A professor of systematic instruction climbed the long trail to the mountaintop temple where Ilo-nil, a renowned Zen master, was holding retreat. Ushered into the master’s simple residence, the professor asked:

“Will you tell me the specific behavioral objectives you pursue as a Zen master, so that I can teach my student teachers what you have learned?”

“Yes,” Ilo-nil replied. “My objective is to have no objective, to seek no predicted behaviors, to meet no one’s evaluative criteria.”

At that moment tea was served and the master began the precise, time-honored ritual, allowing the confused professor to regain his composure.

“However,” he said to Ilo-nil finally, “we can express this as a behavioral objective because you seek a state of...”

“Nothingness, no-thing-ness, a state without intention of any kind, without effort in any direction, without observable behavior of any description, without accomplishing even the tremor of an eyelid.”

The professor’s confusion bred anger.

“But how can you achieve anything if you do not pursue achievement?”

“Ah,” replied Ilo-nil, “how can you be fulfilled if you are always in pursuit of achievements which fulfill no one?”

“But I am fulfilled when I reach my objective.”

“And what does one do when an objective is achieved?”

“That’s easy. You start working toward the next.”

“How brief, then, the moment of fulfillment must be. And even then so drained by anticipation that always another objective must be pursued.”

“This is ridiculous,” the professor cried in frustration. “How can I make sense of an objective with no objective, and achievements with no achievement?”

Then he stopped in amazement as Ilo-nil carefully poured tea into his cup until it was full, and still kept on pouring until the steaming liquid spilled over the brim, flooded the table, and ran onto the floor.

“How,” said Ilo-nil quietly, “can the cup of one’s mind receive any learning when it is so full of predictable objectives and achievements?”

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A Mountaintop Mentality*

by W. James Popham

A wandering educational evaluator, out of breath from climbing the long trail to Ilo-nil’s retreat, entered the temple and quickly surveyed the scene. Sighing almost imperceptibly, he removed a roll of paper toweling from his tunic and knelt to wipe up the spilt tea.

“Ilo-nil,” he said, looking sadly at the master, “I am becoming tired of cleaning up the mess made by you and your mystical disciplines.”

“What do you mean?” Ilo-nil retorted. “Is it not the role of evaluators to judge and improve the situations they encounter?”

“That is true,” the evaluator commented after wiping up the last vestige of Nestea from the floor. “But there are so many educational situations that by their very nature demand improvement. It is unfortunate that time must be wasted by educators in dealing with the results of well-intentioned but fuzzy thinking from mountaintop gurus.”

“What do you mean, ‘fuzzy thinking’?” Ilo-nil’s cheeks colored discernibly as he glared at the evaluator. “I was merely pointing out the educational shortcomings of specific objectives and predictable achievements.”

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