yes," "no," or "maybe" to identical questions. In other cases the identical answer, such as "Go have a cup of tea," is given by Chao-chou to all the different queries he receives.

Reacting in the moment is like being at one's best in athletics. Sports contests resemble the spontaneity, discipline, and mutually transformational quality of interpersonal relations, especially individual games like tennis. One's actions can only be determined and evaluated through interplay with a particular opponent. Practicing a tennis serve, a baseball pitch, or a soccer kick with a backstop for endless hours can be useful training. Ultimately, however, the quality of the serve, pitch, or kick is to be judged by the response, of the opposing player during a contest of abilities. Although the event may be held in a public forum viewed by spectators and backed by teammates, the result comes down to a one-on-one competitive interplay. Yet, the two parties can help each other reach a higher level of performance. In the end, who is the winner and who the loser? One-time Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner said while holding up his gold medal, "I love my competitor; he brings out the best in me." This is much like what was often said about the ongoing rivalry between boxers Mohammed Ali and Joe Frazier, who brought out the best in each other in the ring (yet unfortunately the worst outside the arena of competition).

Just like slamming a home run or acing a serve in tennis, an action completed in a spontaneous way without leaving time for cogitation is needed

for successful professional relations. Although one prepares for the deed with thoughtful and calculating design, the moment of improvisation must be like a reflex in terms of immediacy. But its efficacy stems from an intuitive level of awareness that is integrated with conscious, deliberate thinking instead of a divided effort in which calculating and acting struggle against one another. As Tom Kasulis explains, the aim of Zen is to make reaction time instantaneous, so that saying, "I hit the baseball," is true but, "At the moment of the original event, there is only an unbroken hitting-of-the-baseball" (p. 57).

According to sword master Takuan Soho, a key aspect of self-control is to know what to do and what not to do:

The accomplished man uses the sword.... When it is necessary to kill, he kills. When it is necessary to give life, he gives life. When killing, he kills in complete concentration; when giving life, he gives life in complete concentration. Without looking at right and wrong, he is able to see right and wrong; without attempting to discriminate, he is able to discriminate well (p. 54).

A contemporary example is an executive responding on a case-by-case basis to every employee with whom he deals, so that he explores personnel issues from a variety of angles without coming to a fixed conclusion that cuts off the possibility for constructive change. If circumstances require using the sword (or mind) to kill (or criticize scathingly), he uses the sword that way, and if it requires using the sword to give life (or praise effusively), he uses it for that purpose. He can change paths or reverse his direction in midstream, if that is what is called for, because the Zen mind provides an underlying consistency.

Theater acting provides a useful analogy to Zen-style interaction, since in live theatrical performance every aspect is immediate. The Zen view is epitomized by the injunction of a stage director, who exhorted his anxious troupe at a dress rehearsal for an opening of what promised to be a major stage hit, "Stop acting, and ... Act!" If the actor misses a cue or seems unprepared in any way, there is no backup to prevent this from coming through to the audience evaluating the performance. That is why many Hollywood actors perfect their craft by returning between films to the rigors of Broadway. When something goes wrong or is unexpected, improvising can be just as effective as the script. If the main idea is clear and the mind steady, even a flub or embarrassment can turn out well in the end.

The realm of anti-structure is evident in Phil Jackson's *Sacred Hoops: Spiritual Lessons of a Hardwood Warrior*, which applies Zen principles to the championship basketball arena. Jackson's strategy, which he calls the "Tao of basketball," or "five-man tai-chi," is a distinctive "Full-Court Game" showing how teamwork based on dynamic, interactive offensive and defensive strategies leads to a winning effort. When coaching all-time superstar Michael Jordan, who was perhaps the most talented individual in NBA history, Jackson promoted group-oriented techniques through a Zen insight into utilizing the best skills of all the players as well as manipulating the ball around the entire court. He developed a method to defeat both conventional man-to-man and zone coverages by catching opponents unprepared. As sportscasters used to say of Jordan, "He controls the whole court by having the knack of coming from nowhere to somewhere." He starts away from the ball on the far side of the court and spontaneously, almost without being noticed, enters into the heat of the action for a crucial pass, score, or rebound that turns the tide of the game.

