

The Professor and I

In November 2006, I made a trip to Switzerland to be trained on a personality test that has been in use for more than 50 years now but somehow is unheard of in Singapore. I ended up learning much more, about how to live in harmony. Here is my story.

He has no calling card or a hand phone and he uses a dial-up internet connection.

At 24, as a fresh university graduate, he had already delivered a paper during the first international congress of psychologists after World War II. At 26, he completed his PhD in psychology, psychiatry and philosophy, summa cum laude. By 33 he was already a Professor. He also practised as a psycho-therapist, treating celebrities, executives and non-celebrities alike as well as professionals including fellow psychologists, psychiatrists and coaches. He has written 29 books including best-sellers, with more than 500,000 copies sold and one translated into 29 languages. He wrote a best-seller, "Colours of Love" within two days.

Over the last 55 years he has been the world's No. 1 authority in using colour for diagnosing personalities as well as for branding and packaging.

His name is Prof. Dr Max Luscher, now 83 years old, and I was one of the very few as well as the first Asian to be trained 1-to-1 by him on his colour diagnostic system.

When we finally met in Locarno, Switzerland where he stays during the winter, I exclaimed how it was an honour and a privilege for me to meet and be trained by such a distinguished professor. We shook hands enthusiastically and then he gave me a box of Swiss chocolates as a present. I mentally cursed myself for not bringing a souvenir from Singapore, in my rush to make the trip.

The first thing we did after leaving my downtown hotel was to drive to Ascona, fronting Lake Maggiore, for lunch. It was a sunny day. The temperature then was a cool 20 degrees. As he drove he lent me his pair of sunglasses. "Ning, see how beautiful the world is". And yes, the sights really looked different because his shades were tinted with a reddish colour. I was thinking to myself, "Professor is giving me the first lesson: Your relationship to everyone and everything around you is shaped by how you see them—if you are open, they are open, if you dislike them they dislike you."

Over an al fresco meal of veal scaloppini al limone and a glass of beer, he told me stories of how parts of his most famous work, the colour diagnostic test, had been imitated, photocopied and posted in the internet. I expressed shock and asked him "Didn't you feel angry by all these inaccuracies and wouldn't these have resulted in a wrong diagnosis and therapy? Why don't you sue those plagiarists and imitators?" The professor, wise in his old age as he was even in youth, shrugged and gave me one of his favorite expressions, borrowed from Walter Cronkite: "That's the way it is".

It was only later that I learned his story of the seagulls. When you feed bread to the seagulls, each competes with one another. Even if one seagull already has it, another will still try to take it away. If the latter is successful, the seagull victim would screech and try to retrieve the stolen food. However, if the victim is unsuccessful, he returns to the original circle and waits for the next piece of bread to be thrown and hopefully he can catch it.

The second lesson Professor taught me was: Look at the seagull. He gets offended at the moment he is victimised. But soon, that is in the past and there is no desire by the victimised seagull to seek revenge. It concentrates its attention on the next piece of bread to be thrown. It just moves on. Life is too short to have to harbour angry thoughts. Instead, we should focus on the next experience where we can achieve maximum performance. That's the way it is.

So within the first two hours of my meeting the Professor, I had already learned two valuable lessons.

His house was on a hill, about 20 minutes away by bus from where I was staying. During my visit, he would wait for me every morning at the bus stop nearest his house, and over coffee, lunch, dinner and snacks (some of which he made himself) we would go through the test interpretation manual. He would also tell me stories and test my understanding of the human psyche.

It was his own obsession with understanding the human psyche that led him to develop the colour test in the 1940's. Most people had the mistaken idea that he developed the colour test first and then arrived at his theory of self-regulating psychology, which he calls "the inner harmony in us".

In his view, the entire universe is governed by a bipolar harmony of positive and negative. Just as the universe is self-regulatory, with epochs of creation and destruction and with positive and negative forces, so too is the human being. It is not only our physical organs that work in harmony when we are healthy.

Our minds and feelings as well are governed by an inner harmony, which some of us call conscience. When this inner harmony is agitated, its equilibrium is lost and the result is attitude and behavior that disturb the harmony, first in our body, then in our immediate surroundings, including people close to us and eventually the rest of the world, in a rapid chain reaction.

He was only 18 when he started researching on a system that would illustrate his theory of self-regulating psychology into a personality test. The test eventually became known as the Luscher Colour Diagnostic Test. Consisting primarily of different colours, the test is unique in contrast to most word-based tests.

How can one's colour preferences tell his personal capacities, emotional state and psychosomatic behaviour? According to the Professor, colours have two interpretations: a universal, absolute meaning and an individual, subjective meaning.

If you give a person a card showing red and another showing blue, only a colour-blind, an idiot or a prankster would declare that the first is blue and the second, red. Furthermore, if you ask which of the two cards makes one feel excited and stimulated and which card makes one feel calm and contented, the answers will be unanimous.

This is what is meant by a universal, absolute meaning. So blue, red, yellow, green, etc have universal meanings regardless of the country, age, gender or culture of the respondent.

On the other hand, you may like yellow and dislike black but another person would have the opposite choice. Which colours you like or dislike are specific to you and for totally subjective reasons. No one can disagree with your ranking because it is your personal choice and not the absolute truth.

