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## Zen Communication - A Cross Cultural Approach to Mindfulness, Appropriate Response, and Flow in Dyadic Interactions

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Zen Communication: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Mindfulness,  
Appropriate Response, and Flow in Dyadic Interactions

By

Gregory Husak

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

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Zen Communication: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Mindfulness, Appropriate Response, and Flow in Dyadic Interactions

Gregory Husak

This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the thesis committee.

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## **Abstract**

This study examined the question of how the qualities that arise from the practice of traditionally East Asian disciplines such as Zen and related martial arts might be effectively applied to dyadic interactions. Long-form interviews of about 40 minutes each were conducted with academics who have studied these topics and with expert practitioners who have extensive direct experience. Most subjects had significant cross-cultural experience, having studied and/or practiced in both the U.S. and in Japan. Detailed analysis of transcripts of these recorded interviews indicated that, in particular, the seated Zen meditation practice known as zazen generates personally transformational qualities that immediately and significantly enhance dyadic interactions. A discourse on cross-cultural issues and implications, explanation of key Zen concepts and principles, and examination of the effects of more extensive Zen practice are included.

## Zen Communication: A Cross-Cultural Approach to Mindfulness,

### Appropriate Response, and Flow in Dyadic Interactions

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

A curious Midwestern American boy who had been frustrated growing up in a religion he felt was rooted in guilt and power found a strange new sense of focus and peace when he started practicing Zen meditation. He had stumbled upon a single book in his local library that examined how seated meditation could bring calm, mindfulness, and even enlightenment to anyone who may have found themselves wrestling with traditional Western approaches to defining one's place in the universe. Admittedly, the exotic otherness of Zen was an initial draw, but he soon learned that Zen is eminently practical and simple, rather than exotic. Sitting on a cushion, facing a blank wall and just observing may be as simple as any practice gets, but it soon became apparent that simple does not equal easy. "Try to think of not thinking," a Zen master told him. In college, his study and practice deepened as he took courses in Eastern philosophies and gained perspective and understanding. In addition to Zen, he began to practice martial arts. The Japanese art of aikido became his focus, with its paradoxical emphasis on non-violence, non-reaction, and simply seeing things as they are. His sensei, an accomplished painter, encouraged him to try shodo, traditional Japanese brush writing that refines one's martial practices as it reveals one's character and state of mind with each brushstroke. He then took university Mandarin Chinese courses to learn and fully understand the characters necessary for true shodo practice as well as the unique concepts hidden within the

characters. This long path was clearly much more than a passing interest, and in time it paid the benefits of a powerful equanimity when he practiced and a noticeable restlessness when he did not. He often wondered whether these benefits of his years of practice could be tied to a specific, simple concept that might have some broader practical application.

This person is, of course, me. A few years ago, while recovering from an injury that suspended my aikido practice and indeed even my ability to sit in Zen meditation for some time, I began to consider how and whether some of the core concepts and principles from these practices could be useful in dyadic interactions and other communication settings. Just as martial artists, shodo practitioners and students of Zen all learn and apply specific East Asian concepts to take their practices to another level, what is the potential for communicators to apply techniques of mindfulness, appropriate response, and flow to facilitate more effective and compassionate communication? For example, if I am focused only on the outcome I desire when I enter into a conversation with someone, I may get what I want, but the other person will likely not feel they have been heard or respected. Further, if the other person calls me self-centered, or ignorant of their needs, and I react with defensiveness or anger, the conversation is not likely to end well. On the other hand, if I enter into the conversation committed to dispassionately observing what is happening in the discussion, without forcing my agenda or reacting to any perceived slights, I have time to think clearly and to respond appropriately and compassionately. What sorts of results could be expected from consistently applying this approach in conversation with friends, with family, in romantic relationships, or in the workplace? Such an approach may require reconceptualizing communication to an extent.

## **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

The essential problem to be addressed is that dyadic interactions in the U.S. and much of the West are becoming progressively more agenda-driven and time-driven, making it less likely that both parties will come away from the conversation satisfied. As consumerism and technology reduce dyadic interactions to shorter, faster, mobile communications that increasingly don't even involve actual speech, the focus is on what I want and the expectation is that I will get it instantly. Further, our ever-increasing self-obsession keeps us in our own way too much of the time. We are so focused on what we want, how we look, how we are being perceived, and what we're putting in our mouths and our heads that our own ability to clearly perceive much beyond ourselves is severely diminished. The hope of seeing the other and their wants and needs with anything approaching accuracy is reduced if not entirely precluded by this expanding self-focus. Mutually satisfying and meaningful dyadic communication becomes rare if not impossible as a result. The purpose of the study, then, is to examine the practicality and potential benefits of applying to dyadic interactions the state of mindfulness, appropriate response, and flow that is inherent in traditionally East Asian practices like Zen and martial arts. To accomplish that purpose, I will address these research questions: How could such a state be accessed by virtually anyone, whether or not they have had prior experience with Zen or martial arts? In what ways could this state be applied to dyadic interactions to make them more appropriately responsive, dispassionate, and mutually beneficial?

## **Application of East Asian Concepts in Western Scholarship**

The integration of these East Asian concepts into a Western study, and potentially into primarily Western communication, requires some understanding of terms and ideas that many authors, both in and especially outside of academics, intentionally present as esoteric and mysterious. Doing so captures imaginations and sells books, but it doesn't help the reader understand the subject. My intention is to make these terms and ideas as clear and accessible as possible, and to present them in ways that relate to their eventual application to a study in communication. Zen itself is actually a very simple concept: sitting in meditation so that one can glimpse reality more clearly. The potential conundrum is that it is vital for these purposes to have at least some awareness of the initially inscrutable aesthetic that both constructs and results from such practice. To wit:

"When you do something, you should burn yourself completely, like a good bonfire, leaving no trace of yourself."- Shunryu Suzuki.

This quotation by one of the men most responsible for bringing Japanese Zen Buddhism to the U.S. is illustrative of a key concept in Zen: Whatever we do, we should do it completely, exclusively, and without judgment. The aim is to be fully in the moment, because, in the view of Zen, the moment is all that we have; it is all that exists. Practitioners essentially get more out of the moment by paying complete attention to it. This attention is simultaneously intense and calm, mindful yet dispassionate, flowing and timeless. When we engage in dyadic interaction, especially from this perspective, could we also do that "completely, exclusively, and without judgment"?

Another potential concern to note at this point is that of exoticization. Intercultural Communication studies have identified the risks of exoticizing any culture



such that intrigue or attraction exists simply on the basis of its otherness. My hope and my intention is that I keep my focus on the potential value and practical application of concepts that, in this case, happen to be primarily Japanese. The reality is that while these concepts developed in another place and time, they appear to me to present ideas that have not been significantly examined from the perspective of Western communication despite their substantial potential value here, probably simply because those potentials have not been elucidated. It is also worth noting that contemporary Japanese themselves may not have any more understanding of the principles of Zen, mushin, or aikido than most Westerners. When I first had frequent interactions with Japanese and discussed my interest in these topics, my cultural ignorance was such that I was surprised to learn that they not only did not practice meditation in particular or Buddhism in general, but they had little practical familiarity with much of what is referred to as “traditional Japanese culture.” As in this country (if not more so), their stated focus was generally on more typically Western forms of entertainment, technology, and consumerism. Significantly, numerous Japanese students told me that, after a year or two living in the U.S., they began studying some traditional Japanese art for the first time in their lives. In any case, it is apparent that the lack of potential communication applications of the Japanese concepts explored here is not only a Western phenomenon, but is also the case in contemporary Japan itself.

### **Integration of Key Concepts: Zen, Martial Arts, Flow, and Mindfulness**

It is also important to recognize the interrelation of Zen, martial arts, and the concepts like flow and mindfulness that both spring from them and are made manifest in them. Zen found its first significant application beyond temples filled with monks when it

was adopted and adapted by the samurai. Many are surprised that such a peaceful and calming pursuit would appeal to a warrior class. When we consider the samurai not as the stuff of action films or television parodies but as real individuals who were charged with life or death duties and a highly challenging code of conduct, the merger of Zen and the samurai becomes more apparent. Zen's emphasis on being completely in the moment, seeing things as clearly and realistically as possible, and avoiding attachment are concepts that serve a professional swordsman particularly well. As subsequent examples will illustrate, it is only when the mind is unfettered and clear, and appropriate response occurs spontaneously, that the samurai is able to execute his duties, in a very literal sense. I found the same is true in today's much safer aikido dojo. If you have to stop and think about a physical movement or response, there is no flow, and when there is no flow there is no aikido – you are already beaten. In the dojo, we were continually reminded that aikido itself is communication. Talking was discouraged; we were told that we should be able to find all we needed to know about an attack (and the attacker) by simply observing and spontaneously responding, but we could only do that effectively if we weren't thinking too much, or weren't focused on ourselves. The extension to dyadic interactions, even the most basic of conversations, is clear. It stands to reason that, if we are focused on ourselves, if our mind is racing, or if we are not "in the moment," our communication will suffer. Likewise, if we are clearly and fully observing our dyadic partner, if our mind is calm, and if we are completely in the moment, the quality of our communication should be dramatically enhanced. The interrelated components of Zen and the martial arts, and the concepts that emerge from them, provide an example and a potential model

that may inform our dyadic interactions in ways that have not yet been extensively explored.

One other brief point regarding the intersection of Zen, the samurai, and communication is necessary. Just as Zen was to the samurai not a spiritual pursuit but an eminently practical, ethical and philosophical framework, the same would be true of how it might inform communication. While Zen Buddhism serves as a spiritual practice to many in both the East and West, for our purposes it should be viewed simply as Zen – meditation and mindfulness – itself.

### **Force vs. Flow**

The related traditions of Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism have yielded a body of ideas that may have particular value in the West precisely because they are so different from a typical Western approach. Contemporary Western cultures have generally been established and sustained by force and domination of nature and of others, while much older East Asian cultures have more generally valued flow and living in accord with nature. The ancient cultures of China and Japan stand in living testament to the sustainability of the flow approach, while western cultures have experienced relatively brief periods of flourish followed by rapid recession or implosion, due to the non-sustainability of force.

Flow is central to and made manifest particularly in uniquely Japanese arts such as aikido, shodo, and Zen. In Zen Buddhism as in Taoism, it is implicit that not trying to force things is the only way to a positive outcome. The Taoist concept of wu-wei (“non-doing”) says that we are one with our environment and with each other, so going with the

current will gently and peacefully take us down our respective paths. A principal aim of Zen is simply sitting in meditation (zazen, Japanese for “seated meditation”) observing our place in a completely interconnected universe in which everything and everyone is one. Simply sitting and observing may sound easy, perhaps even slothful. In reality, zazen meditation is not “zoning out” or going into a trance, but rather it is being as present and aware of the moment as possible; being mindful. Shodo, Japanese brush writing, requires the practitioner to simultaneously concentrate with profound intensity and to clear one’s mind of conscious thought, such that one’s training in the art carries the brush on its course. Again, the concept of flow is inherent. This simultaneous profound concentration and abandonment of thought is expressed in the Japanese term *mushin no shin*, or “the mind of no mind.” This concept is central to the thesis.

### **Mushin and Mindful Non-Reaction**

It should be noted here that, while there is little directly applicable research on these concepts from the Communication Studies perspective, a good deal is available from the discipline of Psychology, specifically Cultural Psychology. A concurrent independent study project in Psychology has informed this project significantly. One of the most immediate examples, to be discussed in greater detail in the literature review, is Csíkszentmihályi’s (1990) flow theory. Essentially, Csíkszentmihályi’s theory coincidentally yet independently affirms the Eastern concept of flow. Another key Psychology source is Johnson’s (2011) work with hospice patients who were quickly taught a Zen-based meditation technique which brought significant calm and peace to end-of-life care. Further, ongoing research and discussion with Norasakkunkit dating back to a 2008 Cultural Psychology lab has provided not only important directly

observable material but also connections to other contemporary researchers. Finally, consecutive courses in Intercultural Communication and Gender and Communication taught by Sekimoto in 2008 and 2009 were the spark that gave rise to this research effort and revealed a wealth of perspectives and resources. These foundational elements will be supplemented by others supporting the idea of a communications model based on Zen and other traditional Japanese concepts.

As for aikido, the “harmonized spirit way” is a martial art uniquely founded in the idea of flow. The goal is to redirect an attacker’s energy such that they are gently guided into a position of submission without injury to anyone. A state of *mushin* is required for aikido to “work.” If one thinks about it, it will be too late, or concerns about technique will get in the way of the flow of energy. The “*ki*” in the Japanese art of aikido is synonymous with the Chinese *qi* (or *chi*), meaning spirit, breath, or life force. Many Westerners received their first orientation to this concept through the science-fiction series of Star Wars films. Described in the films as “The Force,” creator George Lucas acknowledged that he modeled the concept on *ki* or *chi*. Lucas also reportedly modeled the wise Jedi master Yoda in part on the diminutive founder of aikido, Morihei Ueshiba, who into his eighties was filmed subduing groups of young attackers using this power of *ki*. Whether or not *ki/chi* is physically real and measurable is still debated, but a great deal of evidence in the affirmative is found in both practical martial arts application and a growing body of medical research.

The paradox of *mushin no shin*, again, the mind of no mind, is that it certainly does not mean “mindless,” as many might interpret “no mind;” rather, it embodies mindfulness in the Buddhist sense of that word. To live mindfully is to live fully present,

fully aware, and in full acceptance of one's surroundings. To do so – to let ego fall away and to simply see – is to fully experience the moment, whatever that moment may hold. Now, while in this state of mindfulness, one can with some training and discipline begin to recognize and apply mushin. One common example of mushin is again expressed in the actions of the samurai. If a samurai has to think about how he will react to a sword attack from an opponent, it will be too late – he will be killed. If he maintains mushin, however, he is able to respond appropriately, by not thinking about how he will react or about his own reality, but relying only on his training for a spontaneous and effective response. It is this subtle difference between reacting to what someone else says or does and responding in a disciplined, non-judgmental manner that I believe has yet unrealized potential in the realm of communication.

For our purposes, based on this subtle difference between reaction and response, mushin might be explored both from the advanced perspective of martial art and from a more fundamental view of what is sometimes called “non-reaction.” When someone raises their voice and speaks in anger, we know what is likely to happen if we react in kind and escalate the situation. If we practice non-reaction, however, by not buying into someone else's destructive approach, we can respond to the angry verbal attack in a calm, dispassionate manner that conveys mutual respect and a path to a more peaceful and productive resolution. A foundational principle of aikido, frequently called “the art of peace,” is that where there is no resistance, there is no battle. That is not to say that one simply allows an attacker to dominate them; again, the aikido practitioner uses the attacker's own energy to gently guide them to a position in which neither party can be

hurt. When force is met with force, destruction results. When force is met with flow, peaceful resolution can result.

