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Observing Change in the Present Moment: Lessons from Zen Leaders and Teachers

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### Abstract

Zen philosophy concerns the nature of reality, which is constant change. Yet, no research exists concerning the application of Zen to leadership in a modern, secular organization. In this exploratory study, seven sources authored by Zen leaders were analyzed for content related to leadership and change. The leadership findings were framed in terms of Bass and Riggio's transformational leadership model. While the approach of Zen leaders largely aligns with transformational leadership, several discrepancies were revealed. References to change most commonly involved the concepts Self/No-Self, Perception, Permanence/Impermanence, Attachment/Non-Attachment, Time, Knowledge, Calmness/Excitement, Concentration/Observation, Independence/Interdependence, Leadership, and Movement. Future research is recommended to examine Zen in the context of servant and spiritual leadership models, and to interview Zen leaders concerning application of Zen philosophy in their practice of leadership.

### **Observing Change in the Present Moment: Lessons from Zen Leaders and Teachers**

This paper is the first step in an emerging area of research interest: how Zen philosophies might inform leadership in higher education. The topic has some inherent dilemmas. First, the scholarship of leadership tends toward models and definitions, while Zen teachers exhort practitioners to avoid forming specific views. Second, Zen teachers or leaders de-emphasize themselves, so their roles are often hidden. Meanwhile, most traditional leadership models still focus on the leader. There are also vocabulary challenges. Mindfulness is a popular topic these days. But while all variations of Zen involve mindfulness, there are many mindfulness practices that have little to do with Zen. Zen implies an entire approach to life of which mindfulness is just one component.

Entries in scholarly encyclopedias concerning Zen fail to provide a concise definition. Cooper (2014) and others categorize it as a religion, but note there is no formulated doctrine or system by which to describe it intellectually. Zen has several sects, and has been combined with other religions and philosophies—Taoism and Confucianism in China, and Christianity in the United States. Across the diversity of practice, however, there seems to be agreement that the point of Zen practice is to discover an “awareness of reality through an alteration of perception that includes the derailment of cognitive linear thought, which engenders access of our capacity for prajna (quick knowing, intuition, intimate knowing)” (Cooper 2014). Common practices to develop this awareness include sitting meditation (zazen), koan study, dialogues with a teacher, and “moment-to-moment mindfulness during all daily activities” (Cooper 2014).

Zen may offer leaders unique strategies for approaching change and engaging an organization in the change process in a less stressful, less disruptive way. Zen teachers describe how clinging to specific concepts and mental models can imprison our minds, reducing our

ability to be fully awake and engaged with whatever the present reality brings (Suzuki 2011). As the world changes and ceases to match our expectations, we feel disturbed and unsettled. Such stress can be seen in any modern organization undergoing a major transition: indeed, every modern organization is constantly undergoing change. A Zen perspective involves observing the constantly arising changes all around us during each present moment and making peace with that reality. What lessons can we learn from Zen leaders and teachers attempting to help people develop present-moment awareness and grapple with the state of constant change?

This paper will explore the writings of three Zen leaders from different centuries of practice: Dogen (13<sup>th</sup> century), a reformer who reinvigorated Zen in Japan at multiple temples after studying in China; Shunryu Suzuki (20<sup>th</sup> century), who created a thriving Zen community in San Francisco in the 1960s and introduced a new approach to “American Buddhism,” and Angel Kyodo Williams (21<sup>st</sup> century), a Zen priest who leads community conversations surrounding race, love, and liberation. None of these leaders were writing about organizational change per se, but their words and behaviors still provide indications to how a Zen leader might approach leading an organization through change.

### **Literature Review**

While there is some literature on mindfulness and leadership (e.g., Sauer & Kohls 2011), little research specifically focuses on Zen and leadership. The only paper found was an informal article by Swanson (2000) in the Nursing field. The emphasis of many publications concerning the intersection of Zen and the workplace seems to address coping strategies for aggressive, profit-driven, and deadline-focused environments (Whitelaw 2012). One book targets the challenges of dealing with a tyrannical boss (Bing 2004). Les Kaye’s *Zen at Work* (1997) may be the only experiential account of a Zen monk’s approach to working in a modern organization.

*Zen Lessons* (Cleary 2004) gathers short writings on leadership from the Song period (960–1300), but the lack of context for the excerpts made them challenging to use for the present study. In summary, the topic of Zen and leadership is not systematically addressed by existing literature.

Meanwhile, many Zen leaders (e.g., abbots, community organizers, and the Dalai Lama) have published their thoughts on developing helpful practices to support engagement with change in one's personal life (Uchiyama Roshi 2004; Suzuki 2011, Nhat Hanh 2002). Angel Kyodo Williams (2002, 2016) offers lessons from her perspectives as a Black queer woman and Zen priest. Without attempting to impose their views, they offer observations from their own practice, parables, Zen koans, illustrations, and anecdotes about new ways of looking at and responding to change. The intersection of Zen with theoretical physics has also illuminated the fundamentals of universal change (Dalai Lama 2006; Ricard & Xuan Thuan 2004).