Thus, since each colour has an absolute as well as a subjective meaning, how you rank colours in the diagnostic test can lead a qualified interpreter to diagnose you very quickly and validly.

He then introduced bipolar phrases like receptive-directive, constant-variable and integrative-separative and a cube called the Luscher cube. As he showed me the diagrams on his computer, my headache worsened. I have never taken a class in psychology nor have I read any psychology book in full.

My eyes and ears woke up again when he gave me an example. "A person can be very successful. He works hard, exceeds his sales quota, spends a lot of time at the office, and claims he is very tired. So what would be our recommendation, tell him he deserves a break and let him go on a vacation?"

Once we apply his colour test results to the cube, we discover that he feels alienated from his spouse and children, and that he is stubborn and dogmatic. His real problem is not that he works too hard. He works hard to escape from a family environment he considers unbearable. So, the appropriate therapy is marital and family counseling. Unless that is followed, his tiredness from work will not disappear."

He gave me another example, of how a German coach changed his motivational tactics and the team started winning games. Previously, the coach would cheer them up: "We are going to win this game. We are going to win this game." But that tactic didn't work because the message sent the opposite signal among the players: "I doubt that we can win this game". This doubt was in their subconscious and consequently they lost.

They started winning only after the coach consulted the Professor and, with the aid of the Luscher cube, the message became: "We will enjoy this game to the maximum." The counter-message that "we will not enjoy this game" was weaker than the primary message. By enjoying the game fully, the team played well and went to win more and more games.

After returning to my hotel, I held the Luscher cube which he had given me as a gift. I tried applying my own test results to the cube. I realised that my own inner conflicts and anxieties and compensatory behaviour could be seen in the lines that crisscrossed corners of the cube. The cube was truly powerful.

We went through much technical stuff about his diagnostic system but the times I remember vividly were when he was testing me. From time to time while we would be driving or walking in town, even in 3-degree weather, he would preface our conversation with "I have a task for you".

I learned quickly that this meant he was going to give me an oral test. Sometimes I got it right and at other times I got it wrong. His voice would rise by a few decibels, and then get back to normal as he chided me: "Ning, your answer is for a situation two seconds ahead of my question. Do not think of the future, for now. Concentrate on your ego-state at this

very second.” I felt like the boy-monk, Grasshopper, being admonished by his Master in the 70’s TV series, “Kung Fu”.

Another time as I was about to swallow a spoonful of risotto during dinner, he asked me: “I have a task for you. Glance at the person sitting alone three tables away from us. Now tell me, at this very moment, what is his dominant colour preference? Is he receptive or directive? Is he constant or variable? Is he integrative or separative?” Although all my answers were correct, I found it hard to eat after that because I was nervous about being tested again during dinner.

Back at his home, he would show me faces of ordinary people and celebrities in his computer. “I have a task for you. Look at these images and tell me their ego-states.” Here we go again and the glass of water that he brought me remained unconsumed until I was about to leave for the night. At that moment I felt like a 10-year-old. For a while I thought of asking permission to go to the toilet and stay there for a long time (just like what many kids do when their tutor in Chinese comes) except I was in Professor’s house and he was not going to leave when the tutoring time was up.

Every day he would tease me about whether I had visited the casino, which was only 10 minutes’ walk from my hotel. Having survived 3 days and nights in Las Vegas without betting a single coin, I replied that I have better ways of spending my time but if he wished, I would visit the town casino so I can tell him the following day what I saw. At this he laughed but did not take up my offer.

He told me that once he had been to a casino and he had lost everything in his pocket—25 cents! After that he declared he would never visit one again. But I replied that Singapore is building Integrated Resorts and if a congress of psychologists is held there, then maybe he has no choice except enter the casino.

Once I asked him: “What did you have to give up for this week that you have devoted totally to me?” He laughed and replied, jokingly: “I could have written another (30Pth P) book”. I realised then how much the Professor was investing in me.

During dinner on our last day together, I asked him what he expected of me, as his first Asian student. I had promised to be his “evangelist” in Asia and to train others on how to use the Luscher system. Was there any chance of his visiting Asia? He replied that this was highly unlikely at his age.

His advice was: “The colour test is only a means to an end. I would be happy if more people understand and accept the self-regulating psychology, the law of harmony within us”. Indirectly, what I heard him say between the lines was: “ I will not judge your success by how many colour tests you buy from me but by, first, how your own life and that of your immediate family have changed, and then by how people in your region accept and follow what I have taught you.”

He did not charge me for the one-week session. However, I knew I would have to pay for it for the rest of my life by practising what he taught me.

When it was time to part, he gave me a fatherly hug and a prediction and a tease: “I will see you again” and “The casino is just around the corner.”

That last sentence continued to intrigue me until a week later when I was back in Singapore. Surely the Professor had a hidden message, a la da Vinci Code. And then I had my *eureka* moment.

By continually bringing up the subject of the casino, the Professor was telling me to balance my seriousness with a dose of light playfulness. So this was the third and final lesson from that memorable trip. It's all about balance, about equilibrium, about inner harmony. And that's the way it is!

Thank you, Professor, I finally got it.

By Ning de Guzman, 12 December 2006

