

The Zen of Teaching PMC

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What do I mean by Zen?

I am not referring to the religion or Buddhism - instead I want to explore the way in which we approach teaching or working with PMC. The entire seminar with the slides is available at the website TonnboDesign.com.

Why PMC?

The simple nature of working with this material immediately reminded me of other Japanese crafts and art forms- origami (paper), tea ceremony (a bowl, hot water, whisk and tea), shodo - brush painting (ink, brush, paper). In all of these crafts the materials are simple, the tools are basic, and the most important elements are your hands and your mind. The techniques are not difficult yet students can spend years practicing and perfecting the process. The results can be spectacular or simple. And the novice as well as the master can have equal enjoyment of their handiwork.

The PMC and Crafts Industry

Among the various reasons for participating in craftwork, the desire for community seems to be strong among Americans. In this society of individuals, the desire to connect is a constant need. Americans prize productivity and achievement. Children's rooms and walls are decorated with trophies and ribbons. Craftwork is another way to demonstrate our achievements.

I did an informal survey of PMC teachers here in this country and this is what I found: PMC teachers come from a wide range of backgrounds - metalwork, glass, ceramics but also IT, music and education. Many teach to earn income to pay for the PMC but many also noted that they gained tremendous satisfaction from seeing their students end the class with their own finished piece. **"Nothing compares to having a student come into a class with no experience and leave it wearing something they have made themselves."**

Students in the PMC classes are there for professional development but also personal enjoyment. Students want **"entertainment, a great time, learn about a fascinating and fun material."**

One teacher noted: **"When I do a one-on-one workshop, in almost every case the student begins to discuss things in her life that has her down."** Working with PMC seems to allow the students to free her thoughts and relieve tensions. I have also noted that often my students specifically say they are hoping to relieve stress in their lives by learning about PMC.

What about Japan?

Factors which influence crafts in Japan: Mingei movement - "The people's art"
Japan already had a rich handicraft culture but with the modernization of Japan, there was a resurgence of interest in handicrafts with the Mingei movement. In these arts, function was a first priority but design was also pleasing. The craftsmen and women were anonymous and humble and they often created everyday utensils, tools and textiles. Now the craftspeople are not necessarily anonymous but the qualities remain the same and are still tied to everyday life. Simple, earthy functional designs. Mingei has influenced modern Japanese art, architecture and fashion. There is not the sharp distinction between art/craft in Japan as there is in this country.

PMC in Japan

According to Japanese friends, the certification program in Japan is 1 year long, students meet with teachers twice a month. It costs almost \$1000 tuition plus the cost of materials. High standards in workmanship. PMC is available through many retail stores and the prevalence of PMC on many Japanese websites indicates its popularity.

There are also many "trial" classes offered where novices can try one project for about \$30, at the large stores selling PMC supplies. The average class seems to be about 3 hours long. Now there are beginning to be longer classes where like piano lessons, students meet regularly and pay by the month. One Japanese teacher here in the U.S. noticed some differences

between Japanese and American students: Americans think of creating a unique "art" piece while Japanese consider PMC work as another method of creating the jewelry designs or work they have already seen elsewhere. Americans will often choose to use the fastest method (the tumbler) while many Japanese choose to take more time, hand burnishing with 7 different grits of sandpaper.

Why is Craftwork so popular in both countries?

I wanted to understand and define the benefits of these craft and art forms in both cultures. I first looked at western art therapy books to help explain this process. But books such as "Art is a Way of Knowing" by Pat B. Allen focus on interpreting the images one creates. She describes her work as an art therapist **"Art therapy,... is mostly about getting other people to know themselves through art making. ...my most significant experiences have come through using materials to discover and follow my own stream of imagery."** The art therapists try to interpret what that ash tray really means The ink blot approach.

In another book "Process in the Arts Therapies" edited by Ann Cattanach, several art therapists describe their work in the music, theatre and arts **"All the therapists writing in this book describe the process of therapy as kind of metaphoric journey."** p. 195

Then I looked at health books, particularly those which explored the mind/body relationship. I found Dr. Deepak Chopra closer to what I observed in my PMC classes,

"When attention is properly attuned - without excitement, without effort - then self-awareness simply happens. It opens the channel through which the brain can consistently bring health to the body. Healthy people.... Live neither in the past nor in the future. They live in the present, in the now, which gives the now a flavor of eternity because no shadows fall across it. Worry does not occur in the present. When attention is paid to the present moment, it grows in its own fullness. When a life is spent in ever successive moments of now, then time is not the psychological enemy of man. The mischief of worry is defeated by appreciation for what life has to give today" p. 119, p. 122.
Creating Health, How to wake up the Body's Intelligence.