There are several gaps in the data used for this research. Leadership to individuals and groups who are interested in learning about and practicing Zen is different than leadership to an organization with a secular mission. As a result, leaders of secular organizations who are Zen practitioners may use tactics not visible in these writings. Also, this study focused primarily on the writings, not the behaviors of these leaders. Finally, examining just three individuals' ideas only begins to engage with the recognized diversity of Zen schools and individual approaches.

### **Methodology**

The teachings and behaviors of three recognized Zen leaders and teachers were analyzed for mentions of change, transformation, leadership, followership, or organizational behavior. The sources consulted as texts for this study are listed in Table 1; full citations can be found in the bibliography. For the purposes of this study, “teacher” was deemed equivalent to “leader.”

Quotes with any relevance were entered into a spreadsheet and assigned keywords and a relevance score of 1-5. The corpus of data was compared with descriptions of transformational and charismatic leadership models by Bass & Riggio (2006) and Conger & Kanungo (1998), respectively. The data was then entered into NVivo 12, and quotes were reviewed again and coded using a controlled vocabulary. (The previously assigned keywords were used only to help create the concepts). NVivo was used to identify the most commonly referred-to concepts across the leaders, and ideas about change from these cases were analyzed for overarching themes. Ideas from additional sources (other Zen leaders, others' writings about the three leaders) were included in the final analysis to illuminate interpretation.

Table 1. Sources included as texts in this study.

Author	Year	Title	Length (words)
Dogen	c.1237	<i>How to Cook Your Life</i>	6,290
Dogen	c. 1243	<i>Shobogenzo</i> (13 of the 95 essays)	29,170
Suzuki	2011	<i>Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind</i>	40,700
Williams	2002	<i>Being Black</i>	75,296
Williams	2013	<i>Why Contemplation/Awareness Matters to Change...and How</i> (video)	730
Williams	2017	<i>It's Not About Love After All</i> (video)	2,120

Note: words from books estimated by multiplying pages times the number of words on a random full page; words from videos counted using transcripts.

### Findings: Transformational Leadership

The first approach to presenting findings will be within the framework of the transformational and charismatic leadership models. This paper will be guided by Conger and Kanungo's insistence that there is little difference between transformational and charismatic leadership (1998, 69), and will be framed within the transformational model with notations of any distinctive features of charismatic leadership theory.

#### Idealized Influence

Leaders serve as role models, and idealized influence can be seen in "the leader's behavior and the attributions that are made concerning the leader by followers" (Bass & Riggio

2006, 6). There is strong evidence that Zen leaders demonstrate Idealized Influence. As Trudi Dixon, a follower of Shunryu Suzuki, expressed,

A roshi [Zen teacher] is a person who has actualized that perfect freedom which is the potentiality for all human beings. ... The results of this in terms of the quality of his life are extraordinary—buoyancy, vigor, straightforwardness, simplicity, humility, serenity, joyousness, uncanny perspicacity, and unfathomable compassion. His whole being testifies to what it means to live in the reality of the present. Without anything said or done, just the impact of meeting a personality so developed can be enough to change another's way of life" (Suzuki 2011, xix).

A consistent and distinctive feature of the Zen leader's idealized influence is the leader's consistent urging to avoid identification and attachment with themselves. This diverges from traditional charismatic leadership models, which are based on a psychology where people "imagine that a singular individual can play a heroic role in shaping the destiny of their organizations" (Conger & Kanungo 1998, 141). Typical of Zen leaders are Suzuki's words, "If you are attached to the teaching, or to the teacher, that is a big mistake. The moment you meet a teacher, you should leave the teacher, and you should be independent" (2011, 63). The outcome of this type of urging on a follower can be read in Dixon's words: "In the end it is not the extraordinariness of the teacher which perplexes, intrigues, and deepens the student, it is the teacher's utter ordinariness. Because he is just himself, he is a mirror for his students. When we are with him we feel our own strength and shortcomings without any sense of praise or criticism from him" (Suzuki 2011, xix).



### **Inspirational Motivation**

The dimension of Inspirational Motivation surrounds the leader's ability to envision attractive future states, communicate "expectations that followers want to meet," and demonstrate the leader's own commitment to the shared vision (Bass & Riggio 2006, 6). One emphasis of charismatic leadership theory in this dimension is the leader's need to find the status quo intolerable as compared with the highly attractive future vision (Conger & Kanungo 1998, 66).

