

Practice of Bodymind: Zen and NLP

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1

To experience the world is to experience the bodymind. The direct experience of Experience itself is the function of Zen practice.

— Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi

Who are we ... Really? There is a very eager and sincere questioning felt among us today. Often the sincerity is overwhelmed by eagerness and we fall for easy answers. Some of us are questioning into who we are and how we should live through various therapies, others through practices that, for want of a better word, are often called “spiritual”. A part of the answer to our questions is that we are each alive right now and that we are each a bodymind. This then leads us to further questions that we must patiently enquire into again and again, such as: what role do therapies and “spiritual” practices play and how might they interact. Another question is: can we use one to understand the other?

As a novice Zen monk and Practice Advisor, master of NLP, and one integrating areas of these into a new form called Shinjin, I would like to shed light on these questions.

Zen and NLP (Neuro-Linguistic Programming) both work with the experiences of bodymind. Zen, although 2,600 years old, is still being practised and renewed today. The roots of NLP can be found in the California of the early 1970s. Zen is transmitted, mind-to-mind, from teacher to student, and practice consumes lifetimes. NLP, taught by trainers, teaches us methods for changing our experience from less to more resourceful states. Zen practice teaches us what Awareness is, and to experience this as the Actual Nature of ourselves and our world, thus unfolding, for ourselves, Unconditional Freedom. Both are powerful transformative techniques. Practised with sincerity and skill, both can result in profound change in our experience of ourselves and our world.

One major difference is that NLP teaches us to manipulate our states, while Zen teaches us to step beyond any state. Another is that Zen practice begins where, using one of NLP’s own models, NLP stops.

2

Studying the Buddhaway is to study the self. Studying the self, forget the self. Forgetting the self is being awakened by the ten thousand dharmas.

— Dogen zenji[fn]Dogen zenji: *Fukanzazengi, in Progress Into the Ordinary*, translated by Yasuda Joshu roshi and Anzan Hoshin roshi, *White Wind Zen Community, 1986.*[/fn]

Zen practice traces its Lineage back 2,600 years to the realization of Siddartha Gautama, Shakyamuni Buddha. After spending years practising various systems, Siddartha stopped his quest and just sat under the spreading branches of a tree. He just sat (shikantaza), paying “open attention” to what was actually going

on. Watching the rising and falling of each moment of experience, he understood the nature of these experiences; through this, he understood the Actual Nature of the experiencing, and he understood the end of suffering.

He realized that everything, all phenomena or “dharmas” experienced in mind or in body, are impermanent. Whatever we are experiencing, whether a thought, bodily sensation, a feeling, a sight, sound, or a taste, is impermanent. Whatever it is, it arises, dwells and decays. Existing nowhere but in the direct and present moment of experience, these phenomena just come and go, leaving no trace. However, our tendency is to try to hold on to them, to grasp and contract around them, thus making them appear separate from us. In this way, we misunderstand ourselves and our world, and we allow our existence to be conditioned by this perpetual misunderstanding and separation. That is the beginning of suffering. The way to end suffering is to do ourselves what the Buddha did: practise open attention and thus realize what the world really is and who we truly are. Through this practice, dukkha (suffering) and avidya (illusion or ignorance) and the unnecessary conditions which we impose on our life can fall away.

The Buddha taught his students how to do just that by showing them how to practise “just this”. He taught by metaphor, silence, detailed discourses; primarily he taught by living among them as a “Buddha”, one who is awake and aware. His spoken teachings were eventually written down. Many sutras, suttas or “records of discourse” and other teachings exist and are increasingly available to us in the West. Since the Buddha’s time, thousands of great teachers have expanded on and reframed his teachings in order to pass the Buddha’s realization directly to the times in which they lived.

One of these teachings, the Abhidharma, explains very clearly the functioning of bodymind in experiencing its world. Form, feeling, perception, formation and consciousness are identified as the very process of processing our moment to moment experiences. The Western scientific and psychotherapeutic community is finding that this ancient view is at the very least, as accurate, and perhaps even more useful, a description of how human beings perceive and cognize than traditionally accepted Western models.

The Buddha’s teaching on the practice and realization of Awareness is the foundation of Zen practice. Dogen zenji, founder of the Soto Zen school, called this aware sitting “jijiyu zanmai”, and used it as the basis of his teachings and transmission of saijojo “great and perfect practice”[fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi[/fn].

Zen is transmitted from teacher to student, and was carried by Bodhidharma from India to China, where several different schools developed. In 1225 C.E. Dogen, a monk from Japan, travelled to Ningbo, a seaport town in China. At a temple in the countryside called Tiantongshan, he found his teacher and after several years of studying and sitting zazen in the Monk’s Hall woke up to his Actual Nature. He went back to Japan where he started to teach what is now known as Soto Zen. Today there are many Zen temples and centres all over the world. More and more people are coming to this “great and perfect practice” to realize their own ultimate freedom from conditions, as did Siddartha Gautama.

Over the years teachers from these different cultures developed many methods to help individuals in their practice, including koan study. Koan, records of encounters between teachers and students, were passed from generation to generation, culture to culture, and from language to language. It is not surprising that many mythologies and misunderstandings about Zen, including koan practice, have arisen. The word “koan” means “public case”, that is, a record of the direct presentation, expression, of practice. Language is only a metaphor for direct experience which can only be experienced; the recording and subsequent translations

and interpretations of koan can tend to obscure or “mystify”, especially if read by non-practitioners and romanticized and intellectualized in the attempt to “figure them out”.

Koan are often used by Zen teachers as a subject for commentary in a *teisho*, a talk given during a period of *zazen* pointing to the actual experience, in that moment, of each practitioner. The *wado* or “root word” of a koan may be given to a formal student to be used to help that individual deepen their practice through “looking into” (*kanna*) it, thereby directly experiencing the mind. Zen koan are not riddles to be solved, paradoxes, jokes or locked boxes that need a key to open them. Koan are a way for learning, through experience, a whole new way of using the mind.

The basic point is that practice, including koan practice, is something that one does. Intellectualizing about Zen and the meaning of practice is to defeat one’s understanding. Daido Looi sensei, the Abbot of Zen Mountain Monastery in New York State, likens becoming satisfied with such intellectualizations to *drinking the dregs, rather than the wine, of reality*[fn]John Daido Looi sensei, *Zen Mountain Record*, Summer 1990.[/fn].

3

Zen practice, first brought to America at the end of the 19th century, eventually found California particularly fertile soil. It was in the California of the 70s that NLP, Neuro-Linguistic Programming, evolved from the study of how successful people do what they do. Co-founders, Richard Bandler and John Grinder, influenced by systems expert Gregory Bateson, developed a methodology which enabled them to determine and replicate the “strategies” of the successful.

Therapist Virginia Satir, hypnotherapist and physician Milton Erickson, the developer of Gestalt, Fritz Perls, and others were studied to determine what it was about how humans process information that made the difference between success and failure. Once the question “What is the difference between the average person and the one who performs brilliantly and with excellence?”[fn]NLP Centres of Canada brochure.[/fn] was answered, NLP was born. When the question “Can the patterns of excellence specific to these individuals be taught to others, enabling them to attain the same results?” was answered “Yes!”, people came from all over the world to study with Bandler and Grinder. There are now NLP institutes and practitioners in every major North American city as well as West Germany, France, Norway, Great Britain, Australia, Belgium and Austria.

The National Association of Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NANLP) defines NLP as “the study of subjective experience”. Robert Dilts, author, developer and consultant in the field says that NLP is, at its core, a set of assumptions about how people process and communicate information. Dilts’ research in 1977 correlated eye movements and brain function; this was seminal in the development of NLP coding of representational systems (visual, auditory, kinesthetic, olfactory and gustatory).

A recent article by Steve Richards[fn]Steve Richards, *Zen and NLP*, *The Quest*, Spring 1990.[/fn] attempted to use these representations to make the claim that it was now “possible to understand the baffling stories of Zen for the first time”; but this sets serious limits on, and misunderstandings about, both Zen and NLP. That statement simply isn’t true; Zen koan have been understood many times, by many people, in many cultures, as their practice ripened.

An attempt was also made to explain that Zen practice “works” by limiting awareness to bodily or kinesthetic

experience. Richards wrote "Gazing down and to the right accesses the kinesthetic channel and this is the solution to the mystery of Zen". I tried this, but it didn't work. While it is important for beginners in practice to anchor their wandering and sinking minds within present bodily experience, Zen then asks us to open directly to the whole "field of experience" as it arises within seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling, thinking, and feeling. Questioning into and penetrating this field is the "mystery of Zen".

4

NLP creates a framework for understanding how to relate to others. Individuals learn to observe verbal and non-verbal communication, and the external manifestations of communication. By noticing the physiology, seeing skin colour and muscle tone change, by seeing and hearing the cues to brain functioning, and by understanding the significance of the different ways the brain processes information, we can facilitate change in our experience.

NLP is evolving many different applications. A perusal of publications and pamphlets show NLP being used for self-improvement... "a holographic approach to personality"; for optimum health; to deal with dependency issues; and even to interpret dreams. It is appearing, to good press and bad, in medicine, education, creativity, and business. We see promises for expertise in goal setting, presentation skills, stress management, strategies for selling and convincing, negotiation, overcoming objections. The Canadian Security and Intelligence Service was recently given a workshop in basic NLP.

Dr. John Grinder, a professor of linguistics with a background in field intelligence, has moved into the corporate area, and is marketing NLP as "the fastest-growing technology for human change and communication currently available". Using Grinder's "New Code" NLP, working more actively with physiology than the "Old", one NLP centre invites you to "Experience the Promise of a Dream Made Real" by teaching how to "Identify, Isolate and Transform any portion of your personal or professional life" and guarantees career enhancement, peak performance in sports, relationships and togetherness that can enrich family members and "contribute value to the extended family and the community".

NLP has, indeed, helped many individuals change the course of their life. One woman, treated at the Ottawa NLP Centre for crippling agoraphobia, credits NLP and directors Janice Gray and Derek Balmer, with giving her "a second chance at life"[fn]Pati O'Brien, Personal Experience, Centre Voice, Summer 1990.[/fn] in three sessions. This is only one of many accounts from all over the world that explain why NLP is growing.

Other forms using NLP are "Imperative Self-Therapy", "Time Line Therapy". Another development is my own Shinjin Training, a synthesis of mindfulness techniques, touchwork and NLP. NLP is used with great success to teach children with learning problems and to enhance and accelerate adult learning. It is in this field that we find an NLP model which can help us to further understand both Zen and NLP.

5

NLP trainer Marvin Oka, and other facilitators of the learning process, use Gregory Bateson's Steps to an Ecology of Mind to describe different qualities of learning based on the concept of logical levels. As I describe the stages of this model, I will also correlate them to a traditional description of five different styles or kinds of "zen" or meditative practices.[fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi, *Begin Here: Five Styles of Zen*, Zanmai No.6, Autumn 1990. [/fn]

The first logical level, Zero Learning, is essentially straight stimulus response. A Zero Learning approach creates a mentality which is “bound in content with no concept of process”[fn]Marvin Oka: NLP & Accelerated Learning, Reporter, March/April 1990.[/fn]. Bopu Zen, or “usual Zen”, concerned only with the issues of well-being, could reside here. Martial arts, Taoist longevity practices, Noh theatre and all of the Zen arts (if engaged in as ends in themselves) and most of the Western forms of meditation, are all traditionally considered to be bopu Zen. It is Zen engaged in for “therapeutic” purposes. Bopu Zen is an aspirin, a pain reliever[fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi, *ibid.* [/fn].

At the next logical level, Learning 1, the student can go beyond rote memory and can “think” for themselves within a given subject. This kind of “thinking”, however, is much like a multiple choice exam where the student selects from an already existing set of choices. The student rearranges what they already know. It is from Learning 1 level that we play games such as trying to decode Zen koan using the NLP representational systems. Learning 1 level can also be a trap for beginning Zen students as they can, at this stage, try and fit what they are experiencing in their practice into other bodymind models. At this level, having achieved some calm and concentration, a person may stop dynamically practising. They may start writing articles, books, and, alas, even give instruction to others. Gedo zen, or “outside way” zen, religious in intent and practice, a way to feel spiritual, could reside in this logical level.

The next level, Learning 2 is where, according to Bateson, we start “learning to learn”. In the NLP world, many trainers “play” at this level and they teach others how to learn about and recognize patterns and process instead of merely rearranging content. As rearranging the components of content is how NLP is used by many we become aware that much of NLP is practised and taught at the lower logical level of Learning 1. It is at the equivalent of a Learning 2 level that shojo zen starts. For it is here that a practitioner begins to glimpse that practice is about actually working with our life as it is. “It is a profoundly vital investigation into perception and cognition, into how we experience our world and ourselves, and what this world and ourselves are”[fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi, *ibid.*[/fn].

Learning 3 is where daijo zen “great practice zen” and saijojo zen “complete and perfect practice”, the two levels of practice that have been traditionally understood as true Zen only begin. Learning 3 is described as “the process of processing”[fn]Marvin Oka, *ibid.* [/fn]. It is from the perspective of this logical level that we can see what happens when we intellectualize and try to explain experience: *As soon as we put an experiential process into words, we create a map which only represents the actual experience*[fn]Marvin Oka, NLP & Accelerated Learning, Reporter, March/April 1990.[/fn]. This “map making” transforms the Learning 3 process into a Learning 2 distinction and this, of course, drops it back a logical level.

Gregory Bateson said that, “Learning 3 is likely to be difficult and rare even in human beings” although “it is claimed that something of the sort does from time to time occur in psychotherapy, religious conversion, and in other sequences in which there is a profound reorganization of character”[fn]Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, Chandler Publishing Company, 1972.[/fn]. He also said that, “Zen Buddhists, Occidental mystics and some psychiatrists assert that these matters are totally beyond the reach of language...in spite of warnings...let me begin to speculate”. Inherent in Bateson’s speculation is a logical level drop back to Learning 2.

As I have mentioned, Learning 3 is where true Zen practice begins. “Learning 4 would be change in Learning 3”, says Bateson, “But probably does not occur”. This is the realm of mature Zen practice. Although this level cannot be explained, it can be expressed and that is what Zen teachers do. Koan, dokusan (face-to-face

meeting with the teacher) and teisho (formal talks by the teacher pointing to aspects of actual experience) are called “dottoku”, the expression of the unexplainable process of processing.

Although the Lineage of Dharma and Zen Ancestors weaves across many countries, many times, many temples and teachers, the path itself is a straight and direct path. That is to say, each practitioner or student of Zen does exactly what his or her teacher, and their teacher’s teacher, and so on back to Shakyamuni Buddha did. And this is, quite simply, to sit and walk, and stand and lie down, developing the ability to watch the activity of mind. Here we can usefully employ another NLP concept, “modelling”, to shed more light on understanding the process of Zen practice. The teachings are transmitted beyond words through the embodiment of the Way, and of the Lineage, in and through the teacher. It is through paying attention to the details of their own experience that the student gradually manifests in themselves the experience of the teacher’s world.

6

Mindfulness is paying attention to the details of experience, and through this we learn to see beyond the contractions of conditioned reactions to our world. Seeing into Actual Nature (kensho), we realize ultimate freedom, freedom from all conditions. This is what the Buddha taught and this is Zen. Gregory Bateson, brilliant but hopelessly alcoholic as he was, chose to die at the facilities of the San Francisco Zen Centre. It would seem that even if he couldn’t manage to sustain practice himself, he did recognize, even while “drinking the dregs of reality”, the transcendent freedom of practice.

Zen practice is entering completely with mind and body into this life, into each moment. We “enter” by paying open attention to the actual details of experiencing. Take a deep breath. Feel your feet on the floor. Really feel them, not with the head but with the feet themselves, the soles, the skin, muscles and bone. Feel the breath leave the body. See the black ink on the page as you read these marks on paper. See your hands holding the magazine. Feel the weight of the magazine and the muscles of your arms. Notice the texture of the page. Be aware of thoughts and feelings. Notice sounds.

By reading the article and becoming aware of other aspects of your experiencing, you introduced an element of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the beginning of Zen, the first step on the path to the realization of unconditional freedom...freedom from the contractions of conditions.

Unconditional freedom is difficult to talk about because, not only is it an experience, it is a new way of experiencing. Language is only a metaphor for experience. The problem is not, as Steve Richards stated in his article, “that we don’t know how to speak of enlightenment”, but that the Actual Nature can only be experienced directly by each individual and our expression of that experience is not an “explanation” of it.

7

Zen is the realized-practice of complete and open awareness. NLP is a learned model of bodymind functioning that arises within awareness. Both Zen and NLP are concerned with the experiences of bodymind; Zen however, points to and requires radical clarity and teaches us to experience fully the actual nature of bodymind: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, smelling, feeling, thinking as these arise moment after moment, both in formal practice and in the rest of our day-to-day experiences. *Seeing forms with the whole body and mind, hearing sounds with the whole body and mind, one understands them intimately*[fn]Dogen zenji: *Genjokoan: Progress Into the Ordinary*[/fn].

Body arises as mind, Mind arises as body, Right here, right now The Way achieves itself. [fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi, *Shinjin Gatha*, composed for Shikai shamini, 1989.[/fn] Dogen zenji says that the recognition of the need to practice and the actual doing of it is enlightenment itself. But “understanding” this is not enough. The student needs to spend time on the zafu (cushion) until their realization of their own Actual Nature is complete. And even when it seems complete, it is truly just beginning; this has been called “sudden enlightenment followed by gradual practice” by the ancient Korean and Chinese masters Chinul and Tsung-mi[fn]Anzan Hoshin roshi, *The Heart of This Moment*, Great Matter Publications, 1989.[/fn]. The message of Zen practice, the knowledge and treasure of this body and mind, kept alive by men and women dedicated to the cessation of suffering for all beings, is as fresh today as it was 2,600 years ago. To sum up: Zen is radical surgery. NLP is a pain killer. NLP and similar methods help us rearrange the contents of our experience into different, more functional, patterns. Zen works with the context of the contents. In the world as it is, both have their place. However, in a world where everyone practised saijojo zen, the need for bodymind approaches, such as NLP, would simply fall away. A little story that Anzan roshi sometimes uses to help orient new students might be useful: Someone (we won't name names) sits down before a bowl of steaming broth and is busily trying to eat it--with a fork. Someone else, a therapist perhaps, seeing the frustration that the poor fellow is experiencing, tries to help and so she takes his fork from him. “There, there, now. Don't you see that this just won't do?”, she says. And then she kindly hands him a nice, shining, silver fork. Zen says: Just pick up the bowl and drink.