It would be wrong to assume that mushin and non-reaction is only the realm of those who practice traditional Japanese arts, or even that they require a high level of long-term training. All of us can think of examples of something that we can do more easily and deftly when we “don’t think about it.” It is at its simplest a matter of taking over-thinking out of the equation, and making an effort to simply see things as they are and engage on that basis.

### **Précis of Chapters**

In Chapter 2, a literature review explores extant research on the broad concepts outlined above. The intent is to gather data from previous relevant studies and to determine specifically how such data might relate to my communication-based questions. Cross-cultural data will also be addressed, and initial determinations will be made as to how these previous studies might refine my course of inquiry.

Chapter 3 explains the research method used in this study. The case is made for why a qualitative approach was chosen, using long-form interviews with expert practitioners and academics to provide data for analysis. Included are specifics about the interview method and process, how subjects were recruited, and plans to make the recorded interviews available online and potentially as a public radio series.

Chapter 4 includes the hard data I gathered in my interviews with practitioners and academics. The intent was to include quotations extensive enough to fully explain the relevant viewpoints and observations of the interview subjects, while providing my own

analysis of why and how the selected quotations are salient, along with concurrent supplementary information clarifying some of the necessary historical and cultural elements in this discourse.

In Chapter 5, I synthesize the data in a discussion of the method or technique that emerged as most effective in enhancing dyadic interactions. The analysis is brought back to my original research questions, with a relevant case study and other specific examples of how the emergent method proves efficacious and, ultimately, how this study has brought a succinct definition to what I call Zen Communication.



## **Chapter 2**

### **Literature Review**

This literature review comprises an exposition and integration of relevant resource material from divergent disciplines including primarily Communication Studies and Psychology, but also Zen, aikido, and related concepts. The intent is to begin with some important foundational sources in each of these areas, then add more specific supportive studies to further illustrate and develop the relevant ideas. The effort has been to present the material in a manner that is sequential in thought if not always in chronology. In a few cases, some sources are not in agreement with others, or have flaws that may lessen their significance. They are included here because, rather than generating doubt or distraction, an analysis of their faults or contradictions serves to further illuminate the review and support the eventual conclusions. Another benefit of the divergent source material is that it has provided a wealth of new perspectives that can inform the actual research process in fresh and interesting ways.

#### **Extant Resource Material**

The available Communication Studies literature on this particular research question is scant. Some articles deal with the topic in a secondary or tertiary manner, and to an extent they have informed this project. There is a good deal of material in the respective fields of Zen and Buddhism, martial arts, and traditional Japanese arts regarding the concepts of mushin and non-reaction, but they are generally not concerned with communication per se. Care is being exercised to avoid pop culture or “new age” materials that don’t stand up to the rigors of academic analysis. Purely academic material

on the topic has generally been related to how Asian values and attitudes might inform communication studies in a macro sense. Such a broad approach may be self-defeating, in that practical communication hypotheses require more specific and narrow principles than could be found in an assessment of so-called Asian values. The divergence of values and approaches among the great variety of Asian nations may render such broad terms moot. What some of these sources could provide, however, was a valuable overview of communication and intercultural studies in various Asian nations, indicating that attempts have been made to conceptualize and apply traditionally Asian concepts for the communications community internationally. Fortunately, as previously noted, a great deal more relevant research has been done from the discipline of Psychology. The importance and integration of this material will be explained in detail later in this literature review.

### **A Foundational Early Attempt**

Dobson and Miller (1993) provided a method for using the principles of aikido in interpersonal communication. While the book used some “pop” slogans and phrases to drive home key points, it presented a way for both aikido practitioners and those interested in its principles to apply them to everyday interactions. The most basic of these concepts is that where there is no resistance, there is no conflict. This is not to say that conflict can or should always be avoided. Rather, the ideal is to take ego and defensiveness out of the equation, so that the “attacker” will inevitably stop pushing when they realize there is nothing to push up against. Anyone who physically attacks an aikido practitioner will soon find their attacks useless, because each time they attack, they will be quickly yet gently taken through the force of their own energy to a safe and neutral position. This phenomenon is genuinely astonishing when first experienced, in

my case administered by a younger and much smaller Japanese woman in my first aikido class. One wonders first how their body ended up on the other side of the room or mat so quickly, and second how it is that they are not injured. Applying this concept and approach to dyadic interactions, one could choose to react to a verbal attack with equally aggressive and malevolent force of their own. This would result in a protracted “battle” in which both people are likely to be “hurt,” and no constructive result is possible. If, however, instead of reacting with equal force, the verbal aikido practitioner chooses to respond thoughtfully and calmly, with the intent of quickly bringing the attacker to another “place” that is calm and safe, a peaceful and potentially constructive result is quite possible. In some cases, when an attacker cannot be mollified or subdued, one must simply disengage. This may leave the attacker frustrated, but it thwarts the potential for “injury” when peaceful resolution is impossible. Where there is no resistance, there is no conflict.

The subheading of the book described the process as “giving in to get your way.” While that may or may not have sold books, this inaccurately implies that aikido practitioners typically “give in” to others and are most concerned with “getting their way.” Neither of these ideas is a good model for a martial art or for interpersonal communication. A more accurate way of phrasing it, and of reflecting the key concept of the book, would be “using the attacker’s own energy to show them that an attack will not get them what they want.” The book addresses the continuous debate between practitioners who experience aikido as Ueshiba intended, an art of peace, and those who take advantage of the profound power of the techniques to simply dominate opponents by inflicting pain or injury, as in most other martial arts. The actor Steven Seagal is a well-

known example of an aikido “master” who uses the techniques in what is frequently described as a sadistic manner, because he seems to enjoy not only dominating but also inflicting unnecessary pain on less experienced practitioners in aikido demonstrations (in keeping with the original intent of the art, there are no competitions or combat tournaments in aikido). While Seagal appears to bring his Hollywood film image to the aikido mat, his macho demonstrations are a clear violation of the true intent of the art and its practice. Aikido practitioners who are true to the art’s core principle of gentle and peaceful resolution are disgusted by such displays of sadistic brute force. The point here is that, as on the martial arts mat, anyone who uses communication styles that simply intimidate or dominate others will find themselves perhaps feared, but also avoided and isolated rather than respected. On the other hand, those who can remain calm, keep their center, and respectfully and fully listen and observe will find that others not only respect them but also enjoy interacting with them, and typically care about them as a person. While Dobson and Miller addressed many complex techniques that would be understood mainly by those already well versed in aikido, the lesson is clear. They contend that the principles of mushin and non-reaction can be rapidly conceptualized and applied in communication settings, whether or not someone has deep knowledge of the related arts.

### **Further Cross-Cultural Implications**

A further word about some of the cross-cultural implications is in order here. Friedman (2005) expanded on the importance of recognizing what some Japanese cultural and martial traditions can bring to the contemporary West, while simultaneously taking care not to romanticize or exoticize them. It was, first, encouraging to find that his introduction was very similar to the one I had written before reading this source, citing

Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism/Shintoism, Suzuki, the samurai, and particularly aikido. This piece dealt specifically with romanticism and psychological implications of aikido, but it provided important intercultural perspective. For example, Friedman recounted how a group of contemporary Japanese businessmen laughed at him when he spoke of his strong interest in aikido and in Zen. One told him that it would be like a Japanese person coming to the U.S. wanting to learn how to draw and fire an Old West six-shooter. When Friedman decried the contemporary Japanese disregard for its cultural and martial heritage, the man replied that a solitary, individual practice like Zen meditation ran counter to the collectivist nature of Japanese society, implying that any non-conformist pursuit was to be frowned upon. Indeed, although roughly one in five Japanese self-identify as Buddhist, I am often told that the only people practicing Zen meditation in Japan today are the rapidly shrinking number of monks living in temples and the Westerners who go there to practice with them. Friedman also explored the sharp divide between differing Asian groups following seemingly congruent pursuits, such as the apparent animosity between Japanese aikido practitioners and Koreans who practice the very similar art of Hapkido. His example of a Japanese man of middling martial arts skill being held in much higher regard in the United States than much more accomplished Americans serves as a warning of how romanticism can distort our view and at times even blind us.

### **Organizational Approaches**

Hwang and Brummans (2010) provided a useful exploration of the concept of “engaged Buddhism.” Specifically, this interview-based ethnographic study explored Buddhist organizational principles in a large Buddhist charitable group in Taiwan called

Tzu Chi. The authors noted that several previous studies of Buddhist organizations, along with a paper written by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, have urged that Buddhist principles be “put into action” in organizations and in society. This study focused on the concept of organizing and addressing issues of hierarchy from a Buddhist perspective, and it offered some insights into “Buddhist communication.” The key point for our purposes here is that “it is possible to liberate oneself from one’s self,” that is, from the typical delusions, anger and greed that not only keep us from observing the simultaneous emptiness and oneness that Mahayana Buddhists consider reality, but also prevent the kind of open, complete, mindful engagement with others that can only come when one’s personal concerns are not at the forefront of the interaction. How to do that, from Hwang and Brummans’ perspective, remains only within the reach of those well schooled in Mahayana principles and practice.

Preston (1999) took a similar approach to that of Dobson and Miller, using aikido as a model for making the process of change within organizations a harmonious one. The concept of giving in to get one’s way was again emphasized, in this case for the greater good of the organization. The key points, which must be understood and practiced by change-makers in an organization for the approach to be effective, are 1) whoever fights loses, and 2) when pushed, pull. Typically in organizations, and frequently in interpersonal communication, when people are pushed, they push back. It is a demonstration of power, of potency, to the point that to not do so is to risk appearing weak in a setting that requires the appearance of strength. Preston said that true strength and potency come not from the image of power or strength, but from the demonstrated ability to facilitate deeper engagement and better results.

## **Differing Communication Styles**

A good example of an academic source that takes a meta-view of “Asian communication styles” is Kim (2002). The author made a valid and important point in noting that Western-based communication research frequently takes an ethnocentric view and disregards the interpersonal communication styles of other cultures. For example, the more individualistic communication style of Americans presents pedagogical challenges when introduced in a collectivist culture such as Japan. The book gave a detailed account of a wide range of communication styles (conflict management, self-disclosure, bragging) that would be markedly different from one culture to the next. Ishii (2004) explored “interreligious communication studies” and the importance of having a basic understanding in the tenets of major world religions (in this case, Buddhism) as a component of intercultural communication studies. The author also explained that consciousness, from the perspective of Buddhist epistemology, is an individual experience first and a societal experience second. In other words, although Buddhists believe all people and all things are one and glimpse this “reality” in the enlightened state, the ability to share consciousness is problematic if not impossible. Components of the Buddhist tradition, however, such as compassion, can be effectively applied in the sphere of interpersonal communication.

## **Applied Zen**

For hundreds of years, the primary Zen consciousness of the universality of all things has served as comfort for practitioners confronting mortality. People have found or invented a tremendous range of ways for framing death in an effort to make it anything

other than either a sudden and complete end of all consciousness or the perhaps more terrifying specter of being cast alone into some unknown afterlife experience. Zen, in concept and in practice, provides the aforementioned perception that, just as everything is essentially and immutably one with the rest of the universe, the individual has always been so and will remain so after death. Johnson (2011) recently tested a breakthrough application of zazen in his work with end-of-life patients. His study not only provided a key to effectively addressing emotional issues arising from mortality fears but, more important to this study, showed that the positive relational effects of zazen can be realized in just hours rather than years or a lifetime of practice. In his study, end-of-life patients who were experiencing significant distress worked for one day with an experienced Zen teacher. The teacher taught the patients a simple method of zazen (seated meditation) that can simultaneously produce a deep level of calm and awareness. Compared to a control group, the treatment group demonstrated significantly lower levels of depression, stress, and anxiety, and higher levels of well-being. That such an immediate effect could be achieved not after years of instruction and practice but indeed only one day demonstrates that extensive “mastery” of Zen is not necessary to the enjoyment of its most apparent benefits. This is useful in approaching how zazen might be applied and adapted for communication concerns.

### **A Western Flow Theory**

Csikszentmihalyi (1990) inadvertently developed a psychological model that is absolutely in keeping with concepts of Zen and aikido. He described flow as “containing and channeling the emotions to align them with the task at hand.” In another word, mindfulness. This is not to denigrate his research in any way. Rather, he succeeded in



simultaneously cutting through and integrating potential cultural barriers by using a Western “positive psychology” approach to rapidly arrive at conclusions that took thousands of years to develop in the ancient East. Csikszentmihalyi has subsequently acknowledged that his work strongly echoes that of Eastern Zen practitioners and martial artists, while contending that his theory was developed independent of these influences. Comparing his theory to those ancient concepts, consider these words attributed to the Tokugawa-era Zen master Takuan Soho (1986):

The mind must always be in the state of 'flowing,' for when it stops anywhere, that means the flow is interrupted, and it is this interruption that is injurious to the well-being of the mind. In the case of the swordsman, it means death. When the swordsman stands against his opponent, he is not to think of the opponent, or of himself, or of his enemy's sword movements. He just stands there with his sword, which, forgetful of all technique, is ready only to follow the dictates of the subconscious. The man has effaced himself as the wielder of the sword. When he strikes, it is not the man but the sword in the hand of the man's subconscious that strikes. (p. 56)

Another dimension of Csikszentmihalyi’s theory, one more applicable to this study, is how his state of flow stems from a level of immersion and focus that causes the falling away of the sense of self and, with it, the elimination of any sense of ennui, angst, or depression. He went on to explore and describe how his flow model can be applied in virtually any endeavor, from hobbies to work to interpersonal and even organizational interactions. Key to his findings is the contention that flow is spontaneous. It happens when we are fully engaged, indeed “fully alive,” in the practice of anything. He explained

that most people have had the experience of working on a project or having a conversation in such a deep and focused manner that a sense of time is literally lost. I recall, for example, an animated film project as a teen, for which I had the use of a 16mm camera for only one day. I was so deeply immersed in my little project that, when I thought my mother was knocking on the door to call me to dinner, she was in fact asking when I would finally be going to bed – it was after midnight. The attendant “deep rapture” and “spontaneous joy” that Csikszentmihalyi said accompany the flow state are also frequently referenced by Zen and aikido practitioners. If conversation can be so joyful, gratifying, and ego-less, it can enter the realm of the extra-ordinary, in the true sense of that word. We may come to find that the most natural of states, the flow state, while usually supplanted by our desire for brevity and the conveniences of technology, is where we ought to be far more often than not.

### **Two Waves of Relevant Research**

In contrast to these much more recent studies, Lesh (1970) is reflective of an important phenomenon concerning academic research into Zen in particular. The first major wave of Western academic research on Zen happened concurrently with the massive counterculture movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. The second wave has taken place in the past 10 to 15 years, in keeping with the explosive growth of Western interest in Yoga as well as Buddhism, specifically Zen Buddhism. The substantial body of work from the first wave was generally foundational and broad, while the recent research of the second wave has been more specific and much more focused on application. Lesh was important for these purposes because the study established that zazen can equip the individual with the ability to understand and control the ego-driven

processes that typically cause the individual to put their own concerns above and ahead of those of others in most communication. As Johnson did just this year, Lesh stressed all those years ago that zazen was not an esoteric exercise requiring years of study and effort, but a simple practice that can be learned by most people in a matter of hours. Zen's ultimate aim of enlightenment, on the other hand, is an arduous path of practice and study by which many practitioners, perhaps the majority, never achieve the "goal" after decades or even a lifetime, but we are less concerned with enlightenment than with the simple yet revelatory experience of zazen itself, yielding the many benefits that have already been described. Lesh says another way of putting it is "learning to listen." Nothing could be more fundamental to constructive communication.