Zen practice has a clear future outcome or at least trajectory: to escape delusion and to seek enlightenment. Yet, Suzuki is clear that clinging to the end goal as one's motivation is incorrect:

"As long as we have some definite idea about or some hope in the future, we cannot really be serious with the moment that exists right now. You may say, 'I can do it tomorrow, or next year', believing something that exists today will exist tomorrow. Even though you are not trying so hard, you expect that some promising thing will come, as long as you follow a certain way. But there is no certain way that exists permanently. There is no way set up for us. Moment by moment we have to find our own way" (2011, 100).

The most important focus is the present moment, "not some day in the future" (89). Angel Kyodo Williams explains that is the *desire* for things to be different (or to stay the same) that is the problem, as well as the rigidity of the vision. She writes, "If we release our fixed ideas about how the world should appear, desires can simply fall away. Our attention is paid to releasing ... once we let go of our desires, we find that a calmer, more graceful way of existing is revealed. It has been there all along but the wanting has made it difficult to recognize" (2000,

24). Thus, the Zen leader's future vision always includes not becoming attached to any particular future vision. While their followers may still be motivated by this ideal, the expectation they want to meet is having no expectation.

Another behavior of leaders found in the charismatic theories is to “demonstrate expertise in transcending the existing order through the use of unconventional or extraordinary means” (Conger & Kanungo 1998, 66). While Zen practice may seem unconventional to some, Zen leaders are quick to teach their students that true practice is “nothing special” (Suzuki 2011, 32). In contrast to Conger and Kanungo's note that leaders should “avoid lapsing into caretaker or management roles” (65), Zen teachers frequently use mundane activities to illuminate the path to enlightenment. Perhaps the closest work to a Zen leadership text is *How to Cook Your Life*, (c.1237/2005) in which Dogen provides instructions for the monastery's tenzo (cook). In this work he describes how the caretaker and management roles of cook—including making shopping lists and washing rice—are equivalent in importance to other leadership roles: “Just working as tenzo is the incomparable practice of Buddhas. Even one who accedes to the head of the community should have these same attitudes” (Dogen, c.1237/2005, 12). In fact, Dogen's advice to cooks illustrates how a leader can both prepare for the future and focus on the present moment. The tenzo is told to prepare gruel for the following morning and make a plan for lunch—doing work for tomorrow as *tonight's work*. Dogen's translator Uchiyama Roshi notes,

In preparing the meal for the following day as tonight's work, there is no goal for tomorrow being established. Yet, our direction for right now is clear: prepare tomorrow's gruel. ... In this routine matter of preparing tomorrow's gruel as this evening's work lies the key to the attitude necessary for coping with this absolute contradiction ... When we stop projecting goals and hopes in the future, and refuse to be led around by them, yet

work to clarify our lives, that is, the *direction* of the present, then we will discover an alive and dynamic practice” (commentary in Dogen, 1991, 64).

Thus, the leader can set future direction for followers through their practice by the very nature of how they go about her present work.

### **Intellectual Stimulation**

Bass and Riggio describe transformational leaders as stimulating followers’ innovation and creativity by “questioning assumptions, reframing problems, and approaching old situations in new ways” (7). A relevant item on the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire reads, “The leader gets others to look at problems from many different angles.” Zen leadership seems to be well-aligned with this dimension.

Zen koans and stories are one method masters use to jar their followers from stagnant thinking. Translator Thomas Cleary describes the practice as “using a story, saying, term, or symbol in a way that departs from the obvious or the stereotyped, traditional view” (Cleary, commentary in Dogen 1991, 6). This helps break up clichéd thinking using a “verbal shock technique” (7). Some stories may feel more accessible, such as one Master Dogen relays that was old in his time (13<sup>th</sup> century): “There were two monks arguing, one saying it is the flag moving, one saying it is the wind moving. As they argued ceaselessly back and forth like this, the patriarch said, ‘It is not the wind moving, it is not the flag moving—it is your minds moving.’ The two monks immediately accepted this” (Dogen c. 1247/1991, 52). Yet teachers may also present material “that is impenetrable without the exercise of qualities essential to Zen work, such as patience, concentration, and ability to suspend automatic thought” (Cleary, commentary in Dogen 1991, 7). Another example from Dogen may suffice: “A Zen adept said, ‘The flowers have never been born.’ There should be no inanity about existence or non-existence confusing

the context of the time of the flowers. It is like flowers always being imbued with colors: the colors are not necessarily limited to flowers, and the times also have colors such as green, yellow, red, and white. Spring brings on flowers, flowers bring on Spring” (c. 1247/1991, 71). As the reader’s own mind grapples with this passage, there is an opportunity to observe one’s feeling of sense-making rise and fall. One has an opportunity to observe the spaces where an analytical mind is useful and those where it is not.