I also found that H. E. Davey, an instructor of the Japanese art of calligraphy (shodo), had interesting insights in his book, Brush Meditation:

"Have you ever become so obsessed with the end result of an action that you failed to concentrate on the activity taking place at that moment? Take a moment to reflect on this. Many of us do it all the time. In shodo (brush painting), some beginners are so concerned about eventually creating a great work of art that they do not adequately concentrate on the real learning process occurring at the present moment, and drift off into a sort of fantasy world. When people are trying to finish and undertake in haste, they are inclined to sacrifice concentration. This however does not mean that it is impractical to act promptly and still be able to pay attention. The point is that you should be certain that you are truly concentrating when in a rush." p. 60
Brush Meditation - A Japanese Way to Mind & Body Harmony.

I then saw a certain common thread in many of the traditional Japanese crafts, including my own experience in tea ceremony. This is where I found it meaningful to look at the practical aspects of Zen and the Japanese crafts. Zen is not really a religion or a philosophy as we know it in the West, Zen focuses on the experience, not understanding. Zen deals with life itself, not symbols or language. Instead of looking at the finished silver and gold piece, we look at the hands.

Kobara Ranshō Sensei, a teacher of shodo (calligraphic painting) wrote:

"I always explain when (my students) eat delicious food, at that moment, they become unconscious of the eating utensils. Shodo is just the same as this. They must be unconscious of, and transcend the brush, thus acting spontaneously. To accomplish this, students must practice severely, every day, until they forget the brush, and make strokes freely. Calligraphers should not worry about gaining the teacher's admiration, or putting their art in exhibitions. They must forget the brush, and simply practice being free

from anxiety about results.” Tokyo, Nihon Keizai Newspaper. The Spirit of the Brush Favors No Nation, 1988 Translated by H. E. Davey.

Mindfulness

I found the term “mindfulness” close to describing this process. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, is Director of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester notes in his paper, Mindfulness Meditation: Health Benefits of an Ancient Buddhist Practice:

“In the practice of mindfulness, you begin by utilizing one-pointed attention to cultivate calmness and stability, but then you move beyond that by introducing a wider scope to the observing as well as an element of inquiry. When thoughts or feeling come up in your mind, you don't ignore them or suppress them, nor do you analyze or judge their content. Rather, you simply note any thoughts as they occur as best you can and observe them intentionally but no judgmentally, moment by moment, as events in the field of your awareness” p.262 Mind Body Medicine - How to Use your Mind For Better Health, edited by Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., and Joel Gurin.

Dr. Kabat-Zinn further adds:

“The key to mindfulness is not so much what you choose to focus on but the quality of the awareness that you bring to each moment. It is very important that it be nonjudgmental - more of a silent witnessing, a dispassionate observing, than a running commentary on your inner experience. Observing without judging, moment by moment, helps you see what is on your mind without editing or censoring it, without intellectualizing it or getting lost in your own incessant thinking.” p. 262 - 263. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, “Mindfulness Meditation: Health Benefits of an Ancient Buddhist Practice”, Mind Body Medicine - How to Use your Mind For Better Health, edited by Daniel Goleman, Ph.D., and Joel Gurin.

Mind/body medicine now has scientific support. The Institute of Medicine, a branch of the National Academy of Sciences has reported “Scientific data generally support the idea that the nervous system directly or through neuroendocrine mechanisms can affect the immune system. “ Between Mind and Body: Stress, Emotions, and Health, Mind Body Medicine, Kenneth R. Pelletier, PhD , senior clinical fellow at the Stanford Center for Research in Disease Prevention and director of the Stanford Corporate Health Program at the Stanford University School of Medicine.

Japanese Concepts used in craftwork - Ki

As a Japanese language student, I noticed how the word “ki” appears in so many daily Japanese words and expressions. Loosely translated it means “life force” but it is part of everyday expressions such as (apply ki) “be careful!” to (my ki is bad) “I feel nauseous” and (his ki is small) “he is a coward”. The dictionary has at least 50 definitions for the word ki. So I was not surprised to find H.E. Davey saying:

“While not exactly principles of art or design, the effective use of ki (life energy or spirit) and hara (abdominal centralization) can perhaps be considered part of the spiritual and technical aesthetics of all the Japanese arts.” p. 34 Brush Meditation - A Japanese Way to Mind & Body Harmony.