In 1978, Shapiro took the idea a step further when he studied the behavioral changes that could result from a simple Zen workshop. To put his work into cultural perspective, the biography accompanying his study noted that Shapiro "lived for fifteen months in the Orient," along with other language in common use at that time, designed primarily to emphasize the supposed otherness and exotic nature of Zen. Shapiro also indulged in the popular notion that Zen and Yoga practices produce altered states of consciousness. While this may be accurate in a purely neurological sense – brain scans of meditation practitioners show a heightened flow of delta waves, for example – one purpose of zazen (and Yoga meditation) is not to "zone out" but if anything to observe more clearly. Nevertheless, Shapiro's work was groundbreaking in that it emphasized how such work was prompting "a new view of the nervous system," concurrent with a growing body of research into "our potential for self-regulation." While his qualitative study produced some questionable results due to vagaries in definitions, it was clear that

subjects who took part in the Zen workshop consistently scored significantly higher on measures of self-regulation in interpersonal communication. Again it was demonstrated that a small amount of zazen training and practice could yield substantial benefits in dyadic interactions.

### **Bridging the Cultural Gap**

One of the questions that were raised from both the Communication Studies and the Psychology perspective early in my research was the degree to which cultural differences might affect individual ability to grasp some of the “foreign” concepts presented here (Morling, Kitayama & Miyamoto, 2002; Heine, S. et al, 2008; Uchida, Y. et al, 2008; Shupe & Bradley, 2010). To this point, we have seen studies old and new showing that, as least from a practical point of view, the question may be moot. Westerners with no prior experience with zazen or other Zen practices or concepts are readily able to learn it and practice it rapidly and without significant impediment (Lesh, 1970, Shapiro, 1978, Johnson, 2011). In other words, while it is important for academics and for advanced practitioners to understand and consider some of the deeper concepts (such as mushin) underlying Zen practice, it is not important for lay or casual practitioners to conceptualize “no-mind,” “flow,” or other such related terms. Lin, et al (2008) shed further light on this principle, however inadvertently, with their study of Chan (Zen) meditation’s effect on anxiety and musical performance. They found, contrary to other studies cited here, that short-term meditation teaching and practice had no effect on anxiety or musical performance. However, their subjects who participated in an eight-week course of meditation training and practice experienced a pronounced decrease in anxiety and concurrent increase in the quality of and satisfaction with musical

performance. It is important to note that these researchers used not Zen (Japanese) but Chan meditation, which they described as “the Chinese predecessor to Japanese Zen.” The Japanese word Zen, Chinese word Chan, and original Pali word Jhana or Sanskrit word Dhyana all mean “meditation.” It is accurate to say that, just as Jhana predated Chan, Chan predated Zen, as this form of Buddhism was brought by Bodhidharma from China to Japan. While many consider Chan and Zen practices to be similar or even identical, the reality is that Chan is frequently tied to the Chinese Taoist and Confucian traditions. Thus, any training in Chan would likely include a good deal of intersecting Taoist material that would take much longer to grasp and apply than the typically fundamental (some would say more refined) approach of Zen. Other forms of Buddhism, particularly Tibetan religious practice, can by extension be so complex and esoteric that, as Robert Thurman commented, even the Dalai Lama himself may not completely understand it. It is also worth noting that Lin’s study was not cross-cultural, but included only culturally anonymous students in American universities.

### **A Zen Aesthetic**

One other relevant essay is that of Ho (2000), a Chinese professor of Theology. He referred to a “Zen aesthetic” in a manner that complements and further reinforces the perception of what these concepts can mean in terms of how we view the world and each other. Ho argued that, while most artistic endeavor is a wild and often pretentious expression of stereotypical style, the Zen artist paints “with the innate or childlike mind of genuineness and sincerity, in order to cleanse the sense of vulgarity (and) to obtain tranquility.” I am reminded of the first Zen priest I met, and of instructions we received beforehand to speak quietly and move slowly and calmly around this man who had just

emerged from three weeks of almost continuous meditation without speaking or hearing speech. Contrasting that with the relatively noisy and garish ways in which many people choose to spend their free time, and considering which aesthetic is more natural, one could contemplate the effects these very different approaches would have on our daily interactions with others. Certainly, the example cited here is extreme, and I am not suggesting that our communication could or should be as antiseptic as that which follows the sesshin (silent meditation retreat) experience. A central tenet of Buddhism is to avoid extremes of not only indulgence but also of asceticism and to follow a balanced “middle path,” just as the historical Buddha did after finding both the indulgent lifestyle of a prince and the ascetic lifestyle of a renunciant to be ultimately empty (and not in a Zen way). If, however, we would approach conversation with Ho’s Zen aesthetic, “with the innate or childlike mind of genuineness and sincerity, in order to cleanse the sense of vulgarity (and) to obtain tranquility,” it would likely produce atypical and interesting results.

This literature review brought several important shifts to my study. First, I was able to determine that Zen practice rather than related martial arts components had the greater potential for application to my specific communications concerns, based on the numerous studies that brought forward other applications for Zen (or Zen-style) meditation. Second, the reality that most of this research has come from the discipline of psychology provided an academic perspective I may not have otherwise considered, along with the challenge to effectively relate the material back to communication studies. Third, it elevated my already significant concerns about whether and how cross-cultural issues could be addressed such that essentially East Asian philosophies and concepts

could be distilled and applied to and by Westerners in a highly specific context. In Chapter 3, adaptations are made to the research method based on what was learned in the literature review, and the method and the reasons for it are fully explained.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Method**

My research method was to conduct a series of recorded long-form interviews with a variety of practitioners of zazen, mushin, and related concepts, along with some of the academics cited in this paper. This qualitative, ethnographic approach provided data for an in-depth analysis of whether and how expertise and consistency in practice leads to peaceful resolution, and further, how such techniques might be learned and applied by lay practitioners who may have no prior knowledge of these cultures or traditions. The intent was that the interviews and my interpretation and analysis would reveal ways in which the techniques can be applied to the dyadic communication setting. My goal was to synthesize the data gathered in the interviews, integrate it with the prior research discovered in the literature review, and delineate specific principles of application. My intention is to use the interviews not only for purposes of this thesis, but also to turn the recordings into a publicly accessible collection of produced interviews, perhaps with commentary. Detailed explanation of each of the above points follows.

#### **Specific Technique**

While the initial goal was to conduct as many of the interviews as possible in person, all were conducted by phone. A potential technological solution was to conduct the interviews using Skype or some other form of video conferencing, but this idea was problematic to subjects unfamiliar or uncomfortable with the technology. Perhaps the greater concern was the quality of the audio recording. Because of the secondary intent to make the recordings available for listening in addition to them being quoted and utilized



in the thesis, a high-quality audio recording would be essential. In the end, owing in part to my background in radio, arrangements were made with the university public radio station to record the interviews there for optimal audio quality as well as for potential later on-air use.

### **Selection of Interview Subjects**

With regard to specific interview subjects, my initial intent was to find a wide representative range of individuals to interview. For example, just as a Zen monk practices mindfulness and mushin, so does a race car driver, and the experiences of both of these practices hold lessons that are translatable, I believe, to communication. It would also be important to avoid interviewing only Japanese or Asian subjects, as it would be beneficial to demonstrate that nationality is not a prerequisite to understanding and mastering these skills. Following the recommendation of my committee, I decided to narrow my options to include only expert practitioners of the arts in question and academics who have extensively studied related topics. My initial goal was to interview eight to ten subjects; I ended up with five full interviews and several other related but tertiary conversations. The length of the interviews was approximately 40 minutes, which is considered an effective standard long-form interview length. The aim was to address the subject matter thoroughly while giving the interview subjects adequate time to say what they wanted to say.

### **Interview Questions**

For the sake of a consistent, scientific approach, the same core questions were asked of all interview subjects. Questions focused on the core concepts of mindfulness,

appropriate response, and flow: How it applies to what they do, how they learned and adapted it, and how it might be further taught and adapted for purposes of more effective communication.

The core questions were:

1. How do you describe the state or mindset that allows working or practicing what you do most effectively?
2. How is that state best reached or accessed?
3. How could such a state be accessed by virtually anyone?
4. How can this state be applied to face-to-face communication?
5. What would you say are the benefits of applying this state to face-to-face communication, especially in conflict situations? Do you see any potential pitfalls or a downside to doing this?

Follow-up questions addressed particular areas of expertise for each of the interview subjects, along with relevant side topics that could further illuminate the subject matter.

After recording the interviews, initial analysis consisted of carefully listening to them and transcribing relevant passages. This first allowed me to “hear” content I may have missed during the initial interview, and second would yield a transcription that would make the rest of the process easier and more accurate. Particularly salient quotations were then pulled and compiled from each interview, and compared with those in the other interviews for both shared ideas/similarities and unique thoughts and

perspectives. It is important to note that the process of determining which passages to transcribe and which quotations to use did not in any case involve the exclusion of data that ran counter to the conclusions I eventually reached. Rather, the intent was to include quotations extensive enough to convey not only the relevant content but also the tone and communication style of each respective interview subject, while avoiding unnecessary repetition or comments that simply weren't directly relevant to the study. As this is a qualitative study taking an ethnographic approach, elements of narrative analysis and self-ethnography were used, instead of coding key words and other content as might be done in a quantitative study, or relying on grounded theory. As my research questions were formulated prior to the interviews, I was certainly seeking evidence that would answer those questions one way or another, but every effort was made in the interviews to solicit answers without leading the subjects in any particular direction. Follow-up questions, however, frequently sought either clarification of or expansion on particular relevant content that the interview subjects initiated over the course of each recorded conversation.

IRB approval was a bit different with regard to this project. It is understood that the purpose of the IRB process is to protect research subjects from a variety of potential violations. In this case, it was essential for the interview subjects to consent not only to being interviewed, but to allow the content of the interviews to be shared in whole or in part in print and online in both written and recorded form. Again, well-known subjects would already be accustomed to this approach. The question was rather these conventional rules of journalism interviews would be acceptable and approved in the academic context by an Institutional Review Board. In the end, after a few minor points

of clarification, approval was granted and the interviews were subsequently conducted as soon as a reasonable pool of subjects could be confirmed.

### Secondary Availability of Interviews

My intent is to make the recorded interviews available online, for download or streaming listening, on a site such as [voicesfromthevalley.com](http://voicesfromthevalley.com). Secondly, sharing the recordings of the interviews in complete, unedited form would allow anyone interested to hear more depth and detail from the interview subjects who interest them, without the filter of selective quotations and academic analysis. Further, this would allow observers to critically examine whether the points brought forward in the thesis are consistent with what they heard from the interview subjects. With a feedback loop in place, more could be learned from listeners' comments and observations in this regard. Many times while reading a research project I have felt a desire to read or hear the raw material that was gathered in the field. While IRB limitations would make this impossible in many if not most cases, I think it is worth pursuing whether giving the reader access to all of the background material might not only further scholarship but also give the author(s) new insights they may not have reached or gathered on their own. In fact, most of those interviewed said they looked forward to hearing the recording, and a few said they would also like to include the recording on their own websites.

The other consideration is whether there might be a book in this process. Opinions vary as to whether researchers should begin a process with this potential outcome in mind. My approach would be to see as I go along whether the project is taking shape in such a way that it could be of value beyond the scope of academic research. Particularly

in the field of communication studies, my thought is that most research projects should be compelling enough to be of interest to any curious audience outside the scope of the discipline. Further, I am firmly in the growing camp of academics who acknowledge the importance of making their work not only digestible and relevant but, more important, applicable. To that end, I will endeavor to find not only the interesting but also the broadly applicable in this project, and to see where it might go from there.

To summarize, the selection of interview subjects and research technique were adjusted based on realities that would have been difficult or impossible to anticipate. Rather than complicating the study itself, these adjustments have actually served to enhance it. The core components are still in place, and the interviews can still provide the necessary data. Further, the intention to make the recorded interviews available online and potentially on radio will be realized with the enthusiastic support of the interview subjects, as seen in Chapter 4.

## Chapter 4

### Analysis

My expectation had been that arranging and conducting the interviews would be the simplest part of this process. The reality was that it was the most difficult. It was initially vexing to assess why most of the academics and practitioners I contacted declined to be interviewed, out of more than two dozen contacted in three rounds of interview requests. In my many years of work in broadcast journalism and as a radio host, it was extraordinarily rare for anyone to decline an interview request, even when they were accused of serious misdeeds. While I am confident that the interviews that were conducted yielded more than sufficient data to reach some significant conclusions, it is important to note the difficulties that were encountered, and some of the reasons for them. I do this so that future researchers using the long-form interview method are aware of these challenges and can thus plan ahead and incorporate alternatives as necessary. I hope this doesn't discourage future researchers who are considering the long-form interview as a research method, or this subject matter as a potential topic of curiosity. The reality is, and it was for me in this case despite the challenges, that such a wealth of relevant material results from each interview that even a small pool of interview subjects can provide all that is needed. It is also tremendously gratifying and enjoyable to ask a noted academic or practitioner specific questions about the concepts one has been wrestling with for so long in a capstone project. It also positions the interview subject as an authority on the topic, and I had anticipated that the nature of the project itself and the intent to make the recorded interviews available to many via public radio and online would be further appealing. In my previous public radio work, these had always been

positive incentives to which most people responded enthusiastically. In this case, however, it is a position in which many potential interview subjects said they would not be comfortable.

I eventually learned why so many practitioners and all but one academic declined to be interviewed. The quandary is that academics are inclined not to go on record about things outside of their own highly specific research, and as my particular question appears to be new, it is difficult for academics to discuss it without some feeling of speculation. Many of the researchers cited in my literature review said they felt they were out of their depth in commenting beyond the particular scope of their own work, especially as it related to something as esoteric as Zen. While understandable, this was particularly frustrating, as it was their own analyses and conclusions that made them compelling resources in the first place. Others, particularly many of the Zen practitioners I contacted, saw challenges in speaking of zazen in an academic context. Author and Zen priest Steve Hagen, for example, presented a compelling account of the challenges of trying to apply the qualities that arise from zazen, to be discussed in greater detail shortly. It was also surprising that some of the Zen teachers who have in print and online highlighted the need to teach and help others whenever possible were among the most immediately dismissive. Meanwhile, several of the most highly esteemed Zen practitioners in the U.S. and overseas took the time to provide detailed and caring accounts of why they could not participate and expressed their support for the study along with their regrets. In three cases, on an intercultural note, their chief concern was their difficulty in discussing concepts for which there is no direct translation or simply too great a language gap (despite the offer of a translator).

