



The Zen of Humanistic Coaching: A Taste of Transpersonal Facilitation in Action

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A good traveller has no fixed plans & is not intent on arriving. (Lao Tzu)

So, what exactly does the term ‘transpersonal’ denote? Well, relating to states of being & aspects of consciousness & awareness over & above the limitations of personal identity, ones that encompasses spiritual, transcendental & peak experiences which promote self-development, illuminate meaning & enhance personal growth. I guess the major difference between run-of-the-mill coaching & transpersonal coaching is its willingness to explore spirituality, to entertain that we are much more than we are taught to believe. It does not identify a God nor speak of religion, but rather keeps the question open for the unknown & the unknowable to inform us. We may speak out loud our intuitions, fears & beliefs to hold in mind & inquire into, but rarely conclude with a once-and-for-all answer. So, are you comfortable with this? Keeping uncertainty & self-inquiry alive?

For example, we might ask you as you begin reading this text: ‘If the essence of

you, say we term this soul, a guiding force over & above & within you, were to say what drew it to read this article – what might it say?’ What instinctively & intuitively comes to mind in response to this query?

If, by contrast, we further asked you to use your intellect & reason to answer ‘What do you expect to find in this article?’, how might a thoughtful & reasoned answer from a more logical & intellectual view differ? Get the point? The difference between qualitative (soft-wired) & quantitative (hard-wired) knowledge & motivation? Such is the difference between much art & science!

So, this article is also a ‘how to’ text, with examples of hands-on client experiences. For instance, we may report a client saying: ‘I don’t know!’

But feeling this is a reflexive rather than considered answer, we would push back, & give examples in the text, of our possible responses, such as:

- ‘So, if you “did know”, what might this be?’
- ‘If you stay a little longer with how you felt with my question, what happened or what indeed may be happening inside you now, under your physical & verbal mask?’
- ‘When you said “don’t know” just then, what feeling accompanied your expression?’
- ‘When you said “don’t know”, I felt a gentle thud in my solar plexus, like I’d been pushed away & told to back off. Was this your intention or am I suffering from an over-active imagination?’
- ‘I fully accept that there are quandaries in life we will never have an answer to, but I merely asked you how you felt coaching was working for you? So when you fob me off with a trite answer I tend to smell a rat! So rat, fess up please!’

We are not saying ‘do as we do’, but rather use our own authentic responses as a springboard to consider your own response to a prospective resistant client. Granted, one has to have a pretty robust & authentic relationship in operation to use the confronting & slyly humorous last example of an intervention cited above, so there is never one right answer, only experimental & exploratory ones.

As you can see in the above, I endeavour not to interpret, but rather illuminate the field in a phenomenological inquiring way. It’s up to the client to analyse themselves.

In terms of the knowledge base informing me, my transpersonal & holistic approach is complemented by bringing humanism to bear within a foundation informed by group analysis

& quantum physics, phenomenological inquiry & Zen. The ten commandments of humanism are my ethics.

Underpinning my approach is an informal heuristic inquiry into my self, & a shared phenomenological co-inquiry into the nature of the person before me & the relationship we co-construct together. The ghost inside the machine is essentially Gestalt – together with a Zen-inspired inquiry into what is Here-and-Now! The therapeutic result is a deconstructive perspective primarily led by the client & the unfolding field....

Destroy everything. Don’t be afraid of loss. When you become attached to things, you start to fear losing them. If you become too obsessed with position or reputation, you become stuck. Throw away your obsessions & attachments bravely. Smash them into tiny pieces. Pass your position in society & reputation to the people who come after you, & forget about these things. That’s the spirit. Once you have smashed everything into pieces, your heart will be free. After ten years training in the Forrest, I stood on the edge of the lake & laughed anew with all my might. Life starts again from this point.

(Yutaka Taniyama)

Throughout this article I intuitively used the old Latin ampersand, so substituting ‘&’ in place of ‘and’. The ampersand was once a part of the alphabet but was removed in modern times. A similar fate, I believe, has befallen things spiritual in contemporary culture, therapy & coaching, so I keep it in view to remind me not to lose sight of the invisible, be it Love or Tao. It’s a bit like saying I did not write this account so much as allowed my intuition to do so – getting out of my own way to allow ‘the knowing field’ to inform me?

I believe my best facilitation happens when ego steps aside, & the intuitive heart of the field within which the client & I co-exist speaks through us. It is indeed through science that we prove facts, build theories & produce figures; but it is through intuition that we are guided towards discovery, illumination & towards the essential essence of things! I veer towards the latter. ‘We live in illusion & the appearance of all things. There is a reality. We are that reality. When you understand this, you see that you are nothing, you are everything. That is all.’ (The Buddha)

The above quotation, inviting paradox & an awakening to the unfamiliar, like the kong-an in Taoism & the koan in Zen, serves to expand awareness while illuminating the limitations of intellect. This article is littered with kong-ans & koans which confront our existential common-sense position, & demand an awakening to difference & shift of consciousness. So what exactly are these beasts I’m inviting you to use, & what is their purpose?

