

Collective Views of the Workings and Significance of Experiences in the “Zone” from the Standpoint of “*Kansei*”

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Abstract

The ideal psychological realm that brings forth the best performance in sports is called “the zone.” Top athletes describe it as “the consciousness that exists within the unconsciousness,” a place where their state of mind is empty and their motion automated. In addition, various extraordinary experiences have been reported from the zone. States of mind become intuitive, and information processing capabilities at the unconscious level become optimized. People experience altered perceptions of time and space; they feel unified and fused with objects; they feel as if they were flowing and floating; they recognize their alter ego; they hear their internal voice, and they see a light.

These transcendent experiences in the zone can be explained from the standpoint of “*Kansei*,” based on Carl Jung’s theory. Basically, the “zone” is another dimension which athletes can enter when their “*Kansei*” becomes transparent and sharpened and their consciousness stretches out to the realm of the collective unconsciousness.

It is thought that the psychological “cocktail party” phenomenon can occur in the zone, and neuroscientists believe that α waves can appear there. Examining the zone experience using Maslow’s self-actualization theory and Suzuki Daisetsu’s Zen viewpoint suggests that it is the experience of attaining self-actualization by fusing the egoistic and altruistic aspects of the self and triggering a spiritual awakening. The zone experience is an inspirational and spiritual experience concerning love, harmony and beauty, and it can contribute to the wellness and happiness of humankind.

Introduction and Objectives

Some athletes experience events such as “seeing balls as if they were still,” “seeing a counterpart in slow motion,” and “not hearing anything other than cheering.” (Shiki 2011). A well-known episode is that of the Olympic gold medal marathon runner who recalled the timing of a sprint by saying, “I heard a heavenly voice” in an interview after the qualifying race (Shiki 2011).

These spiritual experiences are called the “zone experience.” The “zone” is an ideal psychological realm that enables

people who play sports to bring forth their best performance. In sports psychology, it is a realm in which the tension of maintaining high concentration and relaxation are well-balanced (Ueda 2000). The “zone experience” is truly extraordinary.

Michael Murphy and Rhea A. White view the zone as “the psychological space in which one makes one’s own motion look like a superhuman ability” and have collected zone experiences and described supernatural powers and inspirational events in sports that are unexplained by traditional science (Murphy and White 1984).

Meanwhile, “the experiences in the zone are essentially the same with the so-called “flow experiences”, says Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, an advocate of the “flow,” who also states in his book co-written with Susan Jackson that flow is “a state of consciousness in which people are totally engaged in their own actions as other thoughts and emotions disappear” and that “it is something to do with concentration” (Jackson and Csikszentmihalyi 1999).

They mention that they have seen how the performances of those who have experienced the zone have encouraged and inspired not only themselves but also their audiences and that those who have experienced flow have been made happy through it (Csikszentmihalyi 1990). Furthermore, Meinel reports that experiences of pure *Kansei* enrich us, inspire us, leave an impression in our hearts; such experiences can eventually change, transform, and educate us (Meinel, Kaneko, and Yoshida 1998). Therefore, the zone experience is seen as having a positive influence. Thus, shedding light on the zone experience should contribute to happiness.

Hence, in this study, I would like to present the views of some top athletes about the zone experience from the perspective of “*Kansei*” (which generally means “sensitivity”).

Related Work

First, I would like to shed some light on what “*Kansei*” is. The word originated from the Greek Aristotelian term “*aisthesis*” which translates as “sensibilité” in French, “sinn-

lichkeit” in German, and “sensibility” or “sensitivity” in English depending on the situation. However, the meaning of the word *Kansei* varies from one user to the next; it has multiple definitions, academic and otherwise. In addition, many believe that *Kansei* contains subtle nuances that cannot be conveyed otherwise; thus, the word has been adopted as “KANSEI” in the relevant research fields (Nagasawa 1999).

According to interviews with professionals and students in various fields, including top athletes, using questionnaires and other forms of bibliographic surveys, “*Kansei*” can be expressed in various ways such as “sensitivity,” “empathy,” “aesthetics,” “afflatus,” “inspiration,” “sixth sense,” and “sense,” etc (Shiki 2003). The meanings of “*Kansei*” and their commonalities are listed in figures 1 and 2.