It is within the dimension of intellectual stimulation that we find Zen leaders advising others how to teach, with a consistent emphasis on the learner’s role in discovery. For example Suzuki (20<sup>th</sup> century) describes the approach of one master, Rinzai (10<sup>th</sup> century). Rinzai talked about four methods for teaching: talking about the student, talking about the teaching, interpreting the teaching, and finally, giving no instruction: “He knew that even without being given any instruction, a student is a student. Strictly speaking, there is no need to teach the student, because the student himself is Buddha, even though he may not be aware of it” (Suzuki 2011, 63). Dogen offered similar advice: “When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it intellectually. Do not argue with him; just listen to his objections until he himself finds something wrong with them” (Dogen c. 1247, as cited by Suzuki 2011, 80). Angel Kyodo Williams also communicates confidence in her students: “We can trust ourselves to perceive truth,” (2002, 81) but also notes how helpful diverse examples of leaders and teachers are for inspiration and wisdom. She also advocates using critical thinking to engage with the world actively. All three of these Zen leaders place greater emphasis on the follower’s mind discovering truth, and discovering how to discover truth, than they do on the merit of their own words.

Finally, Zen leaders urge followers not to seize upon bits of knowledge or enthrone any piece of wisdom, but instead to keep one's mind open and observant: "wisdom could be various philosophies and teachings, and various kinds of research and studies. But we should not become attached to some particular piece of wisdom, such as that which is taught by Buddha. Wisdom is not something to learn. Wisdom is something which will come out of your mindfulness. So the point is to be ready for observing things, and to be ready for thinking" (Suzuki 2011, 106).

In sum, it would seem Zen leaders consistently practice the dimension of intellectual stimulation, but in a specific way which may or may not be used by transformational leaders generally. They emphasize the learner's role, de-emphasize specific formulations of ideas, and use verbal shock techniques to help followers escape the mental habit of analytical thinking.

### **Individualized Consideration**

The dimension of individualized consideration concerns whether the leader creates a supportive climate for learning opportunities and recognizes individual differences by personalizing interactions (Bass & Riggio 2006, 7). Listening effectively and delegating tasks are two examples of activities practiced by transformational leaders to demonstrate individualized consideration.

Zen leaders' emphasis on the principles of interbeing and no-self might seem to contradict this dimension, however their writings not only acknowledge infinite variation and peculiarities of individuals, but seem to cherish those differences. Angel Kyodo Williams uses the metaphor of flowers: "We may find that the striking beauty of orchids or the sweet, clinging smell of white Casablanca lilies is especially moving for us... It is our unique qualities that make us completely irreplaceable" (2002, 38). Recognizing individual differences, teachers' attitudes and behaviors toward different students are different. Suzuki said Buddha had the most sympathy

for students who had the most difficulty with zazen (sitting meditation). “The teaching given by Shakyamuni Buddha during his lifetime was accommodated to each disciple’s particular temperament, and to each occasion’s particular circumstances. For each case there should be a special remedy” (Suzuki as cited by Chadwick, 1999, 320). David Chadwick, Suzuki’s biographer, described the way Suzuki made personal connections with students:

The morning schedule concluded with a standing bow to Suzuki ... It was a little ritual that gave a moment of private contact with every person who came, every day. He would stand inside the door to his office, and as people filed out they would stop and bow to him. It was never perfunctory. He gave his full attention to each bow, to each person. Some felt that Suzuki was looking straight through them. The bow at the door was a farewell, a greeting, a meeting. It was an intimate affair, each new day (1999, 191).

Yet Zen teachers seldom make individual recognition without reminding students that the idea of a separate self is a delusion. Williams’s metaphor about flowers continues, “we see [lilies and orchids] first and foremost as flowers” (2002, 38). The metaphor of the ocean and the wave is another common one: Individual waves have distinct characteristics, but really they are just made of water like all the other waves. “To speak of waves apart from water or water apart from waves is a delusion. Water and waves are one” (Suzuki 2011, 19).

### **Analysis**

The four major charismatic leadership theories reviewed by Conger and Kanungo (1998), as well as Bass & Riggio’s (2006) model of transformational leadership, focus on empowerment strategies rather than control strategies. Across the dimensions of transformational leadership just discussed, we have seen Zen leaders repeatedly direct followers’ attention to their own self-actualization. Thus, there seems to be some support for regarding Zen leadership as inherently

aligned with transformational leadership. Zen leaders may place more emphasis on the interdependence of individuals with the larger organization than they do on individual identities, inviting followers to focus first on their one-ness with the organization. Zen leaders appear to rely heavily on the transformational behavioral strategies of observation / listening and role modeling. Zen approaches appear to align with Foss & Griffin's ideas about invitational rhetoric (1995), creating an environment where others can discover themselves.