(Kong-ans) are, therefore, not riddles & riddle-like problems which students should solve before their enlightenment, for (kong-ans) are full of meaning which is clear only to those who have rid themselves of discrimination & discernment. Obviously, they are incomprehensible to unenlightened people who grasp at externals & cling to the names & terms of conditioned human language. However, as soon as they keep from illusions, that is, when their minds are not stirred by thoughts, they will understand all (kong-ans) without making the least effort. (Luk, 1971)

Simply, a koan/kong-an is designed to bring you to a stuck point, to a thought

stopper where your usual way of relating to yourself & the world stumbles. Herein is a similar aim to chanting. In Zen terminology, the words of the koan are called the question’s tail, & the stuck state the question’s head. A Zen master instructs a student to grasp the question’s head & not let go until thought stops & you reach the ‘not-moving mind’. I endeavour to encapsulate this self-same process in my facilitation & to cultivate a little of the same in my clients.

For example: ‘Out of no-where the mind emerges.’

Note the paradox, the implication that something emerges from out of nothing, that reality is moving & changing & far from static; that there is ever so much more than meets the eye or our everyday senses; that the universe, life & ourselves are mysterious processes – a truism we will find later illuminated lately by quantum physics.

We do not wake up each day in the same one & only world, but rather individually & collectively co-construct a multiverse as much affected by mind as matter! Underpinning it all, in quantum-science terms, is the notion that everything starts & ends with intelligent nebulous universal energy, where atoms or elementary wave-like particles ‘form a world of potentialities or possibilities rather than one of things or facts’ (Werner Heisenberg), which conscious & emotional intent can influence. Everything is fleeting & fluid! Permanence is a delusion. Our senses & intellect can & do deceive us, for our universe is a human-centric one where our ‘species’ & ‘culture’ determine the world we have come to know! But don’t just believe me; listen to the counter-

intuitive things quantum physicists are saying:

- Objects gain mass the faster they move;
- ‘Time’ itself is not consistent, as long-term space travel & atomic clocks prove time to be gravity- & field-related!
- Electrons metamorphose before our eyes & seemingly can’t decide if they are really particles or waves or both – especially when they are observed;
- Such is the degree of ‘intelligent’ interconnectedness implied in the universe that many quantum physicists say it’s impossible to truly separate thought & consciousness from matter, & the universe is nearer one great thought than one great physical system;
- Experimenters have seen how light, going through a series of blind ‘double slit’ experiments, seems to know, before it begins its journey, exactly what kind of traps have been set for it along the route, as if reading the researcher’s mind!

The final point above, concerning interaction between ourselves as sentinel beings & matter, which at the sub-atomic level seems able to read our mind, is especially interesting. Do we mind-melt with the quantum field or are we both occupying the same field? The chicken or egg scenario!

In relation to our roles as facilitators & coaches, do we have an ability to shape our client physically at a sub-atomic level, i.e. can we teach them how to construct their own reality? These possibilities open up when science

becomes shamanistic & mystical in this way, for we are being led to believe that mind & matter are so melded together, all is possible. Physicists quote experiments which they believe prove quantum energy waves move back & forth between the present, the past & future, & that the only time they stay in the present & become matter is when our minds focus attention on ‘waves of possibility’ – which serves to shape them into a recognisable material form! So, hard science is now proposing mind over matter?

Evidence? Energetic sub-atomic particles have been observed under experimental conditions to not just pop in & out of existence as if travelling through time, but to collapse when subject to observation. Taking this further, some physicists, akin to Buddha, have put forward the hypothesis that ‘universal consciousness’ holds the cosmos together! A universal consciousness, no less, that also defies distance! For instance, in a quantum-physics dynamic described as ‘quantum entanglement’, two particles become so mysteriously linked that change in one simultaneously brings change in the other, even when these are thousands of miles apart. Could this explain the commonly observed phenomenon reported by therapists & coaches where sessions of coaching or facilitation are seen to affect others, central to a session’s discussion, though they are remote & unaware of being subjects of attention?

We are being reminded here, yet again, that everything is interconnected to everything else; that the physical is plastic & malleable; that observation & awareness are powerful in their own

right; that thought & matter communicate, & consciousness may indeed interrelate with matter to glue our universe together! All is substantial & insubstantial simultaneously! In this light, meditative, imaginative & mindful approaches may have more effect than we realise.

But in truth, the authentic mind is one that admits to knowing nothing, for the living field we are in is far too vast for us to understand or grasp!