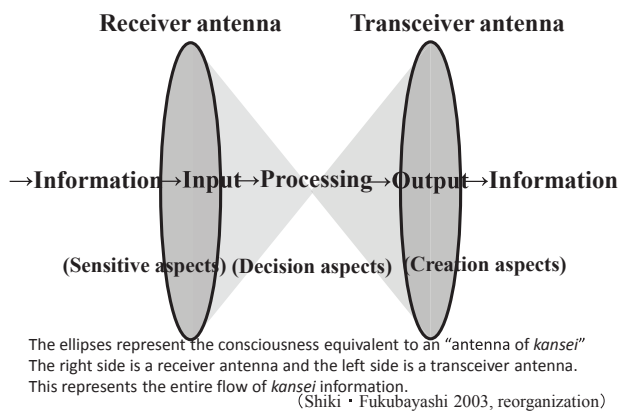


Figure 1 Structure of “*Kansei*”

The circle represents the consciousness. The central circle shows that the realm of consciousness is limited within the five senses. The outside circle shows that the consciousness is spreading toward the realm of the sixth sense.

- ①sight
- ②hearing
- ③touch
- ④taste
- ⑤smell
- ⑥sixth sense

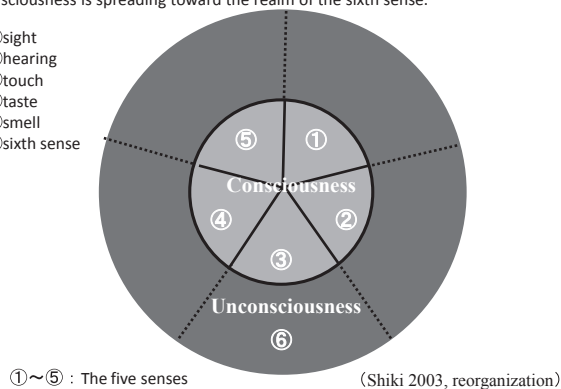


Figure 2 The relationship between the five senses and the sixth sense

What follows is a definition of “*Kansei*” based on the current research results.

We find that “*Kansei*” is an inner sense organ that unconsciously and instantly operates information processes such as receiving, assimilating, and outputting information that cannot be recognized by the normal operation of the five senses (see Figure 1). The term *Kansei* involves both the physical and mental inner senses of “aesthetics” and includes the sharpening of the five (or six) senses in its broad meaning (see Figure 2). It has two receiver and transceiver antennae, and comprises sensitivity, decisions, and creation in its structure. The main factors are sensitivity, imagination, and creativity. It also relates to aesthetics, sense, instinct, soul, talent, and personality, serving as the basis for individuality and ethics. This ideal function brings forth optimum situations—the best performance, inspiration, a sense of unity, and the actualization of love and harmony—by integrating consciousness and unconsciousness.

Research methods

I conducted research on the way “*Kansei*” occurs in sports events and examined its condition when best performances were produced by targeting top current and former athletes between 1999 to 2001 and 2005 to 2011. The research targets are sixty-three athletes, including thirty-eight males and twenty-five females in their late twenties to mid-fifties from twenty-two sports fields (such as soccer, baseball, rugby, badminton, American football, tennis, track and field swimming, shooting, gymnastics, ski, *kendo*, and *judo*). They are among the top-level players in the world or Japan, mostly major leaguers, Olympic medalists, world champions, Japanese national team members, and champions of student competitions.

Results

There is a sense of unity in the examined zone experiences, for example, a player who achieved a world record, said “I was one with everything around me.” There is also an altered perception of time, for example the world home-run record holder who said, “I saw the stitching of the ball” (Shiki 2008). These features are illustrated in Table 1.

Discussion

An examination of the characteristics of the zone experience

Let us examine the main categorized features from the standpoint of “*Kansei*.”

The phrase the “alteration of the five senses” signifies that only necessary information is selectively inputted in order to produce the best performance. Many examples of the “unconsciousness” and the “automation of actions” have been collected, and it is assumed that the sensory input and output of information is unconsciously controlled. Informat

ion processing, from receipt to output (as shown in Figure 1), is believed to instantly operate to output through physical expression without going through a player's thought or mind. The fact that "the athlete cannot hear the surrounding sounds even though they are in fact audible" is the so-called "cocktail party phenomenon," "selective listening," and "selective attention;" this "selective attention" obviously occurs through various senses (Shiki 2011).