There are also discrepancies between the transformational leadership model and Zen philosophies. Zen leaders focus on the present moment rather than on the future vision, and refrain from judging the future as more attractive than the present or the past. This doesn't mean they do not plan for the future, but they are extremely careful to guard against the human tendency to attach their happiness to future goals. Some of the other variations contrast especially with charismatic leadership. Zen leaders de-emphasize their personal role and their personal risk. They exalt the follower's own discovery as greater than the leader's example, and greater still than the leader's words. As part of guiding followers to develop their own visions, they strive to de-associate themselves from an idealized vision. Another divergence from charismatic leadership is that Zen leaders seem to focus less on problems with the status quo, and avoid implications that individuals need to change. Rather, Zen leaders encourage followers to wake up to the joy and happiness of the present moment, discovering their true selves as part of that reality. Finally, while Zen philosophy and practice may seem unconventional to non-practitioners, Zen leaders regard their own practice and even enlightenment itself as "nothing special" (Suzuki 2011, 32).

With all the emphasis on the present moment, avoiding condemnation of the status quo, and refusal to attach to idealized future visions, how would Zen leaders hope to change organizations? How do they see change itself?

### **Findings: Zen and Change**

When asked to summarize Buddhism in one phrase, Shunryu Suzuki said, “Everything changes” (Chadwick 1999, xii). The Zen leaders frequently cited in this paper were themselves change agents. Dogen (13<sup>th</sup> century) was a reformer who reinvigorated Zen in Japan after studying in China. Shunryu Suzuki (20<sup>th</sup> century) is credited as “one of the most influential spiritual teachers of the twentieth century,” and his most famous book has sold over a million copies (Suzuki 2011). Angel Kyodo Williams (21<sup>st</sup> century) promulgates a radical change agenda and has challenged others to become more engaged in the world around them. How do these leaders talk about change?

Fifty-seven quotes from the seven sources reviewed were identified as related to change in some way. The most quotes relevant to change in the sample were authored by Suzuki (n=35), followed by Williams (n=13), and Dogen (n=9). As the amount of text corresponding to each author varies, these numbers are merely descriptive and are not meaningfully comparable. Most quotes were judged to be of medium relevance (n=24), with about the same number of less-relevant quotes, rated 4 or 5 (n=17), as more-relevant quotes, rated 1 or 2 (n=16). Although the different sample sizes contraindicate meaningful comparison of average relevance, descriptively we can say that Suzuki’s quotes average relevance score was 2.8, Williams’s was 3, and Dogen’s was 3.2. The average relevance scores hover around the midpoint, which suggests that when Zen leaders talked about change in these sources, they did so somewhat obliquely.



The top concepts discussed by Dogen in his comments on change were Perception, Knowledge, and Movement. Dogen also used anecdotes or metaphors very frequently when talking about change, in 7 of the 9 quotes. For Suzuki, top concepts were Concentration, Leadership, Self/No-Self, and Calmness/Excitement. Anecdotes or metaphors were used 4 times in his 35 quotes. Williams' top concepts were Self/No-Self, Independence/Interdependence, and Calmness/Excitement. Although her writings do feature anecdotes and metaphors, they didn't appear in this sample. All three leaders discussed the concepts of Self/No-Self (15 cases), Perception (8 cases), Permanence/Impermanence (8 cases), Attachment/Non-Attachment (7 cases), Time (7 cases), and Knowledge (6 cases). As there are links between these concepts, they will be discussed in pairs.

### **Self/No-Self and Attachment/Non-Attachment**

One dimension of Zen practice is observing and expressing one's true self. On one hand, Zen leaders talk about how each individual "is in the center of the world always, moment after moment" (Suzuki 2011, 14) and how our "unique qualities ... make us completely irreplaceable" (Williams 2002, 38). Yet, if we focus on our egos, we may think the world revolves around us. Dogen noted, "When someone rides in a boat, as he looks at the shore he has the illusion that the shore is moving. When he looks at the boat under him, he realizes the boat is moving" (c. 1243/1991, 33). This is an excellent metaphor for change in an organization: We may feel like the organization is changing, but we ourselves are also changing, and the world around our organization is also changing. Accepting these nested changes requires us to resolve the tension between our inner and outer selves, Williams suggests mindfulness of the present moment has the power to help us move forward: "What pulls you forward is presence ... As you choose to be more present, you are more present. What does presence allow? It allows us to see ourselves and

others” (2016, 99). Finding a more accurate conception of self enables real participation in change—our own as well as the organization’s.

The leaders talked about how attaching one’s self-concept to ideas limits change. For example, people may cling to old traditions. Suzuki writes, “In your recollection you may say, ‘I did such and such a thing in some certain way,’ but actually that is never exactly what happened. When you think in this way you limit the actual experience of what you have done” (2011, 48). People may also be attached to what they know. By being in the present moment, we can be ready for new thinking: “It is the readiness of the mind that is wisdom. So wisdom could be various philosophies and teachings, and various kinds of research and studies. But we should not become attached to some particular piece of wisdom” (Suzuki, 2011, 106). People’s individual preferences also play a role in coloring our perceptions. As Dogen said, “Flowers fall when we cling to them, and weeds only grow when we dislike them” (1243/1991, 32). First we have an idea about “what we like,” and then when we become attached to it, we feel loss when that changes. Meanwhile we also have ideas about things we don’t like, and our tendency is to perceived those things never changing.

