

Two Unexpected Zen Masters

I recently returned from a two-week trip to Japan where I had some truly remarkable experiences, including unexpected meetings with two Zen masters. These encounters underscored for me a number of principles that are important not just to build client relationships but also to achieve professional fulfillment.

For those of you who are interested, I have posted a few special photographs on the Kodak photo-sharing site. These illustrate some of the people and places that I describe in this newsletter. The link is:

The story begins in Kyoto, a delightful city which was the capital of Japan from 794 to 1869 AD. Kyoto was the center of the development of Japanese Zen and other Buddhist sects, and boasts what are probably the most beautiful Zen temples and gardens in the world. On our second day in Kyoto, we toured with Masa Fujiwara, a Japanese guide with Esprit Travel who lives full-time in Kyoto. Masa is an architect and an expert on Kyoto's history and culture. He took us to see the Daitokuji temple complex, which was and still is a Rinzai Zen monastery. The serenity and beauty of the temples and gardens was palpable.

As we admired the garden of the Zuiho-In temple, Masa greeted one of the monks. It turns out he was Mr. Maeda, a Roshi (a senior teacher) who is the head of the temple and a well-known Zen master. Steve introduced Maeda Roshi to me, my wife, Mary Jane, and my 15-year old daughter, Emma. After being told we were from New Mexico, he smiled and invited us, spontaneously, to have tea in the temple's tea room. We had no idea at the time that this was a rare privilege indeed, that you would normally have to schedule an audience months in advance—if it would be granted at all. We also didn't know that Maeda Roshi is a master of the Japanese tea ceremony!

We were led into a formal tea room, with a small charcoal fire pit in the center for boiling the tea water. Maeda Roshi, attired in traditional monk's robes, had a jolly, disarming demeanor that surprised me. I imagined a man of his position and rank would be a stern, ascetic, unsmiling Zen priest who would scowl at our unenlightened ways. Instead, Maeda Roshi made us all immediately feel completely at ease in this strange and unfamiliar setting. With Masa translating, the Roshi taught us how to sit, Zen-style, folding a small pillow in two under our seats. Over the next 45 minutes, he slowly prepared tea for us, while sharing a steady stream of seemingly impromptu reflections on life. He spoke directly to my daughter, a tall, willowy blonde who is 5'11" and was feeling a bit out of place in Japan. "You have a very beautiful face," he told her. "Now, your face is the face of your mother and father, but when you reach 20 you will develop your own face." My young daughter was treated throughout the session as if she were, in some ways, the most important person in the group. Maeda-san went on, talking about the importance of breathing. "Air is free," he said, "breathe it deeply because it opens your heart." My wife asked him, "How does a beginner start?" And he replied, "Just try breathing deeply for five minutes each morning. And arrange one flower in a glass. Just one, each day." I asked him about his students, and his role as a teacher of Zen. He said, "I'm not so focused on what I say to them or lectures I might give. I basically try to set an example through my own practice and my own attitude." At the end, he turned to my daughter and said, "You are young, but like everyone, your body will age. There's nothing we can do about our bodies getting older. But we can affect our heart and make it more open. There is no limit to opening up our heart to others."

After serving us Matcha tea (concentrated, powdered green tea that is mixed with boiling water), the Roshi indicated he had to go. It was the first perceptible sign that there was anything else at all going on in his day besides having tea with us. He had given us his undivided attention. For 45 unhurried minutes we had been the only people in his world. When my daughter tried to stand up, she discovered her leg had fallen completely asleep. She tried, in vain, to hobble out with us. She was embarrassed, but the Roshi told her, sympathetically, that it had happened to him many times. And then he laughed long and hard, with her, not at her, and a smile burst onto her face. We left the tea room and said goodbye. "That was very special, even for

me,” Masa said to us. “The Roshi is 65, and he has been a monk here since he was 16. This was a rare moment.” But we knew that already.

The very next day we visited another master, Sakurai-sensei of the Saisho-in Zen temple. This was arranged by Steve Beimel, the founder of Esprit Travel, who now lives in Kyoto (Esprit is a great resource for Japan). Sakurai-sensei, in addition to being the abbot at his temple, is one of the three top Noh mask carvers in Japan. Noh is an ancient Japanese performance theater which dates from the 14th century. In Noh, the actors play out various dramas while wearing sometimes-impassive wooden masks. Through their acting, they bring great emotion to the characters and even to their mask-covered faces. Each mask is a work of art. After it is carved, Sakurai-sensei applies 100 coats of a white paint made from Oyster shells. After he applies each coat, he is able to better see the tiny imperfections in the surface of the wood, which is then re-carved. Sanding is only done after the last three or four coats. The finished product has an unimaginably fine, unblemished sheen to it (see the pictures in the link). Sakurai-sensei has been carving Noh masks for over 50 years, and I was really struck by what he told us at the end of our conversation: “Each time, I try to make a mask that is a little closer to the ideal. But I haven't yet carved the perfect mask. I suppose that if that ever happens in my lifetime, I'll just...well, give it all up! But I doubt I'll ever get to that point.” And this coming from nationally-renowned master of his craft...

These experiences reinforced for me some principles that are perhaps common sense but which we often neglect:

Make your client feel like the center of the universe. When you are with a client, be totally in the moment with that client. Act as though you have no other clients and no other obligations that day. For ten minutes or an hour, make your client feel like the center of your universe. It's a powerful feeling for someone to experience.

Treat even the most seemingly insignificant players in your relationships with respect and interest. After our session with Maeda Roshi, my daughter told me that it had been one of the 2 or 3 “coolest” experiences of her life. No small wonder: She felt an integral part of the encounter. To give another example: The founder of the Rothschild banking dynasty, Mayer Rothschild, always advised his five children to treat even the lowliest clerk “as if the whole depended entirely on him, though perhaps he knew he had but the smallest possible influence in the business.”

Suggest small, manageable steps to your clients. I had expected Maeda Roshi to tell us we had to start meditating for an hour each day and immediately engage in a deep study of Zen in order to become more enlightened. He surprised me by suggesting a small step: “Try breathing deeply for five minutes each morning.” He didn't even tell us to “meditate.” Just to breath deeply for a few minutes. Now that is something quite feasible for most of us!

Make your clients feel smart, not stupid. Sometimes we are so expert in our fields that it's easy to criticize and point out how our clients are not following accepted or best practice. When my daughter's leg fell asleep at the tea ceremony, she felt embarrassed. The Roshi made her feel completely normal by laughing loudly and telling her the same thing had happened to him—to a Zen master who taught meditation around the world! The last time I checked, no one likes to feel stupid!

Never stop pushing. Almost all of the great trusted advisors I have studied push their limits. Like Sakurai-sensei, the master carver, they aim for an ideal—for perfection, really, in their work--and they plug away at it every day, improving slowly, but never feeling smug because they have “arrived.” This quest for

continuous improvement—the student mindset—is something very ingrained in Japanese culture. I’ve studied Japanese martial arts (Shotokan karate and Okinawin weapons) for ten years, and when you get your black belt, it’s really just the beginning of your learning journey).

Walk your own talk. The two masters I met role model their teachings in a big way, and this makes them powerful teachers. In contrast, I have met many professionals who talk about humility but are themselves self-absorbed and arrogant; who preach the value of long term relationships but maximize their individual transactions; who constantly name-drop to reinforce their own authority; and so on. When you are clearly living the principles that you teach, people listen.

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