Two levels of interaction are taking place in a Full Court Game. One, within the framework of the inner group or between Jordan and teammates, has a superstar acting as a supporter by bringing out the best in players who normally exhibit less impressive skills. The five men achieving their respective potentials find harmony and a new sense of confidence.

The second level of the Full Court Game involves a warrior-like interaction with the rival team, which is left defenseless by the comprehensive strategies devised by Jackson. If they put multiple coverages on Jordan, he spontaneously dished off for an assist, and if they went man-to-man he exploited the weakness of the defender, whether tall or short, swift or plodding. In both cases, Jordan and his team effectively utilized the conceptual space of the court, which complements and enhances the players' individual talents and teamwork efforts. A great quarterback in the early days of pro football, Sammy Baugh, once said that if his team was doing well at protecting the passer he could play his position "wearing a tuxedo." This is similar to Chuang Tzu's comment that a Taoist butcher never needs to sharpen the blade of his knife because he knows how to cut through the material.

This approach highlights the fact that eccentric individual behavior is not sufficient to establish the degree of integrity necessary to prevail in an interactive engagement. The process of attaining greatness in oneself and others can be understood by considering a Confucian parable in which a man steals the sheep of his neighbor—it is his eldest son who learns of the

crime and helps his father rectify the wrongdoing. To put this in contemporary terms, one can imagine a supervisor who has neglected to complete a final report on an important project. A junior associate who has been collecting and organizing the data is the one who becomes aware of the problem. This creates a quandary for the junior person, who has been doing his job well, even better than the supervisor, who is at fault. How do you get the supervisor to acknowledge the error of his ways and promptly correct it? If the associate were to report the oversight to the supervisor that would be a basic breach of protocol, but doing nothing at all may cause the unit, including his own position, to fail.

There are two options other than formally reporting this to an outside authority. One is to speak behind the scenes with a more senior figure, who would be able to apply pressure to the supervisor. But this must be done deftly, without embarrassing the supervisor. The other option is for the junior person to take it upon herself to complete the report, thereby setting an example, which the supervisor will eventually follow, although the challenge is to do this in an uplifting rather than humiliating way. In taking the second option, the associate has broken through the formidable, invisible barriers based on hierarchical status and rank. This is done without going against the grain, but rather elevating the ideals of institutional structure. If greatness is real and genuine, then it has an effect on its own and there is no need to proclaim it for personal credit.

According to this view, in order to compel others around you to achieve goals, you must first be responsible for your own achievements. As Confucius says, there is a reciprocal process of establishing merit, “The way to be great is to make others great. It is the greatness of others around that makes you great.” This is a method of leading by example in a world in which all relations are interdependent and interactive, and establishes a spiritually “authoritative” stance that advances the overall good rather than an “authoritarian” attitude that is coercive or intimidating. To paraphrase a Taoist text, “When the wrong person uses the right means the means are used incorrectly, but when the right person uses the wrong means the means are used correctly.” Everyone is a born leader, but it is clear that to be elevated into the status of authority on the bureaucratic ladder one needs to be surrounded by those on higher rungs who demonstrate leadership qualities. Whoever has a reputation for excellent accomplishments, sound judgment, reasonable arguments, and impeccable integrity, will be listened to attentively. As the Confucian *Analecets* recommends, “The practice of government by means

of virtue may be compared with the North Star, around which the multitudinous heavenly bodies revolve while it stays in its place” (p. 18).

The Zen approach can be summed up as the unity of two forces. One is Singularity, as the leader is encouraged to cultivate all the unique creativity that can be summoned within oneself even if seemingly eccentric and anomalous. The second force is Solidarity, because one motivates teamwork that brings out the talent in colleagues who may otherwise have remained mired in mediocrity. The leader is the first to critique and dismiss inadequacies and to praise junior colleagues who surpass his accomplishments. To paraphrase a Zen swordmaster’s injunction: “When it is necessary to lead he leads, and when it is necessary to cooperate he cooperates; When it is necessary to use soft training methods he uses soft training methods, and when it is necessary to be harsh he is harsh.”

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