



Arun Jawarlal

[Follow](#)

Nov 2, 2017 · 4 min read

Zen in the Art of Problem solving



Illustration: Self

..The solution of a problem lies in the understanding of the problem— J Krishnamurti

Problems, problems, problems! At the workplace, isn't every day a bouquet of problems? Who doesn't have problems? There are a few of us who do not want to face problems. There are a few of us who love the misery of problems. There are a few of us who put problems on a co-

worker and try to escape it. What is the Zen approach to problem-solving?

What is Zen?

Zen is the distorted or mispronounced version of the Indian word “Dhyan” or “Dhyana” meaning meditation or more locally “undivided attention”. There are a lot of books about Zen Buddhism but I am going to tread only on the practical and non-traditional knowledge I gathered from books and individuals.

Zen perspective of problems

Zen is a tool that can operate on life. Let’s talk about the famous Zen story of the 84th problem.

Once a farmer came to Buddha and complained that his life was miserable. He had a lot of problems like his crops didn’t yield, his wife didn’t respect him and sons didn’t listen to him etc.

Buddha was in quiet meditation and answered that he cannot help the farmer. The farmer got wild and said, “What good are you if you cannot solve my problems?”. Buddha didn’t get perturbed. Instead, he said, “Every person in this world has 83 problems. I cannot help them with it. There is an 84th problem which I can help you out with. This problem will help you solve the other 83 problems.”

The farmer regained composure and got a bit curious. He asked the Buddha what the 84th problem was which could solve the others. Buddha slowly said, “The 84th problem is the thought that you want to get rid of the first 83 problems. If you understand that life is never without problems, it won’t look so bad.”

It was not an answer that the farmer expected, but he got an inexplicable peace after hearing the wise one tell this truth.

Is the Zen solution just to live with problems and not solve it?

No, but knowing that there will always be problems and everyone has problems helps.

We all have our own flavours of problems at work like:

- Micromanagement
- Pressurising deadlines

- Work-life imbalance
- Escalation of an issue to the next managerial level
- Workplace bullying/harassments

Sometimes you feel like you want to just call it quits. It is not about solving the problems but our attitude to these problems that get it solved efficiently and amicably. What would Zen say about this?

Zen solution:

“No blame, no reasoning, no argument, just understanding. If you understand, and you show that you understand, you can love, and the situation will change.” — Thich Nhat Hanh, Peace Is Every Step: The Path of Mindfulness in Everyday Life

The typical response to problems include blaming others, hysterical arguments, bottling up emotions and going into a (man/woman?) cave. What if we start acknowledging a problem? Denial of problems has never helped anyone in the world. If we are a part of a problem or the cause of a problem, it helps to:

Step 1) **Accept** that we have a problem at hand

$$S = P \times R$$

The above formula is **Suffering = Pain times Resistance**. This formula is attributed to Shinzen Young (dharma teacher, author of several Buddhist books and tapes, Young, 1994) (Source: [dhammawiki](#)). We will change P = Problem instead of pain because pain and problems are more or less the same. The enlightened person does not deny the existence of a problem. The goal is to not put any resistance to it. When we put resistance to the problem, that is the suffering. So acceptance is step 1.

Step 2) **Suffer** the problem (yes, contrary to the popular opinion, suffering from problems is helpful as it helps us understand our real emotions)

“Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate suffering”. — Carl Jung

Suffer! Feel angry, sad, pained, wronged and more. Suffer alone, suffer in silence, suffer with a friend, pour your heart out to a trusted one, but suffer. Escaping the suffering leads to more problems. Face the problems. Only and only then does it take you closer to the solution. A lot of people hear music, travel, hang out and do other things to escape the problems but ultimately are unable to rid themselves of the problem. A good amount of Suffering does help.

Step 3) **Question** the cause of the problem and go back step by step till the root of the problem is arrived at.

Once the cloud of emotions are lifted after suffering, and it will; trace back the problem to its root. In Zen, there is a practice called **Koan**, which invokes the great doubt in man. Let us talk a level below this. Let us talk Zen questioning. When in a problem, follow **Zen Questioning**.

“Question unconditionally without expecting anything. [Question the problem, the suffering, the pain]. Give yourself totally to the question. Zen questioning is like diving, which engages the whole body as you jump, not just the arms or legs. Then the whole body and mind are refreshed as you dive into the cool pool.”

Source: <http://www.dharmanet.org/>

At the end of the questions bloom the beautiful answer. No need to make any effort. Keep asking questions till you run out of questions.

Zen sounds fun and simple? Try practising it. I am a wannabe monk, but I apply Zen to everyday questions and problems and it gives me a sense of serenity.