Those who were interviewed, however, were tremendously giving and enthusiastic about linking practices and potential applications, especially relating to dyadic interactions. As noted earlier, an important outgrowth of the ongoing evolution of Zen in the United States has been the recognition by many practitioners and some scholars that Zen practice not only creates more mindful and compassionate individuals, but also that these qualities have a significant positive impact on those with whom practitioners interact and, by their definition, to the rest of the world. Several of my practitioner interview subjects were quick to point out that, while Zen goes back about 800 years in Japan and another 500 years before that in China, it has acquired uniquely American traits since it gained a significant following in the U.S. a relatively short 50 years ago. One such trait has been this emerging effort to define and apply the qualities manifested by regular zazen practice, which was the primary subject of the interviews. Some contemporary Japanese and Japanese-trained practitioners also speak of the effort to apply what is learned in the zendo (practice hall) in the world. This effort stands in sharp contrast to the position of those adherents to the notion that Zen practice, and specifically zazen, is essentially without purpose or goal. From a cross-cultural perspective, there is a significant cultural gap between Buddhists who ardently believe the purpose or "goal" of meditation is enlightenment (per the historical Buddha's last words - an exhortation to "work out your own enlightenment with diligence!") and those who believe that Zen in general and zazen in particular cannot, by their own nature, have any aim or purpose at all. Steve Hagen, for example, explained the perspective in a paradoxical manner typical of Zen (personal communication, May 6-7, 2012). "Your interest in learning how Zen meditation can be applied to interpersonal interactions is not



at all how we understand our practice,” he said. “We give no consideration of how it might be applied to anything. In fact we sometimes refer to it as ‘useless,’ meaning we don’t use it to obtain certain ends.” This is not to say that this “useless” practice has no important side effects, the most eminent of which would be satori, perhaps best described as the flash of enlightenment. It is rather a perspective that says zazen is not done with relation to any specific goals. It is often stated that the point of the practice is the practice. Hagen acknowledged that zazen does indeed have positive manifestations, but he reaffirmed his perspective, saying, “I have no doubt that Zen meditation might be good for many things, we just never think about it.”

Unless otherwise noted, the quotations in each of the following sections are taken directly from my interviews with the respective subjects, and are word-for-word transcriptions. In most cases I have interspersed my own observations and analyses with their statements (not within the quoted statements themselves, but set outside the quotation marks, in every case). In several other instances in which I found their remarks to be more complex and empirical, typically in terms of the most germane or important points, the quotations are more extensive and unbroken. The point is not to provide an endless transcription of everything that was discussed, but to allow their key statements to be included here for greater clarity, depth, and understanding.

The sections are organized from one interview subject to the next in a manner that provided the best sequential flow of relevant information. Zen teacher Hoko Jan Karnegis initially echoed some of Steve Hagen’s thoughts, but then identified and explained many relevant ways in which Zen and zazen manifest to improve interpersonal interactions. Her section also includes a detailed explanation of traditional zazen method. Next, cultural

psychologist Beth Morling provided a rich analysis of how and why mindfulness meditation is very recently being combined with more established ways of treating emotional issues, and she expanded on how such mindfulness might benefit us all through improved interpersonal communication. Then Buddhist leader Zoketsu Norman Fischer drew on his vast experience to contend that zazen can help anyone “open up” and see things in new ways that make our interactions more meaningful. Joen Snyder O’Neal challenged the premise that all communication has an agenda, as she made a case for zazen’s ability to allow practitioners to “slip under” their self-perceptions and become fully engaged in life and with others. The chapter concludes with Dr. Reggie Pawle, a practitioner, clinical psychologist, and university instructor in Kyoto who teaches and writes about how cross-cultural issues complicate perceptions of zazen’s value in making practitioners better communicators and better human beings.

**Hoko Jan Karnegis: How zazen, skillfulness and wholesomeness relieve suffering and bring appropriate response to interpersonal interactions**

Another practitioner who, like Steve Hagen, initially expressed reticence is Hoko Jan Karnegis, interim practice director at Milwaukee Zen Center. I was particularly curious to hear what she had to say, in part, because our backgrounds are similar. We both got mass communication B.A.s from Minnesota colleges, her master’s thesis examined the development of the Buddhist community in the United States, and we even have the same hairstyle – shaved heads. I mention this because, despite these similarities, we have had significantly different perceptions regarding the nature and purpose of zazen. Karnegis is as intense and fast-speaking as some other practitioners I interviewed are disarmingly calm and soft-spoken. From the time of our initial contact, she suggested

“reframing the premises you've described.” I bring this forward not to denigrate anything she has said, but rather to underscore the importance of these divergent perspectives. She began, “I'm always reluctant to refer to it as ‘meditation,’ because it's not an intellectual activity, and it doesn't actually have a goal. Also, from the Soto Zen perspective, we cannot consider ‘Zen meditation’ to be an ‘East Asian concept’ which can be applied to a situation [like interpersonal communication].” (Soto Zen is one of the two major branches of Japanese-born Zen that are practiced in the West. The other is Rinzai, which involves focusing on Koan – questions or statements designed to test students’ progress. Soto is centered on zazen practice). These initial comments clarified her challenge to my exposition of Zen as an irrevocably cross-cultural phenomenon. “To begin with, Zen practice has been in this country for about a hundred years, and is gradually taking on the shape of the American container into which it has been poured; it is no longer taught from an exclusively East Asian perspective.” Indeed, the logo for the Milwaukee Zen Center includes not only English text but also sublimated Japanese characters intersecting in a manner that suggests the center is more a melding of the two cultures than a uniquely American version of Zen practice.

Karnegis’ initial encounter with Zen reflects a common experience for many practitioners; indeed this is another similarity we share. After picking up a book or reading an article about this big thing called Zen, many are intrigued enough to want to learn more. In both our cases, we first went to Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis, one of the first Zen centers in the U.S. In stark contrast to the harsh and often humiliating training novices receive at temples in Japan, everyone here is welcoming, encouraging and supportive. Shoes are removed upon entering, and first-time visitors are taken as a

group to an upstairs room where they are given gentle and simple instruction in how to sit zazen for about 10 minutes. Joining the experienced practitioners in the main zendo (practice room), however, is typically more intimidating, as one wonders if they can sit stock still and completely quiet for 20 to 40 minutes. Many also have to work through their own thoughts on the religious aspects of practice in a temple or center, typically including prostrations and bowing, chanting, and recitation of sutras. Following the initial period of group zazen and chanting, there is usually a “dharma talk,” in which the head instructor or a visiting teacher from another center or temple discusses a particular aspect of Zen. For Karnegis, as for me, the large group experience was intimidating the first time. “I went downstairs after the initial training, and I saw a room full of people standing stock still with their eyes down at 45 degrees, saying nothing, moving not at all, and I went out the back door! But, the very next Saturday, I was back and I was on a cushion, because somehow I knew there was something there for me.”

A detailed explanation of zazen technique is appropriate here. The “cushion” used in zazen, sometimes referred to as a “mountain seat,” is made up of two parts. The zafu, or cushion for sitting, is a roundish firm pillow about the size of a small watermelon, usually filled with buckwheat hulls or something similar. Underneath the zafu is a zabuton, a larger square cushion a few inches thick, filled with batting or foam. Together, they allow the practitioner to maintain an erect but not stiff posture by supporting the back and providing padding for the knees and ankles while sitting for long periods. Advanced practitioners who are physically able sit in full lotus position, with legs folded and each foot on top of the opposite knee. This provides the most stable and rooted posture. Some, including those not as flexible or with a knee problem, sit in half lotus

position, with just one foot on top of one opposite knee and the other on the zabuton. Many, especially beginners, just sit with legs crossed. This is not as stable, but puts less pressure on the back and knees. Alternatives include seiza, kneeling and sitting on the feet Japanese-style (which is difficult for most Westerners to do for more than a minute or two); using a bench or conventional chair; or using a wheelchair if needed. Zafu and zabuton, provided at most centers for practitioners' use, are helpful but not essential – for a long time I practiced at home on a plastic exercise stepper with a throw pillow on it – and home practitioners can usually improvise something that works.

The important thing is that upright posture and open breathing are maintained, while the eyes are kept half-open and cast about 45 degrees downward, the tongue is placed lightly against the roof of the mouth (to reduce saliva flow), the mouth is closed but relaxed, and breathing is slow and full but silent. Importantly, the hands are rested palms-up in front of the hara, or “center of being,” just below the navel. The left hand is placed on the right, and the thumbs are brought together until they are just touching, forming an oval. Without a great deal of extrapolation, it is important to understand that the hara, or dantien (sea of energy or center of energy) in Chinese, is in martial traditions considered the point from which our energy emanates and even where the mind resides. Bringing the hands together in this mudra (Sanskrit for seal or gesture) in front of the hara gathers and circulates energy flow while it also symbolizes unity and infinity. As the thumbs are not pressed together but are just touching, there is a natural point of high energy and tension here, and the thumbs may even initially jump around a bit. I remember a dharma talk in which an old Japanese master described this point between the thumbs as the point of the greatest tension and energy in the entire world. As practice

deepens, this point does not actually “relax,” but the energy flow is progressively perceived as genuine and natural, giving rise to a greater awareness of the energies moving through our bodies and even between people at all times.

In some centers and temples, practitioners face the wall, while in others they face toward the center of the room. Some practitioners use an object for focus, such as a candle, incense (which can also time the zazen session), or a small Buddha statue. This technique is generally discouraged, at least after one’s regular practice is established, because an object as the focal point can defeat the purpose. Likewise, mantras are not used. Because of the extreme difficulty most people have with stopping the continual flow of racing thoughts, ideas, and interpretations (traditionally called “monkey mind”), many practitioners are initially instructed to count their breaths one to ten and then start over. It is surprising how challenging it can be to get to ten in the early stages of zazen practice without some new thought or idea intruding. This creates an immediate awareness of just how active and jumpy our minds typically are. In contrast, the calm clarity that emerges with determined practice demonstrates that we can indeed see things differently when we are not just chasing our thoughts and the endless flow of information. We can, instead, observe. Counting the breath is also discouraged after a time, rather like taking the training wheels off a child’s bicycle.

There is another method that is used in most centers during long periods of zazen to give the limbs a stretch and to illustrate that meditation can also happen in motion. *Kinhin*, or walking meditation, is done silently and slowly, with the right hand in a fist and the left cupping the right in front of the heart, usually with one step for each breath and the group walking in a circle. The noted Vietnamese Buddhist monk and author

Thich Nhat Hanh has gained a large worldwide following for his emphasis on walking meditation and being mindful of every step and our connection to the earth. These details are provided not only as an explanation of how zazen is typically practiced, but also to show that, at least in the West, a wide range of accommodations are made so that virtually anyone can practice. This concept is central to Zen in the West. While many Asian temples, particularly in Japan, will not allow novices entry until they have fully demonstrated their commitment in some way, U.S. temples and Zen centers are uniformly welcoming and inclusive. This warm sense of community further serves to invite and encourage mindful interactions with others.

Karnegis acknowledged that her prior interest in Asian cultures fueled her attraction to Zen. “It was a draw. This was one more piece of the puzzle that I was trying to put together.” Her curiosity and her immersion in practice eventually led her to Japan for extensive monastic training, to the point that she now considers Japan “a second home.” She cautioned that the trappings of Japanese Zen are for many, rather than an attraction, a stumbling block:

I often encounter people who are uncomfortable with the robes, the chanting in Japanese, the incense, the shaved heads, and all of that. Their argument is that the underlying insights of this practice are not about a particular culture. They are so universal that we don't need all of those things. That is true, and at the same time I feel a tremendous debt of gratitude to my ancestors in this practice. Because of them, I am here and practicing, and it doesn't feel strange to me to honor the culture from which this practice arose. But it's certainly true that you don't need to do that.

Admittedly, many people raised in religious traditions that have admonitions against worshipping false gods or “graven images” are challenged by some of the rituals of a zendo or a martial arts dojo. While Buddhism itself is most often classified as a religion, many Christians, for example, practice zazen and other components of Zen as a philosophy rather than a “religion.” Karnegis’ explanation is helpful in clarifying this. As in aikido practice, bowing to an image of the founder is an act of honor and gratitude rather than of worship.

Beyond this important point, I have intentionally chosen to avoid the spiritual aspects of Buddhism, but that is not to disrespect those aspects in any way. Likewise, while some Zen masters like Karnegis have said zazen is “useless,” others find many uses for the practice and for the qualities that manifest from it. As in martial arts and in other practices such as Yoga and Tantra, there are many divergent views on what is and what isn't genuine, and it's not surprising that most practitioners see their own form as perhaps more genuine than others. But with many respected masters and practitioners in each of these forms, it would be impossible to say from an academic perspective, “this one is right, and this one...not so much.” Rather, I've found it more instructive to include the major themes of divergent thought and opinion here, in part simply to illustrate that it exists, and in part to provide perspective on my line of inquiry.

She continued:

We can't pretend that we can take all of the elements of Japanese practice and make them real here, and we wouldn't want to. Buddhism adapts to the container in which it is poured. It started in India, then went to China, then Korea, then



Japan, and now it is in the West. It has to adapt or it will die. It is both a challenge and an opportunity to us in this country to maintain the tradition and not water it down or take away its power, and yet make it appropriate for people practicing in this country.

Her point about maintaining and honoring the tradition and not watering down the practice helps to explain why I feel it is important to understand the cultural framework and cross-cultural issues in analyzing how and why Zen practice can be explored from a communication perspective. As we saw in the literature review, there is ample evidence that zazen (or similar meditative practices) can be taught to people without any cultural background or other references, and they will still experience some positive effects. I'm also not suggesting that one must immerse oneself in the lifestyle of a Zen monk to experience how zazen can improve the quality of one's life. I am, however, convinced – if nothing else, based on my own experience, but also affirmed by these interviews - that a deep understanding, continued study, and the guidance of good teachers can make zazen the genuinely transformative tool that cannot help but positively impact the quality of our interactions with others (as will be described in greater detail). Academically, and for purposes of this study, the cultural framework and cross-cultural analysis are vital to a clear understanding of how and why this practice can be so powerful.

Karnegis said one of the foundational ideas about Buddhism is also the main reason why most practitioners initially explore Zen. In brief, the first of the “Four Noble Truths” is that life is suffering. The remaining three truths say that we suffer because of attachment, that there is a way out of this suffering, and that Buddhist practice is the way

out of the suffering (by helping practitioners move beyond attachment). Karnegis explained:

People come into the Zen center in the first place because they are suffering. If they weren't suffering in some way, they probably wouldn't be here. Sometimes it's big suffering. "I need to fix my marriage, I need to stop drinking." And sometimes it's small suffering. "I need to find meaning in my life," or, "my life feels out of alignment." Those things become much less important when we begin to sit zazen. We see that there is no goal, there's nothing beyond here and now. We can't escape from this moment, but we don't necessarily want to anymore. We loosen our grip on our preconceptions and delusions.

