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by **Matthew May**

# ZEN AND THE ART OF SIMPLICITY

 **WHEN OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES JR. SAID,** “I wouldn’t give a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity,” he might well have been referring to the Zen aesthetic ideal of *shibumi*. This Japanese word is reserved for objects and experiences that exhibit all at once the very best of everything and nothing: elegant simplicity; effortless effectiveness; beautiful imperfection.

I first came upon this concept over 30 years ago through the best-selling spy novel *Shibumi*, by the late author **Trevanian** (the *nom de plume* of Dr. **Rodney William Whitaker**). Trevanian’s view paralleled

Holmes’s thoughts on ‘simplicity beyond complexity’: “*Shibumi* has to do with great refinement underlying commonplace appearances.” Little did I know at the time that this idea would literally change my life and career in a meaningful way some 25 years later.

Midway through the course of what would eventually become an eight-year advisory retainer with the automotive giant **Toyota**, I found myself struggling to complete a unique-but-challenging assignment: to help identify and then design a way to teach the hidden creative process behind Toyota’s uncanny ability to successfully implement over one million inventive ideas each year. What made



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the assignment so difficult was the need to unite two distinctly different cultures – Eastern and Western – in a common approach, which entailed straddling two different ways of looking at the world.

In the midst of my struggle, someone anonymously gave me a little book of Chinese verse, entitled *Tao Te Ching*, circa 600 B.C., by Taoist philosopher Lao Tzu. In it, I found this snippet:

Thirty spokes share the wheel's hub,  
It is the centre hole that makes it useful.  
Shape clay into a vessel,  
It is the space within that makes it useful.  
Cut doors and windows for a room,  
It is the holes which make it useful.  
Therefore profit comes from what is there,  
Usefulness from what is not there.

This ancient Eastern idea struck me as a completely different way of looking at the world. While it obviously wasn't new, to me it was radical: I suddenly realized that I had been looking at my problem in entirely the wrong way. As is natural and intuitive – at least for the Western mind – I had been focusing on *what was there*, and *what to do*, rather than on *what wasn't there*, and *what to stop doing*. By shifting my perspective, not only was I able to complete my project successfully, but I was also compelled to delve further into the singular thought that when it comes to the structure and design of an idea – be it a product, service, strategy or experience – what *isn't* there can often be as powerful as what *is*.

### Tracing the Zen Aesthetic

What sets *shibumi* apart as a powerful design ideal is the unique combination of *surprising impact* and *uncommon simplicity*. It entails achieving maximum effect through minimum means, which, it

turns out, is a universal pursuit that takes many forms: artists and designers use white or 'negative' space to convey visual power; scientists, mathematicians and engineers search for theories that explain highly complex phenomena in stunningly simple ways; musicians and composers use pauses in the music – silence – to create dramatic tension; athletes and dancers search for optimal impact with minimal effort; and physicians draw on the *Occam's Razor Principle* in an effort to find a single diagnosis to explain the entirety of a patient's symptoms, shaving the analysis down to the simplest explanation. Likewise, filmmakers, novelists and songwriters strive to tell stories with universal resonance that seem simple but that foster many different, uniquely personal interpretations. What these various forms all have in common, and what *shibumi* has at its core, is the element of *subtraction*.

Not only is the thought of subtracting something in order to create value a very different way of thinking (neuroscientists have shown using functional MRI scans that addition and subtraction demand different brain circuitry), it figures centrally in Zen. In order to appreciate the Zen sensibilities, it helps to have a rough sketch of their evolution from and incorporation into art, architecture and now commercial and corporate design.

As the Zen philosophy took hold in Japan during the 12th and 13th centuries, Japanese art and philosophy began to reflect one of the fundamental Zen themes, that of *emptiness*. In the Zen view, emptiness is a symbol of inexhaustible spirit. Silent pauses in music and theatre, blank spaces in paintings, and even the restrained motion of the sublimely seductive *geisha* in refined formal tea ceremonies all take on a special significance, because it is in states of temporary inactivity or quietude that Zen artists see the very essence of creative energy.

