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The Zen Of Safety

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The practice of Zen is to bring one totally into the present moment. This is also a continual theme in safety: keeping one's attention on what one is doing. Perhaps this is where similarities end but maybe not.

One school of Zen uses "koans" or sayings that are meant to bring a person out of mental constructs. The most famous of these is the koan: "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" Of course, there is no answer but one wry answer tells you that it is getting cuffed in the head by the hand. And there is some truth to that.

If your attention is wandering, you are daydreaming or simply not paying attention to what you are doing you can easily get injured. The injury is the sound of that one hand clapping. It is a rude awakening and certainly has the effect of bringing you back to the present moment. The pain is a reminder for a while and the story of what happened is a larger reminder for everyone else at the work place.

Some of the most serious injuries in industry involved a moment of inattention. After the fact, the person usually cannot believe they did it. After the fact it is too late. So, how do we stay present?

The best advice that anybody has had on the subject recently is to build in "safety moments" into your day. Clearly we must do this at the beginning of every new task. Research has shown that taking four seconds before performing a task and doing a mini hazard assessment can reduce your chances of injury by more than 90% versus not taking the four seconds. Look around. Who is working in the area? Is the area clear? Do you have the right tools? What are the conditions around you?

Also, as we proceed with the job, watch for any changing conditions and see if they are going to affect you. Think of these changing conditions as that silent hand that wants to smack you. The "hand" can only strike you if you ignore it and change is

one thing you can count on at work. Has someone started operating tools or equipment in your area? Is there a strange smell that could come from equipment or processes in your area? And ask how the change is going to affect you. It is your ability to recognize the change for what it is and deal with it that will keep you safe.

The sound of one hand clapping is, in many ways, your personal safety program. And though you may not practice Zen, you cannot ignore the "safety moments" you should be taking at work.

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