In summary, the Zen approach to dealing with change involves a proper locating of one’s true self amidst the organization. Related to this is the idea of not attaching one’s identity to various conceptions of the organization. In Zen, finding one’s true self and non-attachment happen as a result of present-moment awareness.

### **Time and Permanence/Impermanence**

In talking about change, Zen leaders attempted to describe the nature of time itself. Two examples will serve:

“Time constantly goes from past to present and from present to future. This is true, but it is also true that time goes from future to present and from present to past. A Zen master once said, ‘to go eastward one mile is to go westward one mile.’ This is vital freedom” (Suzuki 2011, 17).

“Kindling becomes ash, and cannot become kindling again. However, we should not see the ash as after and the kindling as before. Know that kindling abides in the normative state of kindling, and though it as a before and after, the realms of before and after are disconnected” (Dogen c. 1243/1991, 33).

Humans feel very conscious of time’s flow. These Zen teachings are designed to disrupt our conditioned experience of time. The relevance of time bears on Zen teachings about accepting impermanence, which is an excellent foundation for welcoming change. Zen leaders describe how people’s desire to find some things that are permanent as a cause for suffering. As Suzuki writes, “When we first hear that everything is a tentative existence, most of us are disappointed; but this disappointment comes from a wrong view of man and nature. It is because our way of observing things is deeply rooted in our self-centered ideas ... But when we actually realize this truth, we will have no suffering” (2011, 103). Similarly, Williams talked about how letting go of perceptions and desire for permanence can help: “If we release our fixed ideas about how the world should appear, desires can simply fall away. Our attention is paid to releasing ... once we let go of our desires, we find that a calmer, more graceful way of existing is revealed” (2002, 24). Dogen’s comments on perceptions of permanence may be more cryptic, but are still profound:

Zen Master Hotetsu of Mt. Mayoku was using a fan. A monk asked him about this: ‘The nature of wind is eternal and all-pervasive—why then do you use a fan?’ The master said,

‘You only know the nature of the wind is eternal, but do not yet know the principle of its omnipresence.’ The monk asked, ‘What is the principle of its omnipresence?’ The master just fanned. The monk bowed.”... To say that since (the nature of wind) is permanent one should not use a fan, and that one should feel the breeze even when not using a fan, is not knowing permanence and not knowing the nature of the wind either.”

Grappling with change the Zen way is to come to terms with the fact that nothing is permanent, and everything is changing. The pathway is practicing our mind’s ability to let go of fixed views.

### **Knowledge and Perception**

Zen leaders recognize individual knowledge and experience, writing of “inborn knowledge” (Dogen c. 1243/1991, 38), and “differences between those who have been practicing over many years and those who have just begun, or between those gifted with great intelligence and those not so gifted” (Dogen c. 1237/2005, 15). “We can trust ourselves to perceive truth,” writes Williams, but only if we are mindful (2002, 81). Dogen notes that attaining knowledge does not mean one perceives full understanding: “Though realizational comprehension already takes place, implicit being is not necessarily obvious” (c.1243/1991, 34). Recalling the ideas of non-attachment are key when it comes to knowledge: “the point is to be ready for observing things, and to be ready for thinking” (Suzuki 2011, 106).

In Zen, perception refers to how the mind’s view changes our understanding of objective reality. Dogen writes, “Life is like when one rides in a boat: though in this boat one works the sail, the rudder, and the pole, the boat carries one, and one is naught without the boat. Riding in the boat, one even causes the boat to be a boat” (c. 1243/1991, 45). The reality of the boat relates to our perception. Although people have specific jobs within the organization, they wouldn’t

have meaning outside such an organization. Yet the organization would not have meaning without the people inside it. Dogen also describes how the tenzo (cook) should perceive work: “When you prepare food, never view the ingredients from some commonly held perspective, nor think about them only with your emotions. Maintain an attitude that tries to build great temples from ordinary greens ... A person who is influenced by the quality of a thing, or who changes his speech or manner according to the appearance or position of the people he meets, is not a man working in the Way” (c. 1237/2005, 7). During times of change, people easily perceive themselves and others being given lesser and greater assignments. Instead, it is helpful to realize all the parts contribute to building a “great temple.”

Two of the three leaders discussed additional concepts; the most prominently mentioned (8 cases each) included Calmness/Excitement, Concentration/Observation, Independence/Interdependence, Leadership, and Movement. Less-discussed concepts in these writings included Communication (6 cases), Attainment (5 cases), the Organization (3 cases), and Suffering (3 cases). The concepts with eight cases will now be discussed briefly.