It is the courageous business of letting go of those thoughts and misperceptions that allows the practitioner to see things clearly. Along with this new clarity comes a natural inclination toward skillful and wholesome behavior, especially in our relationships, as Karnegis later explained in greater detail:

Our sitting is a moment-by-moment activity of 100-percent engagement in reality, rather than a concept or an idea; it is the complete manifestation of our inherent Buddha-nature. Thus, we do it because we are already Buddha, not because we are trying to become Buddha.

This last point can be particularly difficult for anyone who has not studied Buddhism in general or Zen in particular. The principle is that Buddha-hood or "Buddha-nature" is not something that is obtained by any practice or belief. Rather, everyone is already Buddha; it is simply a matter of whether or not one has realized it yet. There is an

academic purpose in understanding this principle, which Karnegis explained in greater detail in a recorded 2012 Dharma talk:

The zazen I speak of is not meditation practice. It is not a process. There is no good translation for zazen. In Buddhism, practice and enlightenment are one and the same. Buddha nature and the actualization of Buddha nature are one and the same. There is no point to being born into this awakened state, because there is no way to actualize or manifest it in this world. So, not one of us here is going to achieve enlightenment. It's already here. Zazen is not separate from awakening. Practice is really everything we do – it's not just zazen. Mindfulness is a helpful activity, but we don't have to enshrine it or be precious about it. We are sitting for all beings. (Karnegis, 2012)

She concluded, "Don't get stuck trying to wrestle with this. Just sit down. Right there is our enlightenment and our Buddha nature." In answer to the inevitable question, why sit or do anything in particular if we are already Buddha and already enlightened, she replied, "We sit because of who we are."

Following up her initial points, she added:

Having said all that, there may indeed be some merit in considering how a regular practice of zazen can lead us to becoming more skillful and wholesome in our interactions with others. This is a deeply transformative practice. It leads us to ask, "what is this moment about, and how can I be most skillful in this moment?"

This is where the manifestations of zazen and Buddhist practice can have a profound impact on our communication and relations with others. First, as stated elsewhere, the

appreciation of this moment as all there is causes one to embrace it fully. Second, it is this intention toward skillful action that prompts practitioners to try to make interactions with others more meaningful and gratifying or, perhaps more accurately, to fully appreciate the meaning and gratification inherent in our interactions with others. Before more specific comments from Karnegis on the subject of skillfulness, some context is needed. The concepts of skillfulness and wholesomeness are central to Buddhist conduct as delineated in the Noble Eightfold Path, which the Four Noble Truths referred to as the way out of suffering. It is not just a flash of enlightenment that will end suffering. Enlightened beings still have pain, emotional as well as physical. The Noble Eightfold Path, as outlined by the historical Buddha, is Right View, Right Intention, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration. All of these manifest from, and also reinforce, *zazen*, and they simultaneously inform practitioners' actions as they go out into the world. Collectively referred to as skillfulness and wholesomeness, Karnegis explained how this Path deepens and improves human interactions as it does anything else:

In our tradition, wholesome activity is that which moves beings away from suffering; unwholesome activity is that which creates suffering. Skillful action is that which leads beings toward liberation from delusion; unskillful action leads away from liberation toward delusion, particularly greed, anger and ignorance.

When we practice, we practice so that we can liberate ourselves and others. Well, we can't help others if we haven't liberated ourselves.

At this she laughed, then said, "You are probably aware that there are significant teachings about Right Speech; this is an important aspect of our practice. It seems to me

that our practice is all about developing skillfulness that we can take into the world, and goodness knows we need it!” She laughed harder. As enjoyable as our dialog was at this stage, it is important to note that she had just made a key statement: “Our practice is all about developing skillfulness that we can take into the world.” Right Action, Right Speech, and the rest of the eightfold path serve as admonitions, but this morality is less concerned with ideas like sin than with the eminently practical reality that our interactions with others and with the world will be better if we follow this path and worse if we do not.

Something astonishing to me happened at this point in the interview, with her next comment:

Our practice leads us to a fresh, alive, moment-by-moment response. Not reaction, but response, to whatever we encounter. When we go into the world, we meet with suffering, we meet with violence, we meet with conflict. How can we be skillful in that moment to at best reduce the suffering and at least not to escalate the suffering?

I told her this idea of appropriate response rather than self-centered reaction, exactly as she stated it, is central to my question, and asked her to elaborate. She said:

The action might be to go into the world and take up a placard and a bullhorn, or it might simply be to not react to an unkind comment someone makes to me. Or somehow I say something that causes someone else to say, “Maybe this is not the way to solve this problem.” So, the range of possible communication opportunities here is huge, and there’s no preset response. We have to be

completely, 100 percent, wholeheartedly engaged in this moment to make the most skillful and wholesome response possible. Our practice is really about having insight into what does not create suffering, and how do we do good in this world for other beings.

Again, she returned to the idea that we aren't prepared to do this for others until we're doing it for ourselves. "If we aren't following the precepts, we are first creating suffering for ourselves. If we're doing that, it's hard to sit on a cushion, because we're distracted by all the suffering we're causing for ourselves. It hinders our own liberation." She chuckled, "There is some self-interest there, I have to say. It is about other people, but it's not all about other people." From a communication studies perspective, this parallels the learning and training we do to become effective communicators, whether it's dyadic immediacy or skilled leadership of a group. Reaching out to others effectively begins with self-awareness of how one presents and what one is bringing to an interaction.

I was particularly curious to hear what this former public relations professional would have to say about rapid commercial and technological changes that feed today's consumers constant messages, frequently customized to the individual, about what they "need." Not just in the U.S., of course, but especially in Japan, over the past 50 years people in general and women in particular have progressively had more independence and self-determination, more discretionary income, and not only the right but the cultural imperative to indulge the self like never before. Karnegis commented:

We are progressively becoming more about defining our "needs" and trying to

meet those “needs.” Of course, advertising is out to tell us that we have unmet needs and their products are the way to meet them. If we are not paying attention, we can fall into that. It’s the easy answer to point at media and say they’re brainwashing us into thinking that somehow we need their stuff. We have a responsibility. They’re out there doing what they’ve got to do. If you make a product, you need to let people know what that is. We need to take a step back and say, ‘Where is our suffering coming from?’ It’s too easy to say it’s not my fault.

She then hit on a related idea that I have written about extensively: The belief that somehow we are special and are entitled to all kinds of material things without lifting a finger, because all our lives we’ve been hearing about how special we are. She said:

From the time that we’re very small, we’re raised to think that we’re special, and that we should do everything we can to get everything we think we need. It’s a real departure to come to this practice and say, look, what do you really need in your life? Now, there’s nothing wrong with having expensive or nice things. There is no paramita or perfection of poverty in Zen. The Buddha taught the middle path. We’re not required to be destitute, but also not rolling in wealth. It’s helpful to practice with a group of people because the messages we get there are very different from those we’re getting out in the world.

Karnegis said the combination of practice alone and with a community or sangha helps practitioners to get beyond the constructed sense of self, to the benefit of all:

If I'm just concerned with feeding this self, and giving it things, and shoring it up when it seems to be falling apart, we tend to react. We react to whatever might impact that self. If you hurt me, I'm going to hurt you. I might even try to hurt you before you can hurt me. This is unskillful. And all of these unskillful moves are designed to protect something that doesn't really exist!

She let out another big laugh, and said:

When we figure out that there isn't this self that we need to protect and defend, and we realize how much energy we put into protecting and defending it, it's amazing. It's a big relief when we suddenly realize, I don't have to protect or defend the self in that way. I don't need to be a doormat, but I don't need to worry about it. Then we can respond and say, what is the skillful thing I can do in this situation that could benefit everybody? Not just me shoring up my little self-concept. If someone says something hurtful, there's a lot less pain when there's no self. I also don't need to go ruminate over it for a week. Then I'm distracted, thinking "Why did he say this terrible thing to me?" Instead, I can use that energy to do something else.

She acknowledged that a wholesome response rather than an emotional reaction springs from the qualities that emerge from zazen, saying:

It takes patience, it takes insight, it takes commitment to being that way in the world. But, when we see that happen, when we see that work, boy, we want to keep going out and making a difference that way. It feels so much better than the alternative.



So, to repeat, zazen practice “can lead us to more skillful and wholesome interactions with others.” It can help us overcome the encumbrances of self-perception and lead us to a recognition that bringing our skillfulness into the world, primarily in how we communicate with others, is less a moral imperative than a practical opportunity.

**Beth Morling: Using mindfulness meditation and letting go of the self for emotional health and better relationships**

My next interview subject, presenting an academic rather than practitioner perspective, brought forward some of the specific ways meditation practice can make people more effective interpersonally as well as individually. Beth Morling is a University of Delaware cultural psychologist noted for her research on how Japanese and North American cultural differences affect interpersonal interactions. She stated in her interview that traditional Japanese Zen and contemporary westernized Zen are frequently very different things, just as the spiritual and physical practices of Yoga are profoundly different from East to West. Indian Yogis, for example, have no concern for how certain poses might tone one's backside, while that might be a primary aim for many Western practitioners. A previous study I did on Tantra's apparently transformative interpersonal properties noted that the Western adaptation and application of Tantric sexual practices, commonly referred to as "neo-Tantra," are one component of a broad, esoteric, intensely spiritual body of study. Morling also enthusiastically discussed in our interview how Zen (or Zen-style) meditation is being clinically proven in North America to be a powerful adjunct to cognitive talk therapies for bipolar patients. For our purposes here, as in the Tantric study, the question of whether Zen can or should be applied is rendered moot by the rapidly growing body of research from clinicians as well as lay practitioners who

have already been doing it, in many cases not even intentionally, to significant effect.

Morling delineated some of the ways that is being done in clinical psychology:

The researchers haven't really gone out and said, "We're going to apply Zen to these situations and see what happens," It has been more of a case of doing empirical studies and following their noses until they say, "you know, when you approach a relationship and you focus on your own agenda, the worse your relationships tend to be." In contrast, it's the people who enter a relationship and are more focused on the other person – meeting their needs, trying to be helpful, and not focusing on the self at all – tend to have more satisfying interpersonal relationships and, over time, their relationships get even better and they then receive lots of help they didn't even ask for. It's like a Zen koan, that the only way to get benefits in a relationship is to not focus on getting benefits. And, as in Zen, to not worry about the self but instead to let go. So, I recognize those qualities emerging, even though the researchers didn't necessarily set out to find that. It's more like a truth that was there.

This is highly significant for our purposes, and perhaps even more so because it was discovered as a byproduct of related research rather than the specific goal. More than just another Zen paradox – we get what we want from relationships when we don't ask for what we want – these findings demonstrate my point that focus on the self and one's own agenda in a relationship create an isolating wall that inhibits deeper interaction. Further, as these and other findings here confirm that zazen helps the individual look beyond the self and focus on the other, such actions make relationships more effective and rewarding for the selfless practitioner as well as the other.

Morling said more specific study of the application of meditation and its byproducts is permeating clinical psychology now in the form of mindfulness-based therapies:

It's very much East Asian-inspired. It teaches people to take an approach to their thoughts as just thoughts and not facts, and see emotions as things that have occurred that we can get distance from, in order to process painful thoughts and not just reject them. These techniques that come from mindfulness meditation, the same forms of meditation common in the martial arts and Zen as you talked about, appear to be very helpful for a variety of disorders. MBCT, Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy, and related approaches use cognitive-based techniques that we've known about for a long time and add a mindfulness component. They might teach clients how to meditate, or how to sit with a traumatic memory, and it's fascinating that these combinations can work really well on conditions that in the past were especially hard to cure.

While these effects of meditation are not central to this study, it is apparent that meditation's help for those with emotional disorders would also have a positive impact on the interpersonal relationships of those receiving such treatment.

Morling also noted that the technique of stepping outside of oneself or disconnecting one's passing thoughts from reality can be particularly effective. This correlates to the fundamental Zen principle of unattachment. She explained:

You might teach someone to say, "I'm having the thought that I'm depressed," which is different than saying, "I am depressed." Then they're treating the thought just like anything else that might come to mind in a mindfulness meditation

exercise, where you're taught to notice thoughts and then dismiss them with the next exhale. They used to think Cognitive Behavioral Therapy works because it is replacing a maladaptive thought with a better one. Instead of "everybody hates me," you might think, "I can't please everyone," for example. Now they're thinking it works because in the process of recognizing a maladaptive thought and changing it, you have achieved mindfulness of your thoughts. It's not just that you've changed the thought, but that you've taught yourself, "my thoughts are not facts. They're not reality." We can then change any thought into something more adaptive. These techniques have been shown to have a really effective reduction in symptoms for patients with depression and addictions and narcissism and even borderline personality disorder. Their symptoms get better over time, and they tend to resist relapse.

The flexibility and meaning that come with being fully present, as described in Zen literature, "can allow people to overcome some of the really bad things that happen to them," Morling said. Being fully present means not thinking about future or past, but completely in the moment, so each interaction is inherently more meaningful. In essence, each conversation is the only conversation. It becomes like the conversations we would likely have if we knew we were about to die. We would no longer wait to tell others what we think of them or to say the things we most want to say. When each moment is the only moment, everything becomes significant. The classic Samurai code opened with the admonition that a samurai must always be mindful of the fact that he has to die. This was not only designed to prepare the warrior for the reality that they must be ready to give up his life quite literally at any moment, but also to serve as a reminder that the present

moment is all that exists. As such, both the ancient samurai and contemporary practitioners learned to do everything as if it is the most important thing in the world. One can't help but imagine the meaning each of our interpersonal interactions might take on under these circumstances. Of course, these are our circumstances. We never know which conversation might be our final conversation, which breath might be our last. In a purely Zen sense, every conversation and every breath is the only one. Beth Morling's observations provided a psychological perspective that helps shore up, in an interdisciplinary sense, these communication-based strategies and questions.

**Zoketsu Norman Fischer: Using zazen to stop thinking allows practitioners to get beyond the construct of the self to see others and the world for the first time**

Another eminent Buddhist leader who speaks frankly of the positive by-products of zazen and their effects on interpersonal interactions and overall quality of life is former co-abbot Zoketsu Norman Fischer of San Francisco Zen Center. SFZC, celebrating its 50th year in 2012, was the first and is currently the largest Soto Zen center in the West. In 2000, he founded Everyday Zen Foundation, a multinational organization devoted to helping practitioners be more fully engaged in the world. As of this writing, he has authored 17 books, some of them poetry and most concerned with how Zen practice can improve our lives. It was encouraging that, rather than reticence or outright rejection, he said he was excited by the question of how the qualities manifested in zazen could improve our dyadic encounters. He made time for an extensive interview, and was as calm and cordial and friendly as one could hope, in the midst of an already busy week of teaching and practicing made more so by jury duty. I mention this because he seems to be fully living what he teaches. This passage from his blog (2012) explains how he balances

the challenge of “the present moment” with the influence of memories of the past, illustrating the sense of down-to-earth humanity that coexists with the heady paradoxes of Zen:

In Japan, where the Soto Zen practice is really warm and intense and full, practice is mostly for the past. Temples are established to honor the ancestors - Buddhist ancestors as well as parents and grandparents. And are preserved for hundreds of years. I remember a Kurosawa movie (the one with Richard Gere in it, about survivors of Hiroshima as old people, remembering that horror). There's a scene in the film - anyway as I remember it - in which two old ladies are sitting in a very small temple in the middle of a grassy field. Wind is blowing the grasses. The women are chanting the Heart Sutra. One of the most beautiful moments in cinema I have ever seen. As if the power of the past - as it lives in the present - were depicted directly.

In the West, where we have so little sense of the power and importance of tradition, we are practicing for ourselves and for now. That's good. Probably it's no good to practice for the past and only for the past. But also it's no good to practice for now and only for now. What now? Is there any such thing as now?

The older I get the more I appreciate my parents, my grandparents, and the many generations that have gone before. And the more I appreciate my teachers, and their teachers, and the teachers who have gone before. The Dharma is a precious thing. It's not for us - we experience it for a minute, and then we pass it on to others who will experience it for a minute and pass it on. It's the passing on, in

time, through time, as time (the Dharma may be nothing other than time) that really counts. That counts now, as we live this life with its full power.

I include that full passage to provide a sense of how Fischer interweaves the poetic and the pragmatic, which in a way is more descriptive of Zen itself than any textbook definition. Indeed, he concluded our long conversation with the recitation of a poem, not one of his own, but another that had spoken to him that day. I also include the passage because of his explanation of how his work with Buddhist Dharma has progressively enhanced his appreciation of people who have been important to him. Dharma, by the way, is variously described as the state or laws of nature, behavior in keeping with the Noble Eightfold Path, and/or the collective teachings of the historical Buddha (which, to some, includes the work of everyone who has realized or acknowledged their own Buddha nature). Here Fischer writes of women and beauty, of teachers and bygone relatives, of the power of the moment. An appreciation of life this deep has developed in large part, he says, because of his practice. Regarding practice and its effects, he said:

In the Mindfulness Sutra, the Buddha tells us the astonishing news that simply by being honestly and clearly present with our experience, and trusting to that, we will set ourselves on a course toward peace and happiness. How do we go about this? No surprise to us, the process begins with finding a good spot, and sitting down to practice mindful breathing. We breathe every breath with awareness and appreciation, knowing the breath as long when it is long and short when it is short, breathing with the whole body sitting, and gradually expanding our awareness until it includes others and the whole world. Sitting this way, we know

we are not separate from all that arises. We know that everything co-creates us, and we co-create everything moment by moment in a continuous flow.

Fischer explained further:

When we get up from our seat we try to be fully present with all our bodily actions, with speaking and listening, with handling objects, with all our acts of perception. Based on this mindfulness of the body, our inner life unfolds. We are mindful of the nearly unconscious gut reactions we have to things, mindful of our moods, our thoughts and feelings. We begin to see the pattern of our minds, what causes us misery, what causes us happiness. Naturally we will choose to cultivate the latter and gently let go of the former. We don't need heavy-handed discipline. All we need is to be honestly aware of our experience and the way will unfold within our lives quite organically.

Fischer continued:

To embrace our life fully in the present with kindness and honesty is to redeem all of the past and to open up the whole future - not only our own past and future, but the past and future of all. This gives us a tremendous sense of the dimension of our practice, and it gives us faith that we can change our lives and the whole world by living completely. To realize these truths and hold them in our hearts not as theories but as ways of living and understanding every day, we need to practice and we need to support each other in that practice.

This statement about the truths that emerge from practice, and treating them as applicable truths rather than mere theory, summarized Fischer's conviction that zazen is an



eminently practical way of not only seeing but especially of engaging with the world and everyone in it.

He echoed what Karnegis told me about the nature of the self and how escaping the trap of the self through zazen can open us up in a unique way:

This self – the rugged individual – is a construct, and it’s shaky. It becomes dependent on everyone around you. The giving up of the self and the development of surrender to the world outside oneself means giving up the fiction that one is a separate, atomized self. Mindfulness is the word that’s on everyone’s lips now, and when most people hear it, they think of greater individual consciousness. I don’t think that’s what mindfulness actually is. I think of it more as the slipping below the level of self-engagement to a kind of presence in the total situation in which living is coming to you in that moment. It’s more intimate than thinking, because all thinking is self-referenced and self-conditioned. This distinction between typical self-engagement and fully appreciating the moment “in which living is coming to you” emphasizes the point that, while the moment is all we have, most of us waste it in endless self-concern. My next interview subject, Joen Snyder O’Neal, used the same phrase of slipping or sliding below self-engagement, which I found curious, because when we think of meditation we often think in terms of transcendence or rising above rather than slipping below. Regarding this, Fischer said:

Well, the more you work with some of this, the more difficult it can get to talk about it. I agree with the communications perspective you mentioned, that all

communication is agenda-driven. I wouldn't want to say that my agenda is no agenda. If it were getting to some space beyond everything, even that would have an agenda. Maybe it's just that there's a greater spaciousness or flexibility regarding whatever agenda happens to arise in a given moment.

I asked him about the perception some have that Zen masters have gotten, as he put it, "beyond everything," and that there is this perfect equanimity and ability to float above any human problems. He chuckled. "The more I practice, the more I practice. It's not because I need it, but because I love it, because it is what I am. Maybe I do need it, but it's more a matter of loving practice and retreats and all the things that I do."

Then, can zazen provide some kind of immunity from or antidote to the endless bombardment of information fueled by advances in technology? He answered:

It can drive us crazy, it's distracting, and we need a way to get back to the wilderness, the silence, just to deal with the complexity of our lives now. The little MacBook Air computer is like our pet. We don't see it as destructive. We see it as cool and beautiful and a desirable object. But in its own insidious way, through something that's personal and individual and seemingly tame and under our control, it has become this great social force, just like the railroad was a hundred or so years ago.

We laughed about the fear that many people experience when the comfort of this distracting information flow stops even for a few minutes, such as when the TV goes out or cell phone service is lost. He said this highlighted the need for us to stop frequently, every day, just to appreciate the silence, with practice or even a walk in the woods.

Fischer expanded on the intimacy that comes when zazen takes a practitioner beyond (or below) self-referenced thinking:

Seeing things this new way, you're getting information from the environment all the time. Otherwise, you just continually turn everything into self-concern. It's like we've been going around with a mask on a stick, like people used to wear at masquerade balls. We're all at this masquerade ball, holding up our masks and meeting each other's mask. We think these masks are ourselves, so we protect them and make sure they look good, so all our interactions end up revolving around each other's self-protection. When you begin to practice real mindfulness, you see that for what it is. Then you can encounter something, whether it's another person or a cloud in the sky, as if you're meeting something fully and guilelessly. Suzuki Roshi [the Japanese head priest who established San Francisco Zen Center as the first in the West] used the word sincerity, to mean immediately meeting whatever is present, without self-protection or folding it into the social self.

The profoundly accomplished yet conflicted Suzuki, which is to say we are all conflicted in one way or another, wrote of the need to face the world honestly, bravely, and directly. He frequently said that one must maintain "beginner's mind," especially when one has become more accomplished. It brings to mind the familiar Zen story of the trainee who went to the master on the premise of seeking wisdom. As the master prepared tea, the trainee proudly spoke at length of how much he had learned in his practice. As the master poured tea into the trainee's cup, he continued to pour even when the cup was full and overflowing. The shocked trainee asked the master why he had done this. The master

replied that the trainee's mind was like the cup – it was already full, and there was no room for anything more. One must empty one's cup and continually become as a beginner if there is to be room for anything further.

Fischer also raised the related and vital point that, while zazen is simple, it is not easy. It is, in my experience, initially quite challenging. I think of it as much the same as learning to ride a bike. As a beginner, whether a literal or virtual child, the idea is both exciting and scary. What if I don't do it right? So, we make our first attempts with training wheels so we don't hurt ourselves. In the case of zazen, the training wheels take the form of a master or teacher, instructing us in how to sit, proper posture, putting our hands in the right position, breathing correctly, and so on. After gathering the courage to make some initial attempts without the training wheels, a few failures are inevitable, and we might even get a little banged up. But if we persevere, we will soon find that we are gliding along seemingly effortlessly, without assistance, and without having to even think any longer about how to do it. As Fischer said, "We come to love it as a natural expression of who we are." We're then ready to start taking longer "rides" if we wish. It takes a person of significant mental as well as physical constitution to sit zazen for anything approaching the kinds of periods these masters do. This is another reason the samurai were attracted to it; it is akin to any other challenging martial discipline. To be clear, the prior research noted in the literature review has demonstrated that practice periods of 10 to perhaps 30 minutes a day will provide the fundamental benefits of zazen. This is also not to say that those who practice for short periods cannot experience satori, which is by all accounts a spontaneous phenomenon that as likely as not occurs when one

is not sitting. The legend goes that the great Edo-era Haiku poet Basho wrote of the commonplace occurrence that triggered his own awakening:

Old pond/a frog jumps in/kerplunk!

Care must be taken, however, when practice becomes much more extensive. “It’s very hard, and it’s scary,” Fischer said:

We’re used to these conscious lives of action, and we have these reactions to everything that is happening. I think the average person, in the busy crazy world with all of its dread, is inside really conflicted and frightened and anxious, and we don’t want to look at that. It seems like way too much to open the door to that. How would we ever bear it? Let’s just keep distracted. Let’s just keep running, so that we don’t have to stop and look at any of that. When I started practicing, I felt the challenge of that, and I was scared of it. Part of that is because the person who first told me about meditation practice went directly from his first sesshin [retreat of several days of zazen] to a mental hospital, and spent the rest of his life as a mental patient, more or less. So, when I would go to a retreat, I would actually pay all my bills and put my affairs in order, just in case I would never come back. I didn’t know what was inside of me, and I didn’t know what I would encounter in the depths of my soul. This difficulty is not a mistake or a problem. It’s what you need to go through to learn what you need to learn from the practice. The advantage is that if you sit long enough, with enough intensity, you realize that whatever was there has come forth. Zazen is really about coming to the foundations of one’s personhood.

It is worth considering what other activities or methods might bring one “to the foundations of one’s personhood,” to the degree that one is able to truly go into the world, without the mask, for the first time. And worth considering how such an act might revolutionize how one sees and interacts with others.

**Joen Snyder O’Neal: Zazen fosters pure attention, allowing practitioners to participate fully in their relationships**

One more practitioner who shares Fischer’s approach is Joen Snyder O’Neal, Zen priest and guiding teacher of Compassionate Ocean Dharma Center in Minneapolis. Described as “a center for mindful living,” Compassionate Ocean is concerned with “daily life application of mindfulness.” One of the first questions I had for her addressed the issue of exoticization and Otherness that frequently attends Western attraction to all things Eastern (and perhaps vice-versa). In this case, the exotic Other, Zen, is made even more so by the complex paradoxes and unique puzzles that define it. She acknowledged that it is itself a paradox that, while Otherness and mystery initially attracts many Westerners to Zen, the reality is that Zen is all about just sitting down and seeing things as simply and plainly and clearly as possible, just as they are. “Zazen is simply sitting down – just stopping – and being with what is present,” she said:

The first thing is to make a stable base and to be upright. In doing this, being stable and upright, we begin to feel it in our bones and in our marrow. Very naturally, this stability and uprightness begins to come into our daily lives. Being stable implies that we’re not being knocked around so much by what other people say or do, or by the mistakes that we make. Being upright, as far as posture goes,

means we're not leaning or slouching. We're often leaning into something – our views and opinions, a relationship, a job – so this being upright is very important. When we're talking with others, we can be upright and not be tossed away or pushed around emotionally. Not in a clinging way, but being present with what the situation demands, which is always compassion and wisdom.

Her fundamental, softer approach conveyed a counterpoint to the more rigorous analysis-driven ideas presented by Fischer and Karnegis, illustrating the range of tones and attitudes even among practitioners from the same national culture. At the same time, her talk of how zazen can help practitioners “be upright and not...pushed around emotionally” indicates a strength and sense of certainty that is common to those who have practiced as long as she has. Even novices, in assuming the posture necessary for effective zazen practice, will experience this sense of solidity and find that it rapidly translates to more mutually respectful interactions.

O'Neal also saw zazen as an antidote to the effects of technology taking over our lives. She elaborated:

We really are addicted to constant stimulation, and people actually feel frightened when they're not constantly stimulated. They feel like they've lost control in some way. In reality, it's the opposite. The media are really controlling them. To be able to stop and realize that you don't have to be moved by anything to feel like a human being, to be able to stop all the technology, if you can do that not for one or two days but every day, for even five minutes, you can cut through the idea that you have to be constantly fed or you'll starve to death! What we're really

starving for is something beautiful and good and pure. We have access to every moment, but we're afraid to access it.

I should mention here that her voice bears the calm softness typical of one who spends the better part of each day in solitude. It's easy to miss the profundity of her thoughts when listening to her voice. At one point during our interview, she paused for a moment, then commented on the birds she was hearing outside her window, "which is really a miracle, you know?"

O'Neal recommends that those addicted to technology put a pleasant "ding" tone on their computers or phones every hour or two to remind them to be mindful of their breath and, thus, of each moment. Of course, she says, nothing can substitute for zazen practice:

The mindfulness that emerges from zazen means wholesomeness, and that means it is whole. Nothing is left out. Another person isn't left out. It brings attention in a very pure way to what we hear, what we see, and what the fabric of our experience is. It lessens the hold that judgment has on us. Judgment is the sword of separation. Then our vision and our speech and our action become unwholesome. But, in order to have this wholesome mindfulness, we have to start stopping, and just be present with what is.

Her comments about wholesomeness and attention echoed those of Karnegis, and brought to mind how frequently Zen practitioners speak in the same foundational terms. This continuous and common focus on fundamentals reflects the belief that Soto Zen practice



is essentially and almost entirely about sitting zazen, such that “another person isn’t left out.”

At this point I mentioned to her that most communication researchers believe that communication without an agenda is not possible, and asked her to comment on how her ideas challenge that notion. She replied:

This practice is really revolutionary. It’s going against the stream; it is challenging, and very different. It’s true that most of what we do and say is agenda-driven. So, this is an experiment in going underneath our agenda and responding in a pure way by not holding on to our agenda.

Here was the reference so similar to Fischer’s statement about “slipping below.” She continued:

This is very hard. I can understand the skepticism of people around you, because this is doing something remarkably different. It does take practice. I’ve been practicing a long time, and I still practice because I still have trouble. But when we return to practice, our fears diminish. If we turn toward our fears with kindness and compassion and openheartedness, and breathe it in and let it go, then something very naturally begins to soften and open. Then we can go forward together hand in hand. We’re all interconnected, so it really does make a difference.

As with the other foundational concepts mentioned previously, O’Neal closed with a reminder that, in Zen terms, all things and all people are interconnected. This means that, in a literal sense, hurting another is hurting oneself. While the belief is that all

are one, this is not at all to say that all are the same. Interculturalism and diversity fall down on any insistence that we are all the same. Zen makes room for and celebrates the qualities that make each of us unique as well as culturally distinct, even as it recognizes our universal connectedness.

**Reggie Pawle: Getting beyond cross-cultural issues and practicing zazen for selflessness and interpersonal clarity**

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of zazen's impact on interpersonal relationships came from my interview with Dr. Reggie Pawle. As I told him, his input would be particularly valuable because he has all three perspectives from which I have explored this question: Pawle is not only an academic researcher in Psychology, but also a clinician and a Zen practitioner himself. His own interest in the potential applications of Japanese, Chinese and Indian philosophies to human relations and emotional health led him first to practice in Japan and then to move there permanently to continue his work. He teaches university courses in cross-cultural psychology that heavily incorporate Buddhist concepts and has his own clinical psychology practice serving primarily western expatriates in Japan. He said his first motivation was to study Zen in a Japanese monastery.

"I met many Americans and westerners who had come to Japan for the same reason. Most of them returned home disappointed, after having had a cultural experience rather than a Zen experience," Pawle said. As referenced in previous interviews, the perceived exotic trappings and mysterious Otherness of Zen are for many an alluring Siren's call veiling the hard realities of Zen as anything but mysterious or exotic. It is

important to simultaneously understand that an appreciation of cultural influences and their meaning is essential to understanding Zen but also that any perceived exotic Otherness will only serve as a distraction to one's practice. Pawle said:

There is much more cultural influence in Zen than people realize, especially in America. The Americanization of Zen isn't necessarily a bad thing, but people don't appreciate the cultural influences. Practices and monastic life are very different just from China to Japan. If you don't understand these cultural influences, it's hard to fully appreciate Zen and what it means.

This is not to say that a deep cultural orientation is necessary to experiencing the benefits of zazen practice, but rather that cross-cultural appreciation and understanding are important to our purposes here and to any academic exploration of Zen. In order to know where we're going, we have to know where we're coming from. Pawle explained:

The first thing is the strictness and the rules. The Japanese are much stricter than the Chinese (and certainly American Zen centers). The rules in Japan are difficult for foreigners to understand. When we look at the Heart Sutra, for example, there is the passage that says, "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form." The way that Buddha appears in this world is form, and with form comes a million rules. You're treated in monasteries by superiors in ways that, and I've had this experience, were humiliating to me. Being spoken to in ways that you would never be spoken to in America. So, this kind of humiliation is very difficult. This is not just Japanese Zen. It also happens in Japanese businesses, and in universities with the teachers and the students.

The implications on dyadic interactions are clear:

In any kind of hierarchical situation in Japan, the superior is given the right to be extremely direct and extremely rude. This is in contrast to the American idea that the other person has equal rights and is equal to you in some basic way. In America, if that happens, people get angry, and all kinds of things come out.

This Japanese cultural trait would seem to stand in direct contrast to the fundamental Buddhist concept of compassion. The completely regimented and strict, or even abusive, environment of the Japanese Zen monastery can be genuinely terrifying even for Japanese novices, let alone those from the West. The purpose, we are told, is to provide the necessary structure and discipline to ensure that those who stick it out will have the mental and emotional wherewithal to meet the challenges that arise from extensive zazen practice. Pawle explained:

What you are being trained to do is to pay attention. Attention is the faculty of mind that Zen begins with. It's the same with all the Buddhist practices.

Mindfulness. It begins with attention. If you can't pay attention, you can't do the practice.

Indeed, I would contend that the practice is simply paying attention which, not coincidentally, is also foundational to any kind of effective communication. Pawle makes another crucial cross-cultural point which helps explain the growing western attraction to Zen:

The beginning of Zen training and the beginning of education in Japan is paying attention, not thinking, because the way you survive in Japanese society and

business is by paying attention. Education in the west begins with creative thinking, and analyzing, and having opinions. This is a fundamental difference between the two cultures, and between the two education systems, and also fundamental to understanding Zen practice. One of the reasons mindfulness is becoming so popular in America is because it's filling a gap that hasn't been addressed by American education.

Pawle also highlighted the paradox that, just as Zen has grown exponentially in the U.S., it is rapidly shrinking in the nation where it was first fully realized. He elaborated:

Many say that Buddhism is dying in Japan. Young people aren't interested in it. [Today] it is associated with death. It plays the role of death ceremonies and funerals. In Japan, Zen is associated with doing things very strictly and without having any soul. For young people, it's just rules and regulations, and it has lost its essence. Meanwhile, I see fat monks. I see monks driving Mercedes'. I see monks in bars trying to pick up girls. I have never seen these things outside of Japan.

The point is that as the essence of Zen, zazen practice, is becoming lost in Japan, not only the general population but the monks themselves are losing their appreciation of Zen and what it can mean. Pawle said:

When I teach Buddhist psychology, Japanese people are routinely surprised by my perspective. A lot of people say they just don't get it. When I explain it to them, they can appreciate it, but it's no longer something they hear about in the

culture. The future of Zen in Japan is very bleak, unless they can somehow change it. It has become all about the funeral fees with which the monks make a lot of money. Young people aren't going to want to pay those fees, so the whole system is liable to collapse in the next 50 years or so.

As such, it will be incumbent on the American Zen community to become culturally self-sustaining. Rather than “exotic Otherness” being the nexus of initial intrigue for westerners, the focus would be almost entirely on whatever direct benefits it can provide. Thus, as Karnegis emphasized and as Pawle also stresses, the focus shifts to mindfulness and attention to the other as an antidote to one's emotional pain. “Part of it is attention training, and part of it is the usefulness of it. Being able to look at yourself, introspection, and how to be a better human being.” He noted that there's a bit of an intercultural leap regarding mindfulness and its potential in human interactions, which also incorporates a foundational communication concept and cuts to the heart of my question. He explained:

Mindfulness didn't emerge out of northern Buddhism [Mahayana or East Asian Buddhism, of which Zen is a subset], but rather out of southern [or South Asian] Buddhism, the Theravada and Vipassana traditions. Now, in Zen, if you don't drop your agenda – and communication is agenda-oriented – you'll never have a Zen experience. My teacher here in Japan never talked about mindfulness. Instead, he talked about becoming the object that you're paying attention to. The emphasis is on the dissolution of the agenda, or the dissolution of the subject/object relationship, the relationship between self and other. When you become the object that you're paying attention to, mindfulness disappears and the

separation disappears. The point is to see the world as one. This is a particular emphasis that I don't see written about. You transcend mindfulness. You begin with mindfulness, as an intention, but you are quickly encouraged to drop the mindfulness. Mindfulness takes effort. When you get beyond the mindfulness, the effort falls away.

So, from a dyadic perspective, what begins as intentional mindfulness more specifically manifests from zazen as a spontaneous realization that you and I are not separate, and thus, my agenda is essentially moot (if it even exists at all any longer). The traditional conception of the I/thou relationship is obliterated, along with constructions such as subject and object. In this manner, we must in a sense reconceptualize communication itself. If agenda and communicative hierarchy can indeed be rendered moot, I can now observe and engage with full attention and clarity rather than through the filter of my former agenda, wants, and other prejudices. This spontaneous realization comes at vastly different times for different practitioners, if at all. If it does not come, the practitioner still has mindfulness as an intention, which as stated by previous interview subjects still provides for deeper and more fulfilling dyadic interactions because the focus is no longer primarily on the self. I asked Pawle whether the realization he speaks of might be, rather than satori, the state of mushin no shin (again, the mind of no mind) as I had experienced in my aikido practice. "Yes! That's it exactly," he exclaimed. "Aikido is a very good example of this kind of thing. You blend yourself with the other person. You don't look to oppose them. You look to blend with them. Then you can assert your intention in the appropriate way so that it's part of the whole."

Pawle concluded with yet another paradox that effectively summarized zazen's value in interpersonal interactions:

Our practice is who we are, and it changes us as people. You cultivate yourself through practice, and then how you are in the world reflects this cultivation.

We're already Buddha, but we have to realize it, and we do that through practice.

The emphasis in Buddhism starts with becoming less selfish. We go from a selfish person to a selfless person, that is, a lack of selfishness. It changes how we perceive the world, and that changes all of our interactions. In the Rinzai tradition, we have practice even after satori. In Japanese, it is called gogo, meaning "satori after," or practice after enlightenment. You have to go back out into the world, so all of your body-mind has to be adjusted. How you see the world, your thinking, your ways of interacting with other people...it's not enough just to have satori.

Now you have to figure out how to live satori.

Reggie Pawle's integrated approach to the subject matter, as practitioner, clinician, and educator, coupled with the insights that come from one who has lived in both the U.S. and Japan for many years, bring a triangulated legitimacy to the contention that zazen does indeed have profound implications for what our communication can be. Those implications are explored in detail in the next chapter.





## **Chapter 5**

### **Discussion**

The conclusions discussed here include, first, a summary of key interview points as they relate to my research questions and specifically to dyadic communication, second, a case study and several other examples of how I have seen zazen practice affect my own dyadic interactions in the time since I have been practicing regularly, and third, observations tying what was learned back to my original questions. Again, those questions are, how could a state of mindfulness, appropriate response, and flow be accessed by virtually anyone, whether or not they have had prior experience with Zen or martial arts? And, in what ways could this state be applied to dyadic interactions to make them more appropriately responsive, dispassionate, and mutually beneficial? All of these observations and examples can be collectively taken as illustrative of what I call Zen Communication - that is, the deeper, more meaningful, less contentious communication that is possible because of the qualities that are manifested by regular zazen practice, as the interview subjects confirmed.

### **Summary of Key Observations**

If anything, the great wealth of supporting and convincing evidence that arose from just five long-form interviews made it clear that many more interviews would have become like echoes. During the course of my interviews, even before the project was completed, it quickly became apparent that most of the practitioners and academics with whom I spoke had significant evidence of how zazen, or more specifically the qualities manifested by zazen practice, has an immediate impact on the nature and quality of

dyadic interactions. In addition to those who have specifically studied or practiced Zen, I spoke with some of the originators of flow theory, martial artists of various disciplines, and others grounded in Eastern philosophies. What emerged from these varied perspectives, and kept coming back again and again in direct response to my initial question, was that mindfulness was the essential quality that could most immediately affect the quality of our interactions and our lives, and that mindfulness was most directly accessed and developed through zazen.

While the viewpoints were indeed varied, they formed a synthesis of observations from which emerged consistent themes: Cross-cultural concerns (regarding exoticization, Otherness, ritual and ceremony, and basic differences in cultural backgrounds) were in this case more small hurdles than stumbling blocks; what some saw as potential intimidation others took as points of intrigue. As noted by Karnegis, Fischer, and Pawle, Zen, as well as traditionally Eastern martial arts practices, has taken on a unique and distinct form as practiced on these shores, just as occurred as the foundational philosophies moved from India to China to Korea to Japan and to the U.S. While Zen itself is a complex and multi-layered concept, both clinical psychologists and master practitioners, in my interviews as well as the literature review, confirmed that fundamental zazen practice can be undertaken by virtually anyone, to relatively immediate and significant personal and interpersonal benefit. And this practice spontaneously manifests as a multitude of specific qualities that lay a groundwork for more meaningful and satisfying dyadic interactions, including greater attention, more clear and accurate perceptions, a shift from self-focus to other-focus, and an innate compassion.

Without being prompted, the interview subjects brought up all of the key factors I noted in my initial question – mindfulness, appropriate response versus emotional reaction, and flow versus force. Prior to the interviews, in my introduction and literature review, I wrote about the importance of appropriate response rather than emotional reaction in dyadic interactions. Three of the five interview subjects (Karnegis, Fischer, and Pawle) raised the distinction between reaction and response, using the same terms and following the same conceptualization I had outlined, and noted that appropriate response is yet another spontaneous manifestation of zazen practice. Flow was also a common theme in the interviews, not necessarily as conceived by Csikszentmihalyi but more so in terms of the “flow of life” that is realized following zazen practice, as opposed to the agenda-driven force that is more commonly employed, especially in the West. Flow was also referenced as the energy flow known as ki in Japanese or qi in Chinese, a quantity that becomes self-apparent to zazen practitioners just as it does to those who practice martial arts such as aikido. This recognition reinforces the attendant conceptualization that everything and all are one, as all four of the interviewed practitioners mentioned at various times.

The concepts of “dispassionate” and “mutually beneficial” communication were shown to be inherent cohorts of Zen, as our practitioner subjects explained. First, dispassionate should not be taken as disconnected or disengaged, but rather as first calmly and clearly observing and paying deep attention so that one might then respond appropriately (skillfully, as Karnegis put it) and thus be more fully and meaningfully engaged, in a manner that reflects the rather challenging martial concept of mushin no shin, again meaning the mind of no mind, or spontaneous appropriate action without

thought. Returning to the final concept of “mutually beneficial” interaction, nothing could more clearly express the intent that arises from any truly Buddhist-based and zazen-rooted engagement. As our interview subjects affirmed, compassion for all (and for self as part of the “all”) means that virtually any act undertaken by a practitioner would carry the intention of mutual benefit. In each of these cases, and with all of these qualities, the spontaneous manifestations of zazen practice have been acknowledged to have immediate and pronounced effectiveness in the arena of dyadic interaction.

### **Zen Communication: Key Characteristics and Application**

What I call Zen Communication is both a state and a method. It is dyadic communication under the influence of cumulative zazen practice, such that the typical personal agenda and perceptions of the other based on and driven by that agenda are replaced by the communicative qualities that manifest from zazen practice. Those qualities include mindfulness, openness, other-focus rather than self-focus, and spontaneous compassion, all of which combine to produce appropriate response rather than emotional reaction. The state is not some zoned-out trance, but rather the pronounced presence and clarity of mindfulness as generated by zazen practice. The method as defined is essentially spontaneous. While the interview subjects described the communicatively beneficial qualities that manifest from practice, such as mindfulness, skillfulness, wholesomeness, and compassion, these qualities are less conscious intention than spontaneous manifestation. Rather than the practitioner thinking, for example, I want to be compassionate in this communication, compassion is one of the many positive manifestations of the practice that influence the practitioner’s interpersonal interactions. The following observations and examples support this definition of Zen communication.

They include questions of agenda and self-focus, elaboration on practitioners' state of mind in dyadic interactions, examples of the benefits and challenges of the practical application of Zen communication, and its impact on friendship as well as ordinary day-to-day dyadic interactions.

Based on what came out of the interviews, I'd like to draw a distinction between agenda and self-focus. Whether one practices zazen to the extent that the sense of self dissipates entirely, or only to the degree that the focus shifts from self to other or "all" as would be the case with typical lay practice, it is clear that the practice does cause one's focus to shift significantly. As Karnegis said, when we are no longer occupied by continual self-concern - Do I look alright? I want some of that candy. Does he think I'm stupid? These shoes are old, she has nicer shoes than me, etc. - we can then begin to see others and their concerns more clearly. Even setting aside the intention of compassion that is another of the fruits of zazen, the practitioner is now in a position to genuinely attend to the concern of the other. This goes beyond empathic listening. As described in the interviews and has been my own experience, it is as if a veil has been lifted and one sees the world and the people in it with a new sense of clarity, as if for the first time. In this state, I can much more fully appreciate anyone with whom I interact, and I have a genuine and spontaneous concern for them that naturally prompts me to put their interests first. This is not "giving in to get my way," as Dobson put it. This is not practicing "habits of successful people," following a prescription that says I will be successful if I hear the concerns of the other first. Those are still essentially acts of self-interest. The distinction regarding agenda is not necessarily that agenda does not exist - if what I want is for the other person to be happy, that is still an agenda - but rather that this new state of clarity

and spontaneity allows the agenda to be set aside in favor of a primary concern for whatever the other brings to the dyad.

One of my early questions in this regard was whether a completely blank slate, as many people typically perceive Zen or "being Zen," would be necessary or helpful to fully realizing zazen's potential in the dyadic arena. For this reason, I examined the relative concepts such as fudoshin (immovable mind), as in our example of how the samurai strove to develop this quality so that they could observe an opponent as clearly as possible, free of preconceptions, fear, and even thought in the traditional sense. What I have found is that while "immovable mind" does develop from zazen practice in the sense that, because I'm not preoccupied with myself and that things you say or do won't hurt me because my ego perceptions have changed, this is far removed from being cold or withdrawn or somehow immune from emotion. Rather, it is complete and appropriate engagement, made possible by and adjunct to the clarity that arises from practice. Stopping the mind - stopping thinking as much as we can - gives us an opportunity to observe without prejudice, such that response can indeed be appropriate and wholly spontaneous. This is full engagement as expressed in flow theory, in which we lose our sense of self and of time and space because we are so completely engaged in this moment. In this state, more effective dyadic interaction is virtually inevitable.

### **An Illustrative Case Study**

At various times during this project and over the course of my practice, I have been asked what the mindful state that results from zazen practice feels like, or what goes on cognitively in this state. Perhaps the best way to further define this state is to first

define what it is not. As mentioned earlier, the state that emerges from zazen practice is not a detached, trance-like, trippy state as one might associate with various transcendental or ecstatic practices. It is also not a feeling of being emotionally cold or shut off. Rather, it is a feeling of enhanced clarity, being calmly yet fully in the present moment, being relatively free of the nagging imperative of distraction to which our minds are commonly subject, and being able to listen and observe more deeply than under typical circumstances. Crucially, it is this comfort with just what is before us, without thinking about or needing anything else, that gives rise to the genuine sense of joy that can only come with freedom from want. This spontaneous sense of joy, rather than an ecstatic or "high" feeling, further enables the compassionate response that is central to Buddhist action. It is exactly this response that effectively overrides the typical emotional reactions experienced in dyads (and other communication scenarios). Remember the foundational Four Noble Truths - suffering is caused by attachment, or want, but Buddhist practice (especially meditation) can bring freedom from suffering by eliminating the sense of attachment or want. In this way, free of attachment or want, we can approach communication in a manner that is perhaps as close to an absence of personal agenda as is possible. This is particularly effective in dyadic communication, when we are paying attention to one other person, hearing them more fully and responding with appropriate and genuine compassion - that is, in a manner that can help them, whether it's simply empathic listening without interrupting or offering whatever assistance we can.

The following case study provides personal evidence of how zazen and Zen Communication, and by contrast its initial absence, affected the course of a series of dyadic interactions with one other person. This case study further illustrates the "how" of



this manner of communication, provides a critique of a typical communication style in order to further define selfless mindful communication, and specifies some of the behavioral, emotional, and cognitive processes that attend this approach. It begins with a brief examination of a tendency that I referenced in my introduction. Along with a strong natural curiosity, I have a tendency to treat new ideas kind of like a toy, turning them around, testing them, and sometimes over-thinking. While this tendency may or may not be detrimental to dyadic encounters, it certainly runs counter to the stated Zen intention of, as much as possible, seeing things as they are. This is a vital component of what Karnegis described as skillfulness. Rather than potentially endless and highly flexible personal interpretation, the intention is to simply observe, pay attention, and the essence of a concept will be more readily and clearly apparent.

The first interaction of this case study took place in a home environment, in which I was using a laptop computer, a TV was on, and a radio was on in the next room. This was prior to my renewed interest in zazen, during a time in which I was not practicing. I had become accustomed to talking with people, both at work and at home, while working on a computer and frequently without even looking up at the other person. My mindset was that being plugged in technologically gave me a continuous information flow that could only help my business and elevate the quality of my life. I had forgotten that the quality of our lives is inextricably linked to the quality of our interactions. I had also not yet learned that, as a primarily auditory learner, hearing more than one voice at a time, from whatever source or sources, significantly decreased cognition and the quality of listening and learning. In this case I was doing some online research and writing a paper for a class. My dyadic (and relationship) partner came into the room to discuss some

concerns she was having. I initially attempted to conduct the conversation while still online, using my laptop. She expressed that she would appreciate it if I would at least look at her when she was talking to me. With a sigh conveying the frustration of the inconvenience I was experiencing, I closed the laptop and set it down. The TV and radio were still on. Over these divergent audio signals, she attempted to tell me what was bothering her. Thinking back on this example, I am sure that my body language conveyed that my priority was getting back to my computer. There were no immediacy techniques such as verbal affirmation, significant eye contact, or congruent body orientation coming from me that would indicate I had much interest in what she was saying. I don't recall the specific verbal content, except to say that while it didn't seem particularly significant to me, it was important to her.

After a minute or two, she suddenly said, "For someone who's studying communication, you're sure not very good at it," and left the room. My reaction, I'm ashamed to admit, was not acknowledgment that I had been rude and inattentive, but silent outrage that she had criticized my communication technique. "What does she know?," I thought. "I'm the one who's studying and writing here, and she distracts me with a petty and emotional interruption, then insults me when I'm not responding the way she wants. How selfish!" Well, how do you think our communication went for the rest of that evening, or for the next few days? It was only when I told myself that I would have to be the bigger person and apologize, even though I knew that I had done nothing wrong, that hurt feelings were somewhat soothed. Reflecting on it now, she had to have known that my apology was self-serving and insincere, and there was certainly no intention or sense that I would be inclined to do anything differently should the same situation arise

again. To assess this typical, pre-zazen communication style, I would first acknowledge that my communication was essentially ego-driven and self-serving; forceful rather than naturally flowing. Rather than a thoughtful and appropriate response, I displayed a knee-jerk emotional reaction. Cognitively, my thoughts were self-centered, defensive, and ignorant of the needs of another. Behaviorally, my communication was brusque, dismissive, and ultimately divisive. Emotionally, it felt cold, isolating, and sad.

In contrast to this scenario, my interactions with the same person have been remarkably more mutually fulfilling when regularly practicing zazen. First, one of the effects of mindfulness that arises with regular zazen practice is that what were once welcome distractions, such as TVs and radios playing in the background, are now perceived as disquieting interference with clear perception - a sort of aural clutter. So, both are never on at the same time any longer, and each is on only when I'm paying direct attention to it. Otherwise, they are off, and I can think and converse with much greater focus and attention without these media competing for cognitive space. Second, my tendency with zazen practice has been to progressively move away from screens (computer, television, cell phone, etc.) as a continuous source of information, and to move toward other people as sources of more rewarding interactions. Third, when someone enters the room and wants to talk with me, I turn away from the computer (or close the laptop) immediately and reflexively. Without thinking about it, it is simply apparent that I can't attend to what someone is trying to tell me when I'm distracted by a computer.

But, of course, Zen communication goes far beyond limiting or eliminating the distractions of technology. Thinking about more recent interactions with this same dyadic

partner, I realize that I reflexively turn my body to face her. I look into her eyes to discern meaning when she is talking. I also look for non-verbal clues to indicate whether she is receiving my communication accurately, inasmuch as one can determine that. I am patient, my breathing is full and relaxed, and I feel no pull to be doing anything other than being completely in that moment and attentive to that communication. Because I am not concerned with any agenda of my own, my conversation can be relatively selfless, and also frank without fear of offending, as genuine concern is immediately apparent. This is appropriate response rather than emotional reaction. I find myself fully enjoying the interaction, even when it is challenging or potentially difficult, because the calm focus brought by mindfulness makes spontaneous creativity and humor predominant. Not surprisingly, she is delighted by such interactions, especially compared to the previous example. The relationship is deepened and enhanced, and she is much more likely to come to me without trepidation the next time she feels the need to talk. The conversation, rather than forceful and strident, flows with natural spontaneity, like good improvisational jazz. In contrast to the pre-zazen communication scenario, my cognition is other-centered, open, and genuinely compassionate. Behaviorally, my communication is gentle, patient, and harmonious. Emotionally, it feels warm, uniting, and joyous. Another phrase that comes to mind is that it feels like what I was put here for. There is a sense of finding one's true self in dyadic interactions of this nature. This is not to suggest that such interactions cannot be achieved without zazen, but as my case study demonstrates, zazen practice has emerged as the lynchpin to such effective and deeply meaningful communication for myself as well as my interview subjects.

### **Challenges and Related Concerns**

A challenge that should be noted here is that others who have not been practicing may have suspicions or concerns about why someone would communicate with them so openly and spontaneously, while the practitioner must also be careful that interactions are appropriate rather than disarming. When seeing things in such a new light, many practitioners are immediately more open and friendly in their communication, which can easily be misinterpreted by others. It is unusual to encounter people who are friendly just for the sake of being friendly. There can usually be the legitimate assumption that there is a financial, or romantic, or other motive behind gestures of friendliness and openness. Further, it is not unusual for others driven by self-interest to take advantage of the good nature of practitioners, as I have experienced. The expression "no good deed goes unpunished" may or may not be accurate, but in any case practitioners are unlikely to stop doing good deeds, even when others take their time and generosity for granted. Karnegis said it's important to "not be a doormat," and self-respect is as important as respect for others, but it becomes the nature of practitioners to want to help without expectation of reward. As long as that expectation is upheld, there is no "punishment" for doing good just for the sake of doing good.

It becomes apparent that the agenda-driven nature of most dyadic interactions makes genuine friendship an unusual thing. While we may like to think that we have a lot of friends, we are likely to have no more than four or five truly deep and genuine friendships in a lifetime. On the other hand, the potential for genuine friendship is tremendously enhanced when it becomes clear that interactions are not based on what one wants from another. This is not to say that our intention is to establish friendship with everyone we meet. It is self-apparent, however, that when interactions are not so agenda-

driven, as is the case with regular zazen practitioners, we can then be open to the mutual possibilities of each human encounter. We all know the feeling of talking briefly with someone we would like to get to know better, not out of any conventional "attraction" but simply because they are a joy to be around. When we ourselves approach our dyadic encounters with, as Karnegis put it, "joy and skillfulness and wholesomeness," as emerges from regular zazen practice," we find ourselves in the role of a communicator others enjoy being around. This is a palpable quality. In every one of the interviews I conducted, I found myself wishing it could have gone on a good deal longer, not as much out of intellectual curiosity as because of the sheer joy and enthusiasm for life these people radiate. Being around genuine empathy, that is, empathy without expectation, is a powerful and wonderful feeling.

Even when people are being paid to help others, as in retail or customer service jobs, genuine empathy is scarce. Many in such positions don't even bother to try to convey any concern, as if one's presence is an inconvenience. I was recently in a shoe store in which the young clerk said to me quite sternly, "just a minute" when I approached with a question, then proceeded without hurry to complete her obviously frivolous cell phone call before turning to me with a withering look for interfering with her fun. Years ago I might have turned and walked out or called her rude or something, but instead I simply smiled and asked my question, and my cheerfulness seemed to puzzle her. Maybe she thought more of it, maybe not, but her thoughtlessness didn't have to upset me either way (whereas in the past it certainly would have). Personal slights, even unintentional ones, are still more common in our meaningful relationships. Consider, for example, a case in my romantic relationship in which she said something to

me that was critical, or judgmental, or maybe even designed to provoke a reaction. With the ability to 1) not take it personally (because I'm not so concerned with this "person" that is myself), 2) not react emotionally (which would increase discord by feeling hurt and then perhaps wanting to hurt), and instead 3) respond appropriately (which in such a case might be to say something encouraging to the other person, or simply not respond at all), a relationship can sidestep the pitfalls of common contention. There will be conflict, of course, as there is in any significant relationship, but again, the ability to skillfully and wholesomely address conflict, which can arise when one's ego is not at the forefront, mitigates the cumulative destructive impact that results from contention.

To summarize, I have provided extensive evidence from my interview subjects as well as my own direct experience of how zazen can indeed manifest in mindful, selfless, more skillful and appropriately responsive dyadic interactions. Prior research in the literature review confirmed that most people can easily learn zazen or related mindfulness meditation techniques. The implications for interpersonal and intercultural communication scholarship are substantial. If subject/object perceptions and self interest-driven agendas can in reality be overcome by these techniques, we may in fact be looking at a reconceptualization of dyadic communication itself. We have also seen how the ancient and potentially exclusive cultural elements that provide at least some of the initial cross-cultural attraction to Zen can either be effectively taken out of the equation in a Westernized practice or studied and upheld for deeper understanding and appreciation.

Future Research

I chose dyadic communication for this study simply because it is the most basic level of interpersonal communication. I felt it would provide the clearest and simplest foundational illustration of how applied zazen affects communication. As for potential further research on this topic, it would be particularly beneficial to conduct some sort of quantitative study of the application of zazen to standardized and measurable dyadic scenarios. In short, my research has shown qualitatively that zazen provides direct and specific benefits to such interactions. The next step would be to determine the degree of effectiveness, perhaps on perceived mutual benefit, depth and meaning, clarity and accuracy, relative comfort, etc. This could also be undertaken from a qualitative observational/ethnographical standpoint, although I believe some type of measurable coding device would provide more useful and revelatory data than would a purely observational study. Moving beyond the dyad, future studies might address the application of Zen communication to small groups, families, organizations, and business/professional settings. Intercultural scholars might further explore the reasons Zen appears to be dying in the East even as its value is being more fully embraced in the West, especially in light of shifting economic and cultural benchmarks that have led observers in both hemispheres to say that it may be more necessary and important now than ever before.

In closing, I would like to express my deep and sincere gratitude to all who participated in this thesis project. True to form, the interview subjects were uniformly generous, enthusiastic, and careful to convey their ideas as clearly and accurately as possible. Please know that you have helped to advance research on this challenging yet tremendously rewarding subject, in what I hope has been a new way of looking at what



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