

Zen Typography

10 steps to typographic enlightenment

In the original Zen story (*Searching for the Bull*), the bull is the eternal principle of life, truth in action. The ten steps represent the realization of one's true nature. In this story, the ten steps represent the realization of one's skill as a typographer. The struggle to harmonize the physical forms of type is related to the struggle of learning how to visually communicate, and how to trust one's design decisions.

1 : the search for good typography

What is "good" typography anyway? And who cares about leading?

The student has started her search. She doesn't know what "good" typography is, but wishes to find it, though she's not sure she'll recognize it when she finds it. Sometimes she experiments with the search as an escape from her present circumstances, that in general are not pleasant. Learning to use type is a lot of work, and (she thinks) surely there must be a better way of doing this!

2 : finding the path to good typography

I don't know if this is "good," but I like it. I wonder what my teacher thinks?

At this stage, the student finds clues in one or more typographic traditions. She looks at books, magazines, websites. She learns about the "masters" of typography, and notices that there are others who have followed the same path... she is not the first person to have noticed there is something subtle to attain.

She's not sure what "good" typography is yet, but experiences the pleasure of looking for it. In the first step, the student blindly tries to understand what "good" typography is, whereas in the second step her search is more focused and better oriented.

3 : the first glimpse of good typography

Hey! That's good!

This is the first experience of seeing and recognizing "good" typography. The student sees for the first time (without someone telling her) typography she trusts as "good." She feels the pleasure of looking at "good" typography created by others, as well as pride in her ability to recognize it as "good." The experience gives the student insight into how to use type, and the student's objective becomes to elevate her own typographic skill, often following the style of typography she recognizes as "good."

4 : trying to create "good" typography

I know what "good" typography is (and am clear about what's not "good" too...). Why can't I make MY type look good? What's wrong? Maybe I should use the same font and grid that worked for my last project...

The student has recognized "good" typography, and now tries to create it herself. But the type is stubborn and does not do what she wants it too. She finally knows what she wants to do, but it seems obstinate and uncontrolled. When she tries to do something new (her own ideas), her layouts lack tension and/or rhythm. Type is clunky or cliché. Rags and widows and rivers drive her crazy. The text lacks hierarchy, contrast, or direction. It just feels like something is wrong.

She spends hours moving boxes of text back and forth, and can't seem to solve the problems. She finds she is better at creating "good" typography if she follows the rules exactly as taught by a certain teacher, or if she "copies" the style of a typographer she admires. Or if she uses the same grid/layout she's used before.

This step symbolizes our struggle with text/content and our ability to manage it... a struggle that can last a whole lifetime. At this stage the student must analyze if she is advancing and attaining a clearer understanding of how to use type, or if she is simply stuck and protecting herself behind certain styles or ideas about typography.

5 : controlling typography

I understand how type works. When I look at my type and it isn't right, I can identify what's wrong and brainstorm ways to fix it.

The student learns to control text. She does this by knowing it... listening and dialoging with it. Understanding how letters and typefaces behave. The student now controls the typography to the extent it lets itself be guided. Little by little the student becomes the master. What she does at this stage is unite her knowledge of how letters and typefaces behave with her knowledge of what she needs them to do. A "good" typographer knows that you cannot force letters or typefaces or grids to do what they cannot do. This is why many of the best typographers do not try to conquer, dominate, destroy or eliminate the typeface, rather they live in harmony with it.

6 : trusting typographic skill

I can predict possible typographic problems and avoid them before they even happen. The type often just "falls into place."

The student must nurture the typographic part of her being. She learns to trust her skill without abusing nor relaxing her ability to critique her typography. Both her trust in herself and her trust in type become her allies. The student does not force the type. It knows where to go and that's where it goes without being directed. The struggle is over, the student has attained the state of enlightenment.

7 : transcendence (one with typography)

I struggle with external influences (what will others think about what I've done? will I be criticized? will I be seen as innovative and creative?) but occasionally reach true transcendence... where I become one with the content and the typography, rather than reacting to hopes and fears.

The typographer is happy, sketching her ideas, "good" typography is no longer an issue. The student has become one with typography. She no longer struggles with trying to create "good" typography, a state of peace and happiness reigns.

Transcendence is a recurring or temporal experience. It is an exceptional state of conscience. When we are not one with the typography, we experience the conflicts between "good" typography and our human nature to react to external influences: style, critics, success, failure, fear, etc. Transcendence implies a unity with the content and the typography used to communicate the content... rather than reaction.

8 : typographer and typography transcend and fuse

There is no "good" and "bad." Typography just is.

The typographer and typography have fused, and all external influences have disappeared. At this stage the typographer can't even say "I'm a 'good' typographer" or "I'm not a 'good' typographer." "Good" and "bad" typography don't exist for her, only typography itself.

9 : back in the real world

All type is beautiful.

Outside the typographer, nothing has changed, only she has been transformed. She reenters everyday life with different eyes for type. Her love and skill as a typographer guide her and inspire her. Each time she wants to, she can go within herself and become one with typography. All is in peace.

10 : in the world of typography

Teaching others to see, love, and trust type.

The typographer doesn't want to leave her state of enlightenment. She wants to lose herself in her love of, and confidence in type. But she realizes she must return to the real world, and directs herself to helping others learn. She puts all her wisdom at their service, and hopes to relieve some of their pain.