Ki is one of many Japanese words that cannot be easily translated into English, but are at the heart of the Japanese approach to artwork.

Slide of Ki character

Ki is “...energy. The manifestation of the vital inner energy that is to be found in every man, and which is one other than the original creative energy of the earth and the Universes....Ki is thus the fundamental energy

of being, beyond physical, chemical or natural phenomena. Attention, mental force is itself ki and therefore it can be directed into every part of the body or turned outwards toward the external world.” Michel Random, Japan: Strategy of the Unseen.

“In shodo as well as the Japanese healing arts and martial arts, countless examples exist of phenomenal exploits and exhibitions of mental and physical expertise. These exhibitions are frequently thought to be examples of the force of ki. the focused use of the mind permits you to firmly influence and focus your ki.” p. 58 Brush Meditation, by H.E. Davey.

(The seminar also describes other Japanese concepts used in craftwork and art - *hara, wabi, sabi, shibumi and shibui* and slides to illustrate the concepts.) Although these principles are common in Japanese art and the words are frequently used in Japanese conversation, it would be incorrect to assume that all Japanese can explain these concepts.

I would describe this situation as similar to one where a Japanese person might ask an American, “Why do so many of your English sentences contain pronouns?” Unless you are familiar with languages which don’t use as many pronouns, it would be difficult to explain the cultural factors which influence the English language and communication.

I am not expert enough to explain these concepts in depth but I hope that you can see that there is a whole vocabulary which describes the process of creating something by hand and the qualities of a handmade form. These principles are applied to crafts, food, music and even a person’s personality. They are not limited to Japan and are now considered universal. I believe that the simplicity of PMC and the tools, mainly our hands, which are used with PMC lend themselves to adopting an approach of mindfulness.

How do we apply this approach to the classroom?

H. E. Davey notes: Shodo practice is a kind of physical activity, and it is necessary that training in this fine art be managed in a natural way.

Without ease in training your body, you can rarely perform with maximum efficiency.”

“Your spirit (ki) controls your brush or, in everyday life, your body. For a split second, the student needs to powerfully concentrate on the character to be painted, and then without faltering move the brush in a relaxed fashion. In this way, the artist prevails mentally before even contacting the paper.”

“Central to this technique is developing sufficient concentration to first produce a clear mental image and then, decisively and with absolutely no hesitation, move the fude (brush). In time, this becomes automatic, and an image is created in one second while the brush moves in the following second. A similar mental process can be used in most daily activities to harmonize the mind and body and, consequently, achieve greater results with less strain.”

Although this all comes from a book - one really needs to learn this technique by doing it with a good teacher.

How do we apply these ideas to a PMC class?

Consider adding steps in your teaching and practice which will enhance the **mindfulness aspect**. Here is one example using a beginning PMC project I often teach (from booklet Fine Silver Sampler - see TonnboDesign.com) :

Ancient Coin Project

Add these steps in the classroom:

Select objects from Nature for texturing

When working with the wet clay - before opening the package, have all tools and textures ready.

Position your body and hands.

Visualize the desired form in your mind.

Open the package and work spontaneously and quickly.

Don't mindlessly handle the PMC.

Focus on what your hands are doing, what does the clay feel like.

Handle the wet PMC as little as possible.

Spend more time in the green ware stage.

Be systematic in sanding and working on the surface of the piece.

After firing, hand burnish the piece.

Take time to hand polish the piece with fine sandpaper and polishing cloth.

Summary

H.E. Davey, Director of the Sennin Foundation Center for Japanese Cultural Arts, notes:

One of the most significant and basic principles that these (Japanese) arts share is the concept of mind and body coordination. Few of us are required to use a (Japanese calligraphy) brush in daily life, but most of us are interested in realizing our full potential and enhancing our mental state as well as our physical health."

As teachers of this relatively new art form, we can begin to build a foundation on which our physical and spiritual lives can flourish. By consciously connecting PMC to the mind/body relationship through some of these Japanese concepts, we can expand the significance of teaching and working with PMC beyond the latest techniques and design. These concepts can help enrich our physical well being as well as our understanding of the work we produce.

References

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