I sometimes offer variants of the above koans in my client work by repeatedly asking the old enlightenment question: ‘Who are you?’ After a client has spent some minutes sharing their social roles, family & work relationships, shed habitual responses & removed other well-worn social masks, they stumble into territory of the unknown, even to the point of speaking poetically & philosophically, till eventually they discover they don’t really know. For as hinted at earlier, a ‘don’t know mind is our true reality!’ There is too much in swim & too vast a universe for us to really know or generate a complete answer to any question! At this point, with a certain few clients I push further by asking: ‘& if you did know, what might that be?’ – hereby inviting their intuition further into play.

I encourage my clients to always strive after this ‘Don’t Know Mind’, for paradoxically, when ‘The Don’t Know Mind’ becomes clear & with rumination left far behind, we begin to understand that much is really interpretation & cultural conditioning, not ‘fact’. At this point, with possibilities opening up & socialisation in question we are freed to

rethink the ‘musts’ & ‘shoulds’ & ‘oughts’ we impose upon our life!

Now transpersonal facilitation & coaching won’t always lead to enlightenment, but at least it will make sufficient psychic space to provide opportunity to re-write a more current & realistic life-plan & to see through the folly of our ways! But why bother to work in this way? Well, many people’s mind’s are like over-full glasses that need emptying out before they can receive more.

On occasion, I have pushed clients, when I feel them ripe enough, further into the unknown & unknowable to destabilise their limiting conventionality or rigid conformity; I have done this by sharing such a classical hard-edged Zen koan as: ‘What was the shape of your face before you were born?’ The answers received were often surprising & sometimes enlightening!

- ‘That’s a mystery, but the blueprint was no doubt always waiting in the genes of my ancestors.’
- ‘I’m still waiting to be born – that’s why I’m here!’
- ‘This face is not mine, this shape does not belong to me, both are on loan!’
- ‘Good question; if I’m unborn I am not yet with face or shape, so still unformed within the universe – where one day I will return.’
- ‘An uncreated projection within both our mind’s eye’s – yours & mine.’
- ‘An imagined fantasy awaiting realisation.’

All the above open up new portals for therapy or life coaching.

Asking the same question of our daughter when eight years old, we got the most Zen-full of answers: ‘The shape of my face before I was born was that of a flamingo!’ She intuitively knew we are what we think we are – I guess she wins the prize of becoming my next Zen master!

Simply, change the rationale & you change the behaviour. Habitual blue-prints must be challenged for new behaviours to flower.

Zen & Taoism take us to those potent areas where reason is like a fish out of water; so near to chaos & confusion; so deep in the fertile void where growth & creativity lie in wait that our obsessions with doing the correct thing & dependence on rules must of necessity fade & die. Do you personally need waking up to the universe as knowing best & life being a golden opportunity (Taoism)? Or do you need shaking out your naïve belief in social order & life as suffering (Zen)? Both!

How comfortable would you be using the following interventions to lubricate this paradoxical territory we are describing beyond the norm?

- ‘Are you truly conscious here & now – how do you know?’
- ‘What were you conscious of a moment ago – & now?’
- ‘When you are not fully here where do you go – & can you ever arrive?’
- ‘How does your thought arise – mindfully or habitually?’
- ‘Where do you go between your thoughts – to your heart or your head?’
- ‘If there is no such thing as time – where is memory?’

- ‘When are you fully you – when you let go?’
- ‘So what is your real goal here – but to realise your own true nature?’

Such interventions rattle-&-shake our intellectual status quo, take the usual conventions away so we no longer need to dumb ourselves down to fit ourselves in!

After all, the self ‘...is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, to mature, to die; it is a dramatic effect arising diffusely from a scene that is presented.’ (Erving Goffman)

What core drama are you currently running in your life?

Before leaving this discussion, stop a moment to contemplate the following classic koan:

‘When the many are reduced to one, to what is the one reduced?’

Such statements may be dismissed as a crazy joke, but stay with them – what happens to you? What must you let go of to fully engage the question? What do you eventually have to become to understand?

At the most mundane of levels, koans prepare us for the complexity & fertile confusion we meet in the human condition, plus the sense that we are always missing something that’s hiding just out of sight. They are training for the reality that there is always more unknown than there is known around us & as well as within the deepest depths of us!

One last koan to play with: ‘What is the colour of wind?’ – Blew! Humour is a great destabiliser & social cement worthy of the most careful cultivation in coaching & therapy.

Always remember to look to your heart to refresh your life & be born again from this point, & remember to stay in the ‘Now’ so you continually live in your ‘Beginning’!

‘Know only that you don’t know. To fool yourself otherwise leads to confusion.’
(Lao Tzu)

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