Further, because Zen Buddhists view the human spirit as indefinable by nature, the power of suggestion is exalted as the mark

of a truly authentic creation. Finiteness is thought to be at odds with nature, implying stagnation, which is associated with loss of life. The goal of the Zen artist is to convey the symmetrical harmony of nature through clearly asymmetrical and incomplete renderings; the effect is that those viewing the art supply the missing symmetry and thus participate in the act of creation.

Renowned poet **Fujiwara Teika** maintained that “the poet who has begun a thought must be able to end it so masterfully that a rich space of suggestions unfolds in the imagination of his audience.” Teika’s work became a guiding force in the development of Zen thought in Japan, and his treatises on aesthetics are viewed by historians as the equivalent of universal handbooks on the philosophy of art.

### The Core Principles of Zen

The question that remains is, how does this elusive quality come into being? In pursuit of the answer, let’s take a look at the specific Zen design principles that frame and support the pursuit of *shibumi*, and then, at their practical applications to the design of business, work – and even life itself.

#### 1. Koko (austerity)

The first principle is that of *koko*, which emphasizes restraint, exclusion and omission, embracing the idea that ‘not adding’ is a valid subtractive approach. The goal is to present something that appears to be spare, yet imparts a sense of focus and clarity. There is a wonderful photo widely available on the Internet of the young **Steve Jobs** (a Buddhist practitioner) circa 1982, sitting in the middle of the living room of his Los Altos house. There isn’t much in the room, save an audio system and a Tiffany lamp. Jobs is sipping tea, sitting yoga-style on a mat, with just a few books around him – but the picture speaks volumes about the motive behind every **Apple** product designed under his command, and even helps to explain his aversion to buttons. Beyond the obvious fact that iPods, iPads and iPhones are virtually buttonless, rarely, (if ever) can Jobs be seen wearing a buttoned shirt. He even removes buttons from elevators in multilevel Apple retail stores.

The product designers of Toyota’s youth brand, Scion, embraced the principle of *koko* when they created the fast-selling and highly profitable xB model. The small and boxy vehicle was made intentionally spare by leaving out hundreds of standard features in order to appeal to the Millennial Generation, who are prone to making personal statements by customizing their belong-

ings. Sure enough, buyers commonly invested an amount equal to the purchase price to outfit their xB with flat panel screens, carbon fiber interior elements and high-end audio equipment.

#### Zen design lesson #1:

Refrain from adding what is not absolutely necessary in the first place.

#### 2. Kanso (simplicity)

*Kanso* dictates that beauty and utility need not be overstated, overly decorative or fanciful and imparts a sense of being fresh, clean and neat. **Instagram**, a wonderfully simple and fun iPhone photo-sharing application founded by CEO **Kevin Systrom**, is a great example of *kanso* in software design and functionality. Instagram allows the user to snap a photo, choose a filter to beautifully transform the look and feel of the picture into a work of art, and quickly share it through social media. But Systrom’s first iteration (called Burbn) was a feature-laden app lacking a simple value proposition, and thus had few users. By cutting out the clutter and paring it down into a streamlined app people could understand and have fun with inside 30 seconds, Instagram reached two million users in only four months, a rate of growth faster than **Facebook** and **Twitter**.

#### Zen design lesson #2:

Eliminate what doesn’t matter to make more room for what does.

#### 3. Shizen (naturalness)

The goal of *shizen* is to strike a balance between being at once ‘of nature’, yet distinct from it – to be viewed as being without pretense, without artifice, not forced, yet to be revealed as intentional rather than accidental or haphazard. When UK-based urban designer **Ben Hamilton-Baillie** goes about designing the kinds of ‘shared spaces’ found at Kensington High Street and Sloane Square in London, he is taking a page from the *shizen*-inspired high-traffic intersections in the Netherlands that have been redesigned to be void of traffic controls. In these shared-space intersections, curbs have been eliminated, asphalt replaced with red brick, and there are fountains and garden-like café seating right where you think you should drive. When you come to such an intersection, you have no choice but to slow down, have some human interaction, and use your intelligence. The result is an organic, naturally self-organizing order that leads to half of the accidents and nearly twice the vehicle flow. The only rule is driven by the context: first in turn,

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with all due respect to the most vulnerable. Such naturally emergent self-organization is far better and more powerful than any control we could artificially impose. It's like looking at a crowded ice skating rink for the first time: it looks chaotic, but there is a natural order to things. "If we observed first and designed second, we wouldn't need most of the things we build," says Hamilton-Baillie.