The expression "the batting body" instead of "the batting eye," commonly used by baseball players, expresses the player's sense that it is not his eyes but his body that is nailing down the ball; this is an actual example of "the holistic effect" (Shiki 2008).

	The Main Features	Details
1	Intuition	Inspiration/ Visual images
2	Alteration of Five Senses	Obtuseness of Visual and Hearing Senses/ Sensitivity of Visual and Tactile Senses/ Sensitivity of Time Sensation/ Silence/ Aponia/ Selective Attention
3	Unconsciousness	Unconscious Movement/ Empty Mind/ The State of Muga (egolessness) or Enlightenment
4	Sense of Unity and Fusion	Oneness of Mind and Body/ A Sense of Unity with Teammates/ A Sense of Unity and Fusion with Tools and Equipment/ Fusion with Music/ Oneness with the audience/Oneness with all Beings/ Coinciding of Image and Reality
5	Recognition of Guidance	Physical Guidance/ Guidance by an Orbit/ Guidance by Illumination and Brightness
6	Inner World	Conversation with Alter Ego/ Communication with Instructors and Teammates/ Recognition of Inner Voice and Conversation with Inner Voice/ Recognition of Inner Being
7	Automation of	Movement without Thought/ Natural Movement/ Natural Self
8	Alteration of Time and Space	Alteration in Time Perception/ Slow Motion/ Alteration of Size
9	Positive Sense and Feeling	A Sense of Control/ A Feeling that Everything is in Favor/ Can-Do Attitude/ Peak-Experience
10	Other Force	Positive Influence of the Cheers of the Audience/ Positive Influence of Family's Support
11	Foresight and Prediction	Sensation of Crisis Ahead/ Visual Image
12	Natural Flow	Fluidity/ Natural Self/ Smoothness
13	Holistic Sense	Panorama/ Perception through the Body/ Alter Ego/ Objective View
14	Qi or Life Energy, Wave and Aura	Inference(feeling "qi")/ Sense of Wave
15	Clearness	Clearness of Mind and Body/ Clearness of the Surroundings
16	Flip of a Switch	Switch of Mind
17	Closed World	In One's Own World
18	High Concentration	Transcendence of Five Senses
19	Altruistic Spirit	Altruistic Feeling for Teammates
20	Sense of being Wrapped	Protective Coat/ Full-Body Suit to Support Body/Capsule
21	Energy	Outputting an Aura/ Sense of Transmitting the Force
22	Lightness	Weightlessness
23	Calmness and Excitation or	Calmness and Excitation/ Calmness and Tension
24	Recognition of	Brightness/ Illumination/ Light
25	Harmony	Harmony of Mind and Body
26	Sense of Floating	Feeling of Floating
27	Detachment	Detachment from Victory/ So-What Attitude
28	Playback of Memory	Flashback or Memory of Whole Life

Table 1 Main features and details of the zone experience

Another baseball player thought of *Kansei* as the "five senses and the sixth sense" (Shiki 2008); Figure 2 shows the relationship between the five senses and the sixth. Figures ① to ⑤ represent the ordinal five senses and ⑥ corresponds to "the sharpened five senses" and "the sixth

sense," which surpasses the level of the ordinal five senses. Accordingly, *Kansei* is an internal sense that resides in both mind and body, where both are believed to be linked through "qi" or "life energy" uniting body and mind (Yuasa 1994). The research suggests that athletes, especially those in match-up sports, recognize "life energy" and utilize its effect. The phrase "batting body" is presumed to express the realm of ⑥ as opposed to the general realm of ① that athletes tend to use, which is a purely visual sense. As the realm of ⑥ corresponds to the consciousness that functions as the antenna of *Kansei*, athletes who utilize ⑥ naturally obtain more input information (i.e., *Kansei* information) than those who use only ①, "the batting eye," leading to the ability to nail down a ball.

The "holistic effect" includes the "the panoramic sense" that enables athletes to capture all of the players on a pitch as if viewing through a TV camera. Furthermore, the "alter ego" that many athletes say makes them feel as if they are looking at themselves from above suggests the ability to see events from a third-person perspective and perceive an objective ability. The zone experience is thus believed to possess an objective dimension.