Zen teachers advise avoiding **excitement** and excessive emotions, not by force, but through techniques such as mindful breathing. As Suzuki writes,

“If you become too busy and too excited, your mind become rough and ragged. This is not good. ... Usually we become busier and busier, day by day, year by year, especially in our modern world. ...if we become interested in some excitement, or in our own change, we will become completely involved in our busy life, and we will be lost. But if your mind is calm and constant, you can keep yourself away from the noisy world even though you are in the midst of it. In the midst of noise and change, your mind will be quiet and stable” (2011, 42).

Maintaining calm is linked to **concentrating** on observing the present moment:

“Suppose you are sitting under some extraordinary circumstances. If you try to calm your mind you will be unable to sit, and if you try not to be disturbed, your effort will not be the right effort. The only effort that will help you is to count your breathing, or to concentrate on your inhaling and exhaling. We say concentration, but to concentrate your mind on something is not the true purpose of Zen. The true purpose is to see things as they are, and to let everything go as it goes. This is to put everything under control in its widest sense” (2011, 16).

The idea is to avoid being caught up within the stress and turmoil of change by accepting the reality of it. The Zen approach to dealing with both enthusiasm and stress about change is the same: remaining grounded in the present moment and staying observant. The only time we can control anything (if ever) is in the present moment.

Zen ideas about **independence and interdependence** have the potential to reveal people’s intrinsic value to the organization without relying on ego. Zen leaders recognize our individual natures, but also the importance of our place in the larger system. As Suzuki writes,

“Tozan, a famous Zen master, said, ‘The blue mountain is the father of the white cloud. The white cloud is the son of the blue mountain. All day long they depend on each other, without being dependent on each other, The white cloud is always the white cloud. The blue mountain is always the blue mountain.’ ... There may be many things like the white cloud and blue mountain: man and woman, teacher and disciple. They depend on each other. But the white cloud should not be bothered by the blue mountain. The blue mountain should not be bothered by the white cloud. They are quite independent, but dependent” (2011, 13).

As discussed in the section on self and no-self, we can only change ourselves. Yet, Zen leaders constantly point to how we are linked with others. Suzuki notes how we are indebted to others for our current state: “Every existence in nature, every existence in the human world, every cultural work that we create, is something which was given, or is being given to us” (Suzuki 2011, 51). Williams writes, “without collective change, no change matters” (2016, 89). Arriving at a balanced understanding of our independence and interdependence can help reduce the stress of collective change. Williams describes how she is able to sustain her work to further social justice: “A rich relationship with one’s inner life deepens the root of integrity, fortifies the heart of courage, sharpens the eye of vision, and strengthens the will to serve and the resolve to sacrifice” (2016, 196).

As leadership is often defined as getting people to move in the same direction, the Zen leaders’ thoughts on **leadership** and **movement** will be discussed together. When wishing to influence others, Zen leaders advise giving up on ideas of control. As Suzuki writes,

“Ancient painters used to practice putting dots on paper in artistic disorder. This is rather difficult. Even though you try to do it, usually what you do is arranged in some order. You think you can control it, but you cannot; it is almost impossible to arrange your dots out of order. It is the same with taking care of your everyday life. Even if you try to put some people under some control, it is impossible. You cannot do it. The best way to control people is to encourage them to be mischievous. Then they will be in control in its wider sense. To give your sheep or cow a large, spacious meadow is the way to control him. So it is with people: first let them do what they want, and watch them. This is the best policy. To ignore them is not good: that is the worst policy. The second worst is

trying to control them. The best one is to watch them, just to watch them, without trying to control them” (2011, 15).

Similarly, Williams writes, “We don’t have to fix people at all. We have to trust the evolutionary draw that is” (2016, 99). This perspective hearkens back to the previous discussion of empowering followers.

Observing change in the present moment allows leaders to be patient and recognize the inherent value in what might seem like slow progress. Suzuki writes, “In a fog, you do not know you are getting wet, but as you keep walking you get wet little by little. If your mind has ideas of progress, you may say, ‘Oh, this pace is terrible!’ But actually it is not. When you get wet in a fog it is very difficult to dry yourself. So there is no need to worry about progress. It is like studying a foreign language; you cannot do it all of a sudden, but by repeating it over and over you will master it... Just to be sincere and make our full effort in each moment is enough” (2011, 31). Leaders are also reminded to avoid becoming attached to accomplishments or even future goals, while ensuring one is headed in the right direction. As Suzuki writes, “The most important point in our practice is to have right or perfect effort. Right effort directed in the right direction is necessary” (2011, 44). This seems simple, but he goes on to say, “Usually when you do something, you want to achieve something, you attach to some result. From achievement to-non achievement means to be rid of the unnecessary and bad results of effort. If you do something in the spirit of non-achievement, there is good quality in it. So just to do something without any particular effort is enough.” Doing something without effort may seem like “slacking” to Western audiences, and Suzuki even seems to contradict himself. The idea is to lose track of the “effort” and just do. Our minds also naturally seek for signs of progress and achievement. Instead, Suzuki offers the approach of confidence in incremental progress.