#### Zen design lesson #3:

Incorporate naturally-occurring patterns and rhythms when designing a solution.

#### 4. Yugen (subtlety, implicitness)

The principle of *yugen* captures the Zen view that the power of suggestion is often stronger than that of full disclosure: leaving something to the imagination creates an irresistible aura of mystery, compelling us to find answers. The seduction lies in what we don't know, and because what we don't know far outweighs what we do know, we are naturally curious and easily drawn to the unknown. What *isn't* there drives us to resolve our curiosity, and we will fill-in the information we deem missing in order to do so. Apple used *yugen* in its marketing strategy for the original iPhone which, in the months leading up to its June 2007 launch, was hailed as one of the most-hyped products ever to hit the market. To hype something, though, means to push and promote it heavily through marketing and media. Apple did the exact opposite: Steve Jobs demonstrated it at Macworld '07 just once, giving a masterful and tantalizing presentation a full six months before the scheduled launch. In between? Radio silence. No publicity, no leaks to the media, no price discounts, no demos for technology reviewers, no pre-ordering. There was essentially an embargo on official information, with only the Jobs demo available to reference online. The bloggers and Apple loyalists took over, interpreted and extrapolated, completed the picture as it were, and the iPhone 'tipped' before it ever went on sale, with over 20 million people expressing an intent to buy.

#### Zen design lesson #4:

Limit information to engage human curiosity and leave something to the imagination.

#### 5. Fukinsei (imperfection, asymmetry)

The goal of *fukinsei* is to invoke the natural human inclination to seek symmetry. Nearly everything in nature is symmetrical—it's the predominant organizing principle of the universe. But because it's so prevalent, we often take symmetry for granted—until it's missing. To employ *fukinsei* is to convey the symmetrical harmony of

nature by providing something that appears to be asymmetrical, so that the viewer must actively and creatively participate in completing the picture. **David Chase**, creator of the TV series *The Sopranos*, used this principle in the now-famous final episode. *The Sopranos* was an eight-year long series about a band of somewhat organized criminals in northern New Jersey run by one **Tony Soprano**. There was a great build-up to the final episode, made special because Chase himself wrote and directed it, and the audience would find out whether or not Tony would finally get 'whacked'. But the ending presented Chase with a true dilemma: if he killed Tony off, he would alienate half of his audience and squash his chances for a feature film; but if he let Tony live, he would disappoint the other half of the audience, because Tony was a really bad guy.

In the final seconds of the show— with 12 million people watching— just as something was about to happen, the screen went black. Credits rolled a few seconds later, and *The Sopranos* came to an end. People sat dumbfounded, cursing their cable provider for signal failure, or blaming a spouse for not paying the bill. No one saw it as *the* ending, but rather 'something gone wrong', because they were robbed of traditional story symmetry. The media uproar was deafening, with many calling Chase's decision a cop-out. Within 24 hours, though, Chase announced in a stroke of genius that everything one needed to know about the fate of Tony Soprano was embedded in that final episode; he had planted all kinds of clues. Within three days, another 25 million had viewed or reviewed the show, and not one, not two, but three distinctly-different endings sprang up on the Internet, each with a logical argument for why that ending was correct. By denying his audience symmetry, leaving the story incomplete and imperfect, and requiring audience participation to complete it, David Chase managed to triple his impact.

#### Zen design lesson #5:

Leave room for others to co-create with you, providing a platform for open innovation.