Following Jung's theory (Jung 1959), Figure 3 shows how athletes enter the zone (Shiki and Fukubayashi 2001). When athletes are in an ordinary state of mind, their consciousness, functioning as an antenna, lies in ①. When they enhance their concentration and become unconscious, they move toward the "collective unconsciousness" where every living being is connected while passing through the "individual unconsciousness." It is thought that the closer the condition of consciousness moves toward ③, the stronger the "sense of unification and fusion" becomes through harmonizing with the surroundings and losing the sense of distinction between oneself and others. The term "foresight and prediction" is presumed to be related to the "collective unconsciousness." An "empty mind" is believed to be experienced in the movement from ② to ③, and a state of *muga*, or "enlightenment," is thought to be sensed in ③.

As seen above, the condition of consciousness that athletes described as a "consciousness that exists within unconsciousness" is equivalent to an "empty mind." Suzuki Daisetsu states, "there is no way of describing the state of mind other than a dazzling paradox of 'being unconsciously conscious'" (Suzuki 1964). Suzuki describes the empty mind: "an empty mind can be regarded as a concept of 'unconsciousness' at some point. Psychologically speaking, this state of mind is absolutely passive and a mind is generously entrusted to an 'other force'. At this point, a human becomes an automaton as far as consciousness" (Suzuki 1964). What he describes is in accord with the condition in which the motion of the empty-minded athlete is automated and subject to another force. It is assumed that the $F_m \theta$ (theta) waves can appear in the athlete's brain, just as in the brain of a meditating priest of the Soto Buddhist sect (Shiki 2008).

The closer it gets to ③, where the distinction between self and others disappears, the stronger an “other force” seems to be sensed. The “outputting energy” should be at its strongest in the ③ condition. Just as some athletes manifest an “altruistic spirit” toward their teammates and equipment, it is thought that those who experience the zone go through a self-actualization that Maslow describes as being “actualized through fusing the egoistic and altruistic aspects” (Maslow 1973)

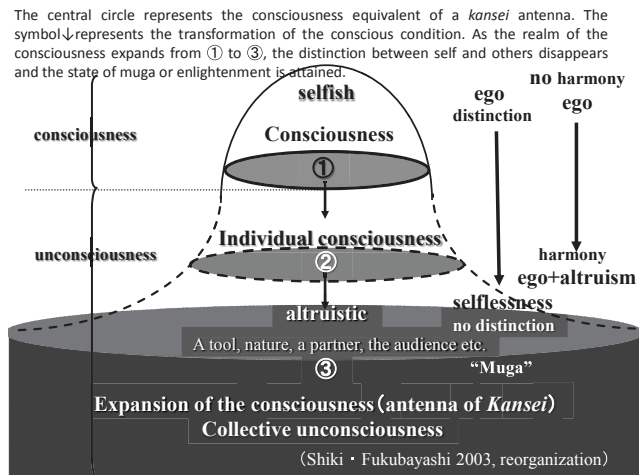


Figure 3 Structure of how to enter the zone

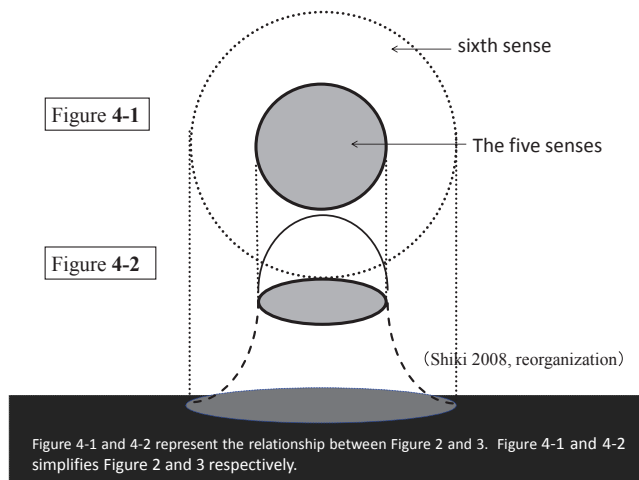


Figure 4 The relationship between Figures 2 & 3

The consciousness is aware of the physical world when in ① but is believed to be moving toward another dimension as it transforms from ① to ③. The “alteration of time and space” and a “floating feeling” embody the athletes’ awareness of another dimension.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between figures 2 and 3. The athletes who communicate in the “closed inner world” sense *qi*, or the “life energy,” described as a “wave motion,” an “inner voice,” an “inner being,” an “aura,” a “light,” a

