

LEARNING TO COMMUNICATE

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The Japanese character for learning tells us a great deal. The bottom part signifies white, clean or unprejudiced; the upper part refers to the flapping of a bird's wings, especially a baby bird as it is first learning to fly. Implicit in this dual form is the notion of repeated action. (Illustration I)



There is a Zen story which illustrates well the meaning of the bottom of this character. Two university students went to a Zen master saying, 'Master, we have come here to listen to you.' The Master stared at their faces for a moment and then said, 'One moment.' He went into the kitchen and came out with a tray holding two tea cups full of tea and a teapot, which he placed in front of them. When the students thanked him for his trouble, he started to pour more tea into the already full cups, and of the course the tea overflowed. The students wondered what he was doing and asked, 'Master, what are you doing?' He paid no attention. The second time they asked him he answered, 'Do you now understand what I mean?' They answered, 'No.' The Master replied, 'Then you'd better go home.'

This is a simple story but it has a profound message. The Master said that the students were not ready to listen - their cups were full. Full cups will hold no more tea, just as full minds will hold no more knowledge. The message of the Master was for them

to empty their cups so that they could let in or receive. One does not have to agree in order to receive. To listen is to be receptive to people or people's opinions, whether one likes them or not. So when one is listening, he has to forget himself. That is, he has to empty his cup. This demands a change in a communication situation, or a change in behavior.

How can listening as a skill be developed? I am reminded of the advice handed down by Dogen, the Zen Buddhist Master, who said, 'The way to Buddha is to learn about oneself. And to learn about oneself, one has to forget oneself. When one forgets himself, he can be one with everything.' He can then communicate with every existent thing in the world, and Dogen was saying that this is the way to find Buddha.

Totally outside the religious implications here, I have sought to apply the Dogen methodology to the teaching of listening skill. The particular technique involves exercise in a certain way of Zen painting called hoshu no tama (a circle with the top suggestive of flames.) (Illustration II) In the exercise one is to find out how to forget himself in order to learn about himself. Essentially this is a kind of mirror act - one sees in his instantaneous drawing of the circle a reflection of his condition, his state of being, at that particular moment. He confronts himself. Drawing involves 'doing', and through action one discovers himself. The 'doing' is nothing more than training, and it is sheer repetition.

My students in undergraduate classes at International Christian University and in executive training programs at the Fuji Film Company have been put to drawing circles and flames as a step toward becoming better communicators. It is amazing what this simple exercise can do. Of course, it is not so simple as it appears. The inner state is all-important, with the goal of achieving 'no-mindedness' by emptying oneself, forgetting oneself.*

*'No-mindedness' may be roughly but inadequately described by such terms as 'no-thought', 'no-form', 'devoid of striving', 'free from deliberate effort', 'non-interfering', etc.



Illustration II.

Through repeated drawing of the hoshu no tama the students and young executives discovered that their drawings were unpredictable. When they tried to produce better drawings, to impress people, they were not able to bring out their best. But the closer they got to no-mindedness, the better were the results, and the individual was himself the first to recognize this.

In Zen, the self is being expressed in every action, and even in the most mundane aspects of life the self-expression becomes an art. A Zen Master typically evaluates a person by looking at the way he walks as the person is going away from him.

There is another Zen story about a monk who was serving an apprenticeship for three years, but who did not learn anything about Zen. One day he went to the Master and asked why he did not get anything out of his life in the temple. 'What is Zen?' he

asked. The Master answered, 'Did you eat your breakfast?' The disciple answered, 'Yes.' 'All right, then go and wash your dishes,' was the Master's answer. The point, of course, was to stress discovering himself through doing.

It is important to understand that no-mindedness can only be found in action. Though it is not the same as washing dishes, through drawing hoshu no tama one can learn and acquire skills to be one, even with inanimate things. This is the ultimate goal of Zen, and I find that it is the ultimate goal of communication also.

If you wish to try the experiment, use some white paper, brush and black ink. First draw a circle in one stroke. Next, draw flames coming out of the circle as a symbol of infinite power or strength. Now you have executed hoshu no tama, which means human beings are like precious jewels. In repeated execution of the drawing you find that you are learning more about yourself. With each picture you are expressing a new self-understanding. In the state of no-mindedness, effortlessly, a strength emerges from within you, your true self. This is both satisfying to you and appealing to others.

The first attitude of students before they move into action is a fear of expressing themselves. They have to force themselves to do it. Next they discover that the circle differs each time, that they are never able to express the same one again. Each one is a unique product. Third, they realize that they cannot foresee what kind of self-expression they are going to come up with, and they realize that they cannot control themselves. The students find that when they feel irritable and tired it shows plainly on the paper. Every mental and physical condition is revealed in the drawing in the form of total expression. For instance, the drawing itself lacks vitality when the person is tired. After many attempts the student comes up with a pleasing and satisfying drawing. He cannot analyze why he likes it, why it is so pleasing as a totality.

These insights emerge: The drawings are like mirrors, they reveal the self. The human being is changing, never the same at any moment. He is unable to control and therefore to predict himself, since he has no fixed form. When a pleasing product is made it impresses not only himself, but also others. Discovery has moved from the particular to the universal.

When does the student produce pleasing results? When he forgets himself, when he is not self-conscious, when he has achieved no-mindedness. It becomes clear to him that when he empties himself,

power is felt coming out. However, the duration of no-mindedness is short: in the flash of a second other thoughts creep in, so that when he tries to remind himself to be of no-mindedness, he is at that very moment being of 'mindedness'.

A little experience at this teaches him that he cannot force himself; too much effort prevents him from forgetting himself. Students who have practiced the exercise soon realize that to forget oneself is a skill, the resultant of much training.

Once they produce a pleasing drawing they become motivated to repeat, and do not mind repeating the drawing because the reward is so refreshing, which amazes them. Interestingly enough, they do not know how and when they come out as 'themselves'. As with a good golf shot, one does not know how the drawing was produced, but it simply came out of him as a total performance in the flash of a moment. It is through repetition of an act that one gains the experience of no-mindedness. This repetition takes time, but the more it is done, with attention, not just mechanically, the oftener a satisfactory product is likely to come out.

Now a strange thing happens. The student learns to stop in the midst of his enjoyment. He does not stop because he is tired, or bored. His nervous system tells him when to stop in order not to become too attached to the enjoyment or the product. This sense of restraint, the denial of obsession, is a by-product of the exercise.

In the next stage the student wants to make a change, usually a very minor one, such as a different brush, size of paper, or quality of ink. The effect is astonishing. The smallest variation in technique seems greatly exaggerated in the total impression. Fascinated, he pursues his own devices and proceeds to establish his own style. This I call creation. By 'creation' I mean changes in one's productions which are according to one's own desire but are not made deliberately. It is important to understand that creativity can come only after arduous training with the fixed form. After the form has been mastered, creativity will inevitably emerge. I have witnessed this with students who never thought of themselves as artists, and who probably don't have that talent in the usually accepted sense. But in accordance with the Zen sense, once one has realized his power of self-expression he is considered an artist. The discovery of such potential brings a quiet and deep kind of joy.

As they continue to produce drawings of the hoshu no tama students come to a stage where they can accept any and every result. The drawing is not a conscious effort, but a mirror image. To recognize

that and thus accept the results involves total acceptance of self. Every product becomes, indeed, a precious experience which has value to the person at that moment. Even if during the course of training the student feels discouraged with one of his drawings, he can still accept it because he can see in it the progress he has made in self-expression since his first drawing. (Illustration III)



The acceptance of each performance helps the student to learn how important it is to be imperfect. This is a most relaxed inner state, when he gains a love of performance regardless of the result. Finally the student learns to become one with the drawings that emit from his brush, that is, at one with himself.

Yet there is more that happens. The paper he uses becomes precious to him. He wants to show reverence to the paper. It becomes more than just a 'substance'; he realizes that he has an intimate relationship with it, and with the brush and the ink. And then it is the desk, chair, floor, or anything else around him. Everything becomes precious to him, and he wants to show reverence to everything. Now

he has come to a total acceptance of those objects because he sees them as mirrors which reflect his formless self.

The student feels that he can be one with anything. If he saw a cricket, he could become one with it. He thoroughly enjoys the little creature, no matter how insignificant it may appear to others. The cricket 'is everything' - the whole world - at that particular moment. In Zen this means to communicate with the cricket. Such power derives from awareness of one's real self, the formless self. One who has achieved this may sense communication with any and all things. He becomes acute to the marvelous world he lives in, and all things come alive. The diversity is astonishing, because it exists in unity. All things in the world are connected like knots of a fishing net. When one knot is lifted other knots are lifted too. Everything is interrelated; nothing exists in isolation. Thus, if he can communicate with one object, then he should be able to communicate with any other object.

Communication in Zen means to be one with the other. An awareness of 'oneness' develops from emptying oneself and accepting the other. This is perhaps easier said than done. Zen trainees spend years at it. For us all it may also be said that learning to become a good communicator is not easy; it requires a long continuing process of training.

The four skills of communication - listening, speaking, reading and writing - all have to be learned, and we are introduced to them in that order. The child's efforts to speak are polished by instruction, as is his ability to read and write. Thus the encoding skills are rather fully covered; so is one of the decoding skills, reading. But, strangely, the other important decoding skill, which happens to be the first naturally exercised by the infant, seems to be left to chance. Rarely is any training given to develop the skill of listening. Yet this is the most difficult of the four, calling for the most subtle form of training.

Listening is a most positive action. It requires acceptance of others - total acceptance for a good listener. As illustrated in the story of the Zen master's tea cups, the listener must empty himself, achieving the state of no-mindedness. This state is not merely passive; on the contrary, it involves an action of the 'whole self' directed toward becoming one with the other.

The total acceptance involved in this act means to me to love. It surmounts the apathy, or lack of understanding, or even lack of respect that we might have for another. To do good for others is fine, and is an indication of love. But in the hurried age we

live in, it is a more genuine expression of love merely to listen to persons we encounter, to be one with them. Then we will know what to ask, what to say, and what to do. In the jargon of communication study, we have learned 'feedback'.

To the Western proverb 'Silence is golden' a Japanese counterpart adds, 'and speech is silver.' Both imply that listening is the more precious of the two communication skills. That, I believe, is because listening is more difficult. It is also commonly said that a good speaker becomes so by being a good listener. Some people do work at this, but it is the rare individual who has empathy with his audience thoroughly, who becomes one with his listener. If all of us received training in listening from an early age, as we do in the other communication skills, how much better we would understand one another.

When I came upon the Dogen practice of Zen painting it naturally occurred to me that here was something aimed at the results that I had been attempting to achieve in my communication skill courses. It seemed perfectly designed for that most needed of all the skills, indirect though the method might appear. After ten years of experience with students I can confidently say it works.

A part of my work has been to train young people for the very difficult task of simultaneous interpretation, which I have attempted myself to do on any number of occasions. This has taken me into many halls in Japan, the United States, Canada and countries of Southeast Asia, Europe and Africa where international conferences were conducted. In Tokyo alone there are, on the average, three or four such conferences held each week.

The problems of communication through different languages are difficult enough, but it has been my common experience to observe a more serious barrier. The delegates are so concerned about being understood that they forget to make the effort to understand. They want to speak, but somehow cannot listen. Needless to say, without achieving empathy with their audience they are not very successful speakers.

It is possible that we have a hint here of a basic reason for international misunderstanding. Within our own communities, too, and even within the family, the lack is frequently present. We hear but we do not listen. It is like reading a page of text while our attention wanders - nothing is absorbed. Listening differs from reading in that there is a closer human contact, and in this sense it would seem that listening should be easier. Yet for most of us it is not, because our tea cups are overflowing.

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Mrs. Saito-Fukunaga (or 'Mitzie', as her friends here call her) is very active teaching and writing in Tokyo. She also travels throughout the world in her work as interpreter at diplomatic meetings, and to attend conferences. In addition, she has a busy life as the wife of a Member of Parliament (the Japanese Diet).

As Associate Professor in the Department of Communication at International Christian University, Mitzie now teaches the following courses: Oral Communication, Introduction to the Study of Communication I (Intra-personal Communication), General Semantics, Psychology of Language, Conference Interpreting I, II, and III.

Her published books include: The Science of Spoken Language and Theories of Listening, and in translation, The Silent Language by Edward Hall and Living in the World of Words by J. Condon. There are also numerous articles published in newspapers and periodicals.

STEPHEN TOULMIN is a philosopher, scientist and historian of science. He is the author (with his wife, June Goodfield) of two volumes in Hutchinson's The Ancestry of Science series — The Fabric of the Heavens (1961) and The Architecture of Matter (1962). For many years he was lecturer in the Philosophy of Science at Oxford and a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge. He taught at Brandeis University, and now is teaching in the Department of Philosophy at Michigan State University at East Lansing.

In his article on Ludwig Wittgenstein, Dr. Toulmin gives a historical analysis of Wittgenstein's intellectual development, and shows the continuity in his long Odyssey. It was, of course, his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus which greatly influenced Korzybski in the early 1920's (Wittgenstein is among those to whom Science and Sanity is dedicated). As Dr. Toulmin points out, Wittgenstein was misread by the 'logical positivists', members of the Vienna Circle, and 'once [he] had been labelled as a positivist men found it hard to see him in any other light.' On reading this fascinating account of his development, we see other important influences in his life. Korzybski, also erroneously, has been called a 'logical positivist', perhaps partly by association because of his interest in Wittgenstein.