#### 6. Datsuzoku (break from routine)

*Datsuzoku* signifies a break from daily regimen or habit, a certain freedom from the commonplace that often results in pleasant surprise and sudden amazement. Everyone knows the story of **Archimedes'** shouting "Eureka!" upon discovering volume displacement while taking a bath, and of **Einstein's** *Theory of Relativity* coming to him in a daydream; but there are countless such stories of sudden genius. Car designer **Irwin Liu** sketched the innovative new lines of what became the shape of the first Toyota

Prius after helping his child with an elementary school science project involving hard-boiled eggs; author **J. K. Rowling** was travelling on a train when the character of **Harry Potter** flashed in her mind; and **Shell Oil** engineer **Jaap Van Ballegooijen**'s idea for a snake oil drill came as he watched his son turn his bendy straw upside down to better sip around the sides and bottom of his malt glass.

These strange timings and random locations are not merely coincidence: neuroscientists now believe that the ability to engineer creative breakthroughs hinges on the capacity to synthesize and make connections between seemingly-disparate things, and a key ingredient is *time away* from the problem. Research shows that creative revelations often come when the mind is engaged in an activity unrelated to the issue being addressed, and that pressure is not conducive to creative thought. Recent findings demonstrate that the ultimate break – sleep – actually changes our mind's perspective unconsciously. Information is consolidated by a process taking place in the *hippocampus* during sleep, enabling the brain to effectively clear itself and 'reboot', all the while forming new connections and associations. The result can be new insight and the 'aha!' feeling of the legendary *Eureka!* moment.

**Boston Consulting Group** (BCG) recently ran a multi-year *datsuzoku* experiment in which members of a dozen four- or five-member consulting teams were required to take 'predictable time off' every week, defined as one uninterrupted evening free each week after 6 p.m. – no work contact whatsoever, and no BlackBerries. The downtime was awkward for many, nerve-racking for some, and a few even fought the idea, fearful of poor performance ratings or more weekend work. The goal was to teach people that you can tune out completely for a time and *still produce great work*. Within six months, internal surveys showed that these consultants were more satisfied with their jobs and work-life balance, and more likely to stay with the firm, compared to those who weren't part of the study. In addition, BCG's clients reported that these teams turned out better work, in part due to more open dialogue, and that the improved communication also sparked new processes that enhanced the teams' ability to work effectively. The experiment worked so well that BCG has since instituted it firm-wide.

#### Zen design lesson #6:

'Break' is an important part of any breakthrough.

### 7. Seijaku (stillness, tranquility)

The principle of *seijaku* deals with the actual content of *datsuzoku*. To the Zen practitioner, it is in states of active calm, tranquility, solitude and quietude that we find the essence of creative energy.

For over two decades, neuroscientists have been studying Buddhist monks in Tibet, because the most experienced practitioners – those with over 10,000 hours of meditation to their name – exhibit abnormally high levels of 'gamma brainwaves'. These brainwaves have been shown in studies of complex problem solving to be the exact signal to immediately precede sudden creative insights – the aforementioned *aha!* moment. It is the quiet mind that stimulates the brain to produce strokes of genius.

Perhaps this why so many high-performing athletes and executives meditate or use neurofeedback training. Ford chairman **William Ford**, former corporate chiefs **Bill George** of **Medtronic** and **Bob Shapiro** of **Monsanto**, **Phil Jackson**, **Tiger Woods**, and Italy's 2006 World Cup champion soccer team, along with executives at **GE**, **3M**, **Google**, **Bloomberg Media**, and **Salesforce.com** all designate daily time to calm and quiet the mind, to free it from thought. These leaders realize how important is it to be able to do *absolutely nothing* in order to achieve maximum impact. But doing nothing is far from easy. If I asked you to do nothing for the next five minutes, my bet is that you couldn't – you would undoubtedly do *something* during that time, and most likely you would think. What we normally consider the easiest thing in the world to do – nothing – is in reality, often the hardest.

#### Zen design lesson #7:

Doing *something* isn't always better than doing nothing.

#### In closing

While there is nothing easy about achieving *shibumi*, if taken together as a cohesive set of design principles, the concepts described herein will guide and inform your efforts. Keep in mind that very often in life, although something looks effortlessly simple, it takes a great deal of effort and refinement to reach such a state. And keep close the wisdom of **Antoine de Saint Exupery**: "Perfection is achieved not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away." **R**



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