“brightness,” a “transparent rail,” or an “orbit.” These phenomena cannot be sensed through the ordinary five senses but only by the sharpened five senses and the sixth sense while the athlete is in the realm of ⑥ as shown in Figure 2 and in the movement from ① to ③ as in Figure 3. The “*qi*” or “life energy” is apparently gradually perceived as a white haze through training (Yuasa 1994). It is thus a “guide,” experienced as a “white line” or a “white hollow.” These phenomena help guide the athletes towards their best performance.

A “sense of clearness” represents a life energy of body and mind that is pure and clean. As a result, the athletes felt lighter than normal. It is also thought that a “sense of weightlessness” and a “feeling of floating” are sensed because the consciousness of the athletes lies in another dimension and their physical weight cannot be felt.

There is a theory that *qi* is a kind of energy of which not only humans but all living beings are composed of (Yuasa 1994); another theory posits the human aura as an “energy field” (Brennan 1987). Therefore, the experiences of “being fused with the surrounding nature” and a “feeling of unity and fusion” represent not only a simple sense of unity but also an energy level. For example, “a feeling of unity” experienced by synchronized swimmers epitomizes this energy field; this was expressed as an “aura” fused with the surrounding energy field.

The phase “natural flow” describes how the energy field of the athletes merges into other energy field so that they flow together. It also shows that the processes of ①, ②, and ③ are each distinct and flow smoothly. It is believed that “detachment,” in which athletes lose an attachment to victory or to the record they will achieve, occurs through the change of consciousness from ① to ③ and through the value transformation from the physical dimension to another level.

They become intuitive and gain inspiration because they are unconditionally able to access the “inner knowledge” accumulated in the collective unconsciousness by stopping the flow of their thoughts. The process of “memory recall” is thought to happen when the conscious condition goes through individual unconsciousness by changing the condition from ① to ③.

In their “feeling of being wrapped,” expressed as a “protective coat” or a “full-body suit”, athletes may have sensed a layer close to their skin formed by an energy field that is generally believed to have seven layers.

As for their “awareness of the light and brightness” that leads athletes to victory, it is possible that athletes sensed the presence of an archetype by enhancing their mentalities (Jung 1981).

Suzuki states, “If you wish to reach a true entity for grasping the secret of artistic and religious activities, you have to share a sense of the ‘universal unconsciousness.’ The ‘universal unconsciousness’ is the principle of creativity, God’s workplace and where the dynamic force of the universe

is stored” (Suzuki 1964). The point is clearer if we replace the “universal unconsciousness” with the “collective unconsciousness.”

Nature and significance of the zone

Suzuki says, “Spirituality functions in the depths of our mind. You can say that once it is awakened, the secondary nature of the mind is resolved and our mind is able to sense, think, have a will, and take action based on the true entity” (Suzuki 1972). Since the zone experiences are believed to be related to the collective unconsciousness, it is assumed that the deep realms of the mind are involved. That is to say, the zone is an experience that awakens a spirituality functioning in the depths of our minds.

Athletes who enter the zone experience are overjoyed and are filled with positive feelings. Upon entering the zone, they are detached from their records and their victories, demonstrating that their sense of value has been transformed from the physical world into another dimension.

Suzuki mentions that another world opens behind the mental and physical worlds (which many people regard as being in conflict) once “spirituality” is awakened (Suzuki 1964). This “other world” can be considered the zone.

The structure of sensation and a sense of unity

Figure 5 presents two parallels for the item in Figure 3, showing how a sense of unity is formed between two athletes, A and B. When both consciousnesses approach the realm of the collective unconsciousness, from ① to ③, a “sense of unity” is “shared” by them and strengthened through this realm. This “sense of unity” can be formed not only among athletes but also between the athletes and the audience, when the athletes enter the zone and the audience cheers for them.

It is believed that a “positive sense and feeling,” experienced as a sense of control that “everything including water, the referee, and the audience was in favor of me,” increases when the condition of the athlete’s consciousness approaches ③. Then, “harmony” and a “sense of unity” is believed to be experienced through the collective unconsciousness. The precondition for these relationