

# Curriculum as Zen

## Five Moments Inspired by Aoki

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無門の扉 たたずむ影に 暮れる秋  
Boundless, open mind  
Knocking on a gateless gate  
Pale autumn shadows

**A**OKI (2003) DISCUSSES how, in second-language classrooms, curriculum development is often treated as a process leading to nothing more than the giving and taking of knowledge. He suggests that an instrumental understanding of language on the part of teachers and students begets only an instrumental understanding of education. “Missing is a willing admission of the whole beings of teachers and students. Teaching tends to be reduced to instruction and is understood as a mode of doing. An understanding of teaching as a mode of being is virtually eliminated” (Aoki, 2003, p. 245). I have found that in the classroom, curriculum as it is lived by teachers and students is equally as important to consider as curriculum-as-planned.

Often, second language curriculum is seen as linear, from standardized assessment and evaluation, to the technical details of language. However, I believe that language learning goes beyond these categorizations. From 2006 to 2008, I investigated the connection between language and identity through the eyes of four Japanese women as they attempted to learn English at a Canadian university and to navigate the Canadian sociocultural landscape. Three of the women were of various ages, and the fourth was myself. I collected our experiences through diaries and both personal and group interviews. Throughout my study, I also attempted to separate myself from my Japanese identity as well as my growing Canadian one, and accept the information, opinions, and emotions that arose from this investigation without judgment or binary answers, in a manner that might be regarded, in my native Japanese culture, as Zen.

As an instructor of Japanese as a second language at a Canadian university, I considered the understandings that arose from this research to be of particular importance. Though my research examined one subset of second language learners, I recognized that what I found might provoke a certain empathy for some of the challenges faced by my own students, which are not always so

clearly visible in a classroom context. With this in mind, and recalling Aoki's words during my research, I tried to understand second language learning and identity as a mode of being rather than simple instruction, opening my mind to the complicated and many-layered answers provoked by my research question, "What does it mean for a Japanese woman to study English?" My participants' diaries and interviews were filled with contradictions.

In an interview, one of my participants, Aya, expressed ever-changing levels of confidence.

My confidence is always zooming up and down like a rollercoaster. When John says that I really shouldn't be in ESL because he says I am already very fluent in English, and that I should have more confidence in my English, I still feel as though I can't hold onto that confidence. I don't even trust myself or I have too much pride. From the perspective of others it might seem as though I appear confident however. (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 227)

Another of my participants, Yoko, was a very feminine girl who placed a great deal of importance on how men viewed her. In a diary entry she shared with me, she expressed the conflict between her new, Canadian-influenced, and more direct approach to men and her perception of what makes a good Japanese woman:

From the point of view of the Japanese man who is accustomed to the cute and obedient Japanese girl, after I return to Japan, I will probably cause some men to be nervous around me. There might be some instances in which other people might look me at as being selfish, strong, or careless. Compared to Canadians however, I'm still very Japanese [shy, kind to others, polite]. (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 245)

I found Yoko's description of herself as "very Japanese" to be particularly interesting. While I tried throughout my research to view the challenges and questions that arose without generalization or binary thinking, I found that my participants themselves tended to demonstrate notions of Japanese and Canadian cultures as being strongly divergent, particularly in their approach to women, and that they tended to generalize these notions across populations.

Though each of my participants' experiences was very different from my own, I found myself empathizing with their feelings about Japanese women as being stereotypical. Certainly the experiences and perceptions of women across cultures, regions, and ages are likely to be diverse, which to me made it seem all the more significant that this common thread could be found throughout each of our narratives. Ultimately, I came to appreciate that while this kind of thinking might be an unfair generalization of Japanese or Canadian cultures, it was a feeling that I and all three of my participants shared, and so to us was a significant part of our lived experience. We were trapped and unable to completely separate ourselves from our own definitions of femininity, or the perceptions of others, but at the same time our changing outlooks caused us to reject many of these ideals and desire to be free of the gaze of men.

My eldest participant, Rie, consistently expressed her strong feelings that Japanese women should not change their personalities and behaviours just to succeed in a multicultural Canadian society. In one of our meetings, Rie expressed that the aggressive assertiveness of some of her Western classmates repulsed and discouraged her. "There is one man in the last term who raised his hand all the time, when he became tired, he would hold his hand with his other hand and 吐かつく (mukatsuku, trans., disgusting) really irritate me. For him, showing his opinion was the

most important thing and he never listens to other's opinions" (Yoshimoto, 2008, p. 222). In spite of this, as her studies in Canada progressed, she spoke more often of the ways in which her own behaviour was naturally changing to a more Westernized standard, as shown in the following personal statement:

At the beginning, I always tried to change my personality to fit to this environment in order to succeed, but I now realize that I did not need to change my self unwillingly. Initially I thought that I must be assertive like Canadians in order to succeed but now I think that it is more important for me to be confident about my culture and environment in order to be able to express myself. Since I began in 2005 I have been afraid to even scratch my head in case my teacher were to think that I was raising my hand. Recently however, I attended an ESL conference and I have been so surprised at myself with how I am raising my hand with my index finger extended so that I can be called upon and heard. As an international student, even though I am not very skilled, I have begun to realize that expressing my opinion is a very important thing. We are different in many ways. If I accept my differences as a Japanese person, such as my Japanese accent, Japanese ways of expression and behaviour, things become easier and now, I am more confident than when I started this program. (Yoshimoto, 2008, pp. 88-89)

I was surprised by the apparent chaos of Rie's feelings, as she expressed an earlier fear of Westernization, followed by a principled stance against changing, even as she spoke about how she had already changed. What this portion of my research truly highlighted to me was that my participants, both as students and as women, were ever-changing, and could not be pinned down to fixed images.

In seeking answers to my research questions I found that there were in fact many responses, layered one on top of another, irreducible to one succinct response. I puzzled over this until I read Aoki's (2000) article *Locating Living Pedagogy in Teacher "Research": Five Metonymic Moments*. I was moved by Aoki's work to consider how my experiences and research could be applied to the concept of living pedagogy. I interpret Aoki's five metonymic moments as movements away from binary thinking to an in-between space, recognizing the complexity of living pedagogy. While Aoki's moments evolve in such a way that he seems close to locating living pedagogy, he consciously ends on a question, which for me provoked the Zen image of *muki*, no answer.

Thus inspired by Aoki, after much reflection I eventually arrived at my own five moments of Zen. I came to see some applications that Zen philosophy might have in a classroom setting: beginning with *muki* (no answer), I proceeded to *yū/mu* (being/non-being), *mushou* (no image), *shoshin* (beginner's mind), and *shogyo mujou* (impermanence). These Zen images had previously guided my approach to my research, my participants, and my students, though I was never consciously aware of them.

### **Moment #1: living pedagogy midst curriculum-as-plan/curriculum-as-live(d) 無記 (*muki*): curriculum-as-live(d) is a space without answer.**

無記の世を 茹蛸のごと 恥多く

Impermanent self

Wandering, her head hung low

## Undying questions

Aoki's (2000) first moment, "Living pedagogy midst curriculum-as-planned/curriculum-as-lived," refers to the struggle of teachers between "the plannable and the unplannable, between the predictable and the unpredictable, between the prescriptible and the non-prescriptible" (p. 2). He suggests that the site of this struggle is their pedagogical context, the site of living pedagogy. Here, no simple answers are found. This thought gave rise to my first moment of Zen, *muki*.

無 (*mu*) literally means nothingness, while 記 (*ki*) means to inscribe or take notes. The Buddha gave this word to his followers when he left to meditate under a tree. This was his answer to their metaphorical questions about the nature and existence of heaven, hell, the universe, and human sufferings. *Muki* can be interpreted as the need to dwell in the self, forever seeking the answers in emptiness, rather than looking to outside sources for a correct answer. By acknowledging that no single answer can be found, we acknowledge the need to never stop questioning.

In order to reach a state of Zen, we go beyond the borders of language, to an in-between space where contradictions co-opt common sense. For example, a very famous Zen question is, "What did your face look like before your mother and father were born?" which to the logical, common-sense mind is unanswerable. According to Minami and Mogi (2009),

The theory of Buddhism might be close to linguistic philosophy. We consider its limits and meaning at first, then destroy it. The first step of training is to hammer down this idea. The person who hammers these ideas into a student does not necessarily understand the purpose and meaning, but as it is traditional training, he follows it anyway, and repeatedly, like a hammer, tells the student to stop thinking, and to abandon himself. Through the practice of *koan* [ritual questions], the student learns to fully abandon the answers of common sense. At least in Buddhism and especially in Zen, this is to destroy ordinary logical thinking. This method is the key approach of Buddhism. From the destruction of self, the self can be rebuilt, though this requires enormous energy. (p. 25, translation by Yoshimoto)

Traditional educational curricula place the emphasis on answers, but in Buddhism, the question is more valuable than the answer. Following Zen, the teacher must learn to place the students' questions, and their voices, above the simple recounting of facts.

This being the case, I believe that teachers who separate themselves from the notion of discrete and veracious answers and approach pedagogy from the perspective of Zen see their methodology as perpetually in flux, transforming their approach(es) through their own questioning and mindfulness for their students. Teachers can not rest, since life is made of infinite questions – infinite possibilities.

### Moment #2: indwelling (presence/absence)

**有無 (*yū/mu*, the third space): teaching without teaching from a space of possibility.**

火の鳥の 灰から芽吹く 有無の詩歌

Tabula rasa

From ashes of prejudice

## Ears for Phoenix song

In Aoki's (2000) second moment, "Indwelling midst presence/absence" (pp. 2-3), he refers directly to the Zen concept of *yū/mu*, or being/non-being. If *muki* guides us to turn away from seeking one correct answer, but to continue asking questions, we enter a space that is ambiguous and often contradictory. It is a space with which I am deeply familiar.

After coming to Canada, and as my English improved, I found myself struggling to reconcile my new Canadian culture and identity with my Japanese heritage. During the course of my research, I was introduced to Bhabha's (1992) notion of the third space: "a third space that does not simply revise or invert the dualities, but revalues the ideological bases of division and difference" (p. 58). To me, the third space became a place in which I could hybridize my dual identities, let go of my binary thinking, and accept the many contradictions that exist between them. My third space is a compassionate space without need for full reconciliation of my cultures or straight answers; a place of constantly shifting possibilities where I can dwell in the moment.

I express my third space through my haiku, which allows me to be ambiguous, contradictory, and logically illogical. For example, in the above haiku, "Tabula rasa/From ashes of prejudice/Ears for phoenix song," I have made use of the mythological phoenix, an eternal being reborn from its own ashes and with a song so beautiful it impressed the gods. This symbol does not exist in Japanese mythology, but its theme of destruction and rebirth is close to Zen; using haiku I am able to express my hybrid identity. Here I feel I am close to the Zen notion of *yū/mu*.

The concept of *yū/mu* is crucial to Zen philosophy. The central practice of Zen is meditation known as *zazen*, in which the practitioner strives to think without thinking. This is different from simply thinking or not thinking, which may be nothing more than a conscious, binary way of focusing one's attention on an object. Kasulis (1981), in examining the works of 13<sup>th</sup> century Zen master Dōgen, defines the goal of *zazen* thusly:

## Without-thinking

noetic attitude: nonpositional (neither affirming nor negating)

noematic content: pure presence of things as they are (p. 73)

Abe (1992) writes that Dōgen regarded all life and beings as inherently impermanent (p. 70). Through the practice of *zazen*, it seems Zen may provide an experiential self-awakening, self-liberation, and self-transformation in an ever-changing temporal space. As Kasulis (1981) summarizes, "Without the objectifying activity of thinking, there is in *zazen* only the experience of universal flux, the flow of temporal events" (p. 82).

Likewise, Sogen Hori (1994) develops the idea of teaching without teaching, as practiced in the Rinzai Zen monastery. Here the objectifying activity of teaching is left behind; rituals such as the *koan* are used, but not with an aim to finding a correct answer. Rather, the *koan* is used as a means to motivate the monk toward his own spiritual learning. The important thing is not that the monk finds a commonly accepted response to the *koan*, but that through the experience of his struggle to find a response, he gains mystical insight and *satori* (lit. enlightenment). In support of the teaching without teaching method, Hori (1994) explains,

When a student is told in advance and in detail what to do and how to do it, he has no opportunity to test out different ways of doing the task and to discover through his own

exploration which methods work and which fail.... if asked how the method he has learned from the teacher or textbook compares with other methods, the student cannot answer from his own experience.... In that sense, he does not really know why he is doing what he is doing; his understanding is not entirely first-hand, not based on personal experience, not entirely genuine. (pp. 19-20)

In contrast, rational teaching methods, which he calls Teaching By Teaching, “is task-oriented, aiming to get the task done in the most efficient way possible; it trains the person only as much as is required by the task” (Hori, 1994, p. 13). Teaching without teaching, in contrast, orients itself on the person— its goal is not just the acquisition of knowledge, but to deepen learning.

These days, academic materials tend more and more to the task based, technological, and instructional, at the expense of living pedagogy. In support of Maxine Greene’s warnings against modernist discourse in her 1994 article *Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representation*, Aoki (2003) says,

By representation she was referring to the modernism discourse grounded in the metaphysics of presence, which presumes the preexistence of reality, often hidden in the deep but inviting search and re-search, so success leading to findings. I felt that by crisis she was critical of the hegemony of representative discourse erasing the non-representational. In effect, she was calling for a retexturing this [sic] acknowledged the metonymic figuration such as ‘yū-mu’, presence/absence”. (p. 454)

*Yū/mu* does not privilege one form of discourse above another. In acknowledging *yū/mu*, Aoki seeks the space between the representational and non-representational, thinking and not thinking, teaching and not teaching. *Yū/mu* is a place where we do not consciously choose from the objectified activities of teaching or not teaching; we sit ambivalently between them.

If I interpret curriculum as Zen, then for the benefit of my students I operate from the third space of *yū/mu*, which is contradictory, fluid, and open to infinite answers and possibilities. I interpret Teaching Without Teaching as listening to the students’ voices, opening new spaces, and motivating the students towards personal insight, rather than the mere completion of assigned tasks. However, to truly hear the students’ voices, we must strive to look beyond our preconceptions. The tensioned space where this struggle occurs might be the Third Space.

### **Moment #3: interplay (representational discourse/non-representational discourse)**

**無象 (*mushou*): meaning is discursively constructed.**

逆さ富士 愛でれず跳ねる 鮎の群れ

Fuji’s reflection

Illusion split in a leap

Unseen by the koi

In Aoki’s (2000) third moment, “Interplay midst representational discourse/non-representational discourse” (p. 4-6), he suggests that living pedagogy exists in the space between representational and non-representational discourses. He calls this in-between space of living

pedagogy the third space “of ambivalent construction” (p. 5). He also posits that “It is a discursive world of floating discourse, non-representation, with risks of anarchism and relativism” (p. 5). Reflecting here on my previous moments of Zen, I considered that if there is no single answer, and thus endless possibilities, meaning can only be discursively constructed. For me, one aspect of this third space is to begin by discarding our preconceived ideas, which in Zen is *mushou*, no image.

*Mushou* is to look at things without bias – without holding a preconceived image of the object of one’s attention. Because in Buddhism emptying the mind, 無心 (*mushin*), is important, a Buddhist ideal is the attempt to experience life without succumbing to the limitations of the lens of common sense. In Japan, for example, my perception was of a strong “common sense” definition of femininity. When I first came to Canada, I had deeply rooted notions of how a woman should behave to be feminine: using feminine language, dressing in a feminine manner, and being passive and quiet like a flower. My research participants also questioned the nature of their Japanese femininity; particularly unwritten rules such as women should not speak back to men. They found that they could not reconcile these rules with their experiences in Canada.

In one of my meetings with my participants, Yoko shared an experience in which she had tried to let go of some aspects of her Japanese identity by arguing with her father:

Yes, I tried to argue with my father. He was so surprised that he thought my attitude was very negative and bad. For example, I was given lots of money as a gift during New Year from many relatives as a celebration of turning twenty and as a celebration of entering university. My father demanded that I make a list of who gave me money. I wrote a list of names and amounts and the numbers were a mix of Chinese and Western numbers, so my father got angry. He forced me to rewrite the list three times. I finally argued back at him asking why I had to write such a perfect list; this is family not a company. My father became emotional saying “kuchigotaesuruna” (Don’t talk back!) and I gave up my argument with him. (Yoshimoto, 2008, pp. 195-196)

Though Yoko, in a small way, had demonstrated a more liberated image of femininity by feeling that she could verbally disagree with her father, her father was still held by his patriarchal ideal of women, and did not know how to respond beyond silencing her. He could not break free of his cultural image.

In Japanese culture, a famous image is that of Mount Fuji reflected on the water. In the third space, with *mushou*, we can open ourselves to the possibility that this image is both real and an illusion. In my haiku, “Fuji’s reflection/Illusion split in a leap/Unseen by the koi,” the fish, looking up from below the water’s surface, can see only the mountain. At the same time, a person looking from above might see the mountain and also its illusory reflection. When the fish leaps, the water’s surface is disturbed and the image is gone – the fish can never see the illusion, but it also destroys the illusion for the person watching at the water’s edge. I see myself as both the fish below the water and the person above. In my own research, I found that by leaving Japan behind, the notion of femininity to which I had subscribed for so long was, like the mountain’s reflection, shattered. My participants expressed similar feelings.

In my experience, the post-secondary classroom tends to place an emphasis on task-oriented education, with special stress placed on technologies and how effectively students can memorize, analyze, and reproduce knowledge on a test. In Zen, young monks are given texts and questions

to memorize and consider, but the goal of these is not the task of memorization or answering the question itself. As Hori (1994) states,

...there comes a point when the monk realizes that he himself and the way he is reacting to his inability to penetrate the *kōan* are themselves the activity of the *kōan* working within him.... It has become part of the very consciousness that seeks to penetrate itself. He himself is the *kōan*. Realization of this is the response to the *kōan*. (p. 30)

In Zen education, “teaching how to do the task is only a means to the goal of the spiritual training of the person” (Hori, 1994, p. 13).

As an educator, I seek to help my students understand themselves through the means of curriculum. With this larger hope of personal understanding in mind, entering into curriculum planning with a preconceived image of who students are, or will become, is counter-productive. Gough (2004) speaks of defamiliarization as a means to separate ourselves from prejudice: “Defamiliarisation is based on the assumption that the tactic of surprise may serve to diminish distortions and help us to recognize our own preconceptions” (p. 9). To acknowledge and thus allow us to look beyond our preconceptions, we must open ourselves to surprise, and attempt to view our curriculum as an unfamiliar creature, as we did when we were beginners.

#### **Moment #4: midst self/other**

**初心(*shoshin*): to the beginner’s mind, all things are possible.**

行き倒れ 明鏡止水の 初氷

Past a fall from grace

Eyes and mind freed of logic

The year’s first snowfall

An important Zen concept is *mushin*, which literally translated means “no-mind.” No-mind may be regarded as the space in which we stand with, but also apart from our embedded preconceptions, opening ourselves to wonderment with the malleable mind of the beginner, *shoshin*. Zen Monk Shunryu Suzuki (1970) stresses the importance of *shoshin*, to learning: “When we have no thought of achievement, no thought of self, we are true beginners. Then we can really learn something” (p. 22).

In Aoki’s (2000) fourth moment, “Midst self/other” (pp. 6-7), he tells the story of the creation of the Japanese word 個人 (*kojin*). This word was created by Japanese linguists in an early encounter with American culture, in response to their puzzlement over the Western notion of the individual. Japanese wisdom and written language depicted self and other as inseparable – the Japanese word for person, 人 (*hito*) being made of two strokes to depict self and other – and to express the American idea of the self as independent from others, they required a new word. In this case, the Japanese linguists who coined the term *kojin* were naturally seeing this new concept with the beginner’s mind, *shoshin*. If they had refused to look beyond their familiar conception of the self, the Japanese linguists would not have been able to create this linguistic bridge, and might not have been able to recognize the American ideology.

A famous Buddhist parable illustrates the importance of “emptiness” to the Zen mind through the metaphor of an overflowing teacup. A Japanese monk named Nan-in is said to have begun the instruction of a university professor, who was conducting research about Zen, by

stating, “Like the cup, you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?” (“A Cup of Tea,” n.d., n.p.) This metaphor is also frequently interpreted as showing the significance to learning of the mind unburdened by preconception. Abe (1992), in his discussion of the philosophies of Zen master Dōgen, reaffirms the importance of emptiness as an early step toward self-understanding and learning (p. 33). I recalled the words of Holt (1964), who warned of the dangers of rigid adherence to the teacher-centered method of education: “We kill, not only their curiosity, but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious, so that by the age of ten most of them will not ask questions, and will show a good deal of scorn for the few who do” (p. 275). Holt’s ideas invoked for me the image of the inflexible teacher as a sword, that is forged and refined from raw, malleable metals, but which can no longer be bent or shaped. The forged sword can only cut down, or be broken and re-forged.

Following the example of Nan-in, I believe that as educators, we must ask ourselves, are our minds full, or are we mindful? As I seek to guide my students toward deepened learning, I, too, must be open to learning from my students and the world around me. *Shoshin* implies a place where the trappings of relativity and preconceptions are surpassed, allowing us new awakenings and opening a gate to boundless opportunities for learning.

### **Moment #5: a double reading of a Zen parable**

#### **諸行無常 (shogyo mujou): learning is impermanent; there are no experts.**

螢の死 光の夢を 撒き散らし

Spirited fortnight

Scattering a light like dreams

The fireflies pass on

My final moment of Zen is *shogyo mujou*. 諸行 (*shogyo*) refers to all phenomena in this life, while 無常 (*mujou*) is impermanence. Taken together, this term makes up the Buddhist teaching that “Nothing is permanent” and “All things change and vanish.”

According to Minami and Mogi (2009), this thought became salvation to people who are struggling in this life. The title of their book, 人は死ぬから生きられる (People Can Live Because We Can Die) demonstrates their thinking about this Zen philosophy. Every experience quickly disappears the same moment we experience it. However, we human beings have a strong desire to return to these experiences even though we know they are fleeting. Mogi Kenichiro is a famous neuroscientist who is very close to the Buddhist notion. He says that children’s imitation of adult behaviour comes from their desire to repeat these experiences. When we were children, we innately knew how to enjoy living in the moment, unconsciously recognizing time’s black hole of transience (Minami & Mogi, 2009).

David Geoffrey Smith (1996) says,

I must embrace without equivocation the truth of my mortality as part of my vitality. As the contemporary Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Naht Hanh has put it, ‘Birth and death are fictions, and not very deep,’ by which he means that even when I die, I continue living, in the plants and insects that consume me for their nourishment and life, and in the memories of those with whom I have lived for a brief span, and who themselves go on living. (p. 9)

Here Smith clearly concludes that even death is not an ending, and thus is impermanent.

For me, *shogyo mujou*, and Smith's interpretation of it, has a special meaning. One month before her fiftieth birthday, my mother died of cancer. On her deathbed, she wrote a single word to me, 感謝 (*kansha* – gratitude). Years later, I wrote a haiku about my experience:

指震え 感謝の文字に 母すごし  
 With trembling fingers  
 She penned a sign – gratitude  
 And drifted away

When I reached age fifty, her message became my motivation to change my life by moving to Canada. Until that time, I had not given much thought to how her life, in the way that she had lived and ended it, had affected me. Lev Grossman (2007), in an article in *Time* magazine, writes that “the mind is a strange, self-referential loop—it’s a mirage” (p. 50). My mother’s death was not an ending; it was the beginning of my second life. Looking back on it now, I can see how this key event in my life is closely related to my research, and to the Zen concepts of impermanence and contradiction – mortality is my vitality.

In Aoki’s (2000) fifth moment, “A double reading of a Zen parable” (pp. 7-9), he quotes German philosopher Günter Wohlfart thusly:

For those who know nothing about Zen, mountains are but mountains, trees are but trees, and people are but people. When one has studied Zen for a short time, one becomes aware of the invalidity and the transitoriness of all forms, and mountains are no longer mountains, trees are no longer trees, and people are no longer people.... as the parable concludes – (he) [sic] who has gained full understanding of Zen knows that mountains are once again mountains, trees are once again trees, and people are once again people. (p. 7)

Wohlfart’s story refers to a student of Zen’s acknowledgement of impermanence, and also shows the transitoriness of the student’s own knowledge and learning. In such a place of impermanence, there can be no experts, as someone who possesses a mastery of knowledge in his or her field still must explore it in its innumerable dimensions.

Aoki (2000) goes on to write of how, when visiting a gallery with his son, a fine arts graduate, he was able to learn indirectly when his son asked him a simple question: “Why are you positioned in this way when you are looking at the paintings?” (p. 8). Aoki repositioned himself between the paintings, and from his response, I interpret that he saw the impermanence contained therein. The double reading is that reality exists somewhere between form and no form. If Aoki had not been willing to listen to his son’s question and experience, he might not have found meaning in the gallery’s paintings.

Reflecting on my own teaching experiences, I recalled my ignorance of my students’ struggles with some aspects of Japanese language.

漢字馬鹿 うつむくまつげ 涙雪  
 Kanji stupid fool  
 Snow-drop bent ‘neath weight of leaves

## Tears and melting snow

As a native speaker of Japanese, I learned complex characters, *kanji* as a child in a very systematic fashion, based upon long hours of repetition and rote memorization. Operating from this experience, as an instructor of Japanese language, I tended to believe that my Canadian students who had difficulty with these characters simply did not spend enough time practicing. For a long time, I could not overcome this one-sided thinking, and could not understand how some students struggled with this aspect of the language. For several years, I taught a student who over time developed strong communication skills, but had low test scores, and heard the student's murmur, “あたし漢字ばかね [I guess I'm kanji-stupid]”.

Later, in a classroom exercise, I found some of my students attempting to create their own pictograms to memorize kanji. At that time, Canada was participating in a world hockey championship, and selecting 冬 (winter), one student drew a sketch envisioning this character as a pair of crossed hockey sticks, with a puck beneath. I found myself as Aoki, viewing the same character I had understood, but standing in a new position. This familiar kanji suddenly became unfamiliar to me, and placing myself between my students' lived experience and my own, it appeared, among other things, as foreign scribbles. I began to see it through other eyes – kanji was no longer just kanji, but a multitude of possibilities. I thought of Aoki's willingness to listen to his son with the beginner's mind, which indirectly allowed his son to engage him in Teaching without Teaching. Since then, I have made it a regular part of my classroom exercises to invite all students to show me and all their classmates their way of seeing kanji, and with each class, I find myself relearning kanji as a beginner.

When we are Teaching without Teaching, we must acknowledge the transitory and shifting nature of our students' identities as well as our own. Knowledge is impermanent, so curricula must be dynamic, adapting as teachers adapt to the needs of their students; what works today might be demolished tomorrow. There is no place for teachers to rest – no ambrosia of the pedagogues.

## Epilogue

When I used to live in Japan, several times during the year I would visit shrines or temples to ask questions about the nature and direction of my life. My goal was not necessarily to find a concrete answer, but I have found that through the process of asking questions, we may learn many things, and often things that we did not expect. Curriculum developed from the top down will always reflect its source – the teacher's own center and identity. Our identities may not always match closely with our students, but we may be able to bring them more closely into our curriculum if we are willing to open ourselves to the asking.

Wang's (1999) theory of a curriculum for transformation of selfhood closely matches my vision of curriculum as Zen: “An emergent view of curriculum, situated in an ecology of selfhood, makes possible self-transformation of both teacher and student by their active, full and communal engagement with the world” (p. 153). Wang references the need for teachers to engage communally in learning alongside their students. This view of curriculum “...also calls upon a supportive and critical community in which the self can constantly go beyond self to be connected to something larger than an individual self” (Wang, 1999, p. 151). By going beyond

the self, both teachers and students might have hope of transforming the self, since we are all learners in life.

Avraham Cohen (2008) recalls, “There is an idea in Zen, the *Gateless Gate*. On first glance this seems to suggest that this is a doorway that will not and cannot open, but what it is really suggesting is that the apparently undesirable and the very difficult offer an entrance into a deeper sense of presence, life, and being” (p. 91). My transition to life in Canada has not been easy, and I have often felt as though I were standing before a gateless gate. Though I have suffered in working to understand my new transnational identity and communicate in two languages, my struggles continue to give me deeper understandings of life and myself.

In living reality, we all struggle in the space between seeking answers and no answer, between being and non-being, open-mindedness and bias, learning and mastery, impermanence and linear reality. Zen might offer a peaceable suspension of this problem. I disrupt the idea of desirable or undesirable curriculum as these are illusory notions – the empty mind is open to curriculum regardless of how one might describe it. Those who seek answers to questions should consider the idea that it is not so much about the answer, but whether there is an answer; and not so much about how to find such an answer, but the path one takes in the seeking it. When students and educators enter the classroom embracing Zen, our minds and hearts are open, and we are knocking at the gateless gate.

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