### Discussion

While most of the sources consulted were not texts intended to coach leaders (Dogen's *How to Cook Your Life* being an exception), the analysis of Zen leaders against the frame of the transformational leadership model begins to reveal how Zen philosophies might influence a leader's approach. Zen seems well-aligned with transformational and charismatic leadership, but with less emphasis on the leader's special qualities, more focus on the present moment, avoidance of fixed views, and balance between interdependence and individual identities. Across these characteristics preside the Zen principle of non-attachment, either to one's identity, to the past, or to the future. All these aspects of Zen would seem to support a positive approach to organizational change.

Some of the quotes in the sample identified as related to change may not have seemed to directly concern that topic. It is important to keep in mind that *everything* in Zen is about change. Change is the default, or background upon which everything else is seen. "The basic teaching of Buddhism is the teaching of transience, or change. That everything changes is the basic truth of existence" (Suzuki 2011, 91). We struggle with change because we don't want to accept the truth. As Suzuki writes, "Because we cannot accept the truth of transience, we suffer. So the cause of suffering is the non-acceptance of this truth" (2001, 91). The techniques of Zen offer pathways toward acceptance. First, Zen advises observation. Just "being" with uncomfortable truths is central to the way: to "simply observe [truth] as it is, to make friends with it" (Williams 2016, xx). The pathway to outer change must begin with inner change (Williams 2016). Second, Zen offers perspective on the relationship between our seemingly independent selves and the interdependence found within organizations. A third principle of Zen is to avoid fixed views on anything, by observing how our perception influences our understanding of reality. Everything is

changing, and our perceptions also change how we view the world. Keeping an open mind isn't something to do just when conflict arises, but to practice as a basic way of life. Finally, Zen offers an unusual perspective on time itself, which leads to the potential ability to remain calm about progress, avoiding stress from perceptions of progress as too slow or too fast.

The language of Zen leaders talking about change may be abstract or concrete. Metaphors, koans, and anecdotes are frequently employed—they appeared 11 times in the 57 quotes forming this study's sample. With such techniques, the teacher's goal is to guard against students seizing upon "sound bites" or becoming too attached to a specific verbal expression. In a modern, secular organization, the power of storytelling has been noted (Auvinen et al. 2013; Denning 2006) and Zen offers an extension of this practice. Zen leaders sometimes make contradictory statements, both of which express the truth. They then urge followers to set aside analysis and experience how those two contradictory statements might be true. If a leader wishes to try this technique in a modern, secular organization, they might need to show explicitly how each statement is true in its own way, and invite followers to reflect for themselves, or provide their own examples to illustrate each statement.

Zen leaders' urging to followers to avoid attachment to the leader is intriguing and seems to offer a possible correction to charismatic leadership theories' emphasis on follower identification with the leader. Zen leaders may role model this non-attachment through their own focus on the interbeing of the organization, the importance of followers, and the importance of informal leadership roles. Advantages could include greater empowerment of followers, increased critical thinking of followers, and organizational learning. Such an organization may better survive leadership transitions as their focus avoids dependence on the leader herself.

Zen suggests that real change in a group only happens to the extent that change happens in each individual. One role of a Zen leader is to encourage followers that they are just as capable of seeing truth as anyone else. Zen specifically urges practitioners not to try to change people, but rather to encourage people to observe their true nature and what fixed views they might have, and to draw from these observations in order to choose helpful actions.

### **Future Research**

This introductory research illuminated future avenues for investigation. While Zen leaders were found discussing change at the cosmic, societal, and individual levels, no literature was found where Zen leaders discussed organizational change. Second, no case studies of organizational change influenced by a Zen leadership approach were found. How might Zen philosophies about change actually be operationalized in an organizational setting? Given the interest of Zen leaders in dialogue, using interviews with Zen leaders seems a promising approach.

Additional theoretical models that seem relevant for studying Zen and leadership include servant leadership (Greenleaf 1997) and spiritual leadership (Fry 2003). By locating Zen amidst existing leadership models, there is the potential to reduce dependence on a particular religious or cultural background. Zen leaders recognize the value of many religions in supporting an ethical approach to life and work (Dalai Lama 2012; Williams 2016).

While recognizing some value in “dharma talks” in helping followers, Zen leaders unanimously advise the best way to understand anything about Zen is to just sit and observe the reality of the present moment. In conclusion, therefore, the reader is invited to set a timer and spend five minutes attempting to “just sit” and experience the immediate world around them. As thoughts may come, they can be seen as just a part of that world, like clouds floating through the

sky. Or as Suzuki advised, “Leave your front door and your back door open. Let thoughts come and go. Just don’t serve them tea” (Suzuki as cited by Chadwick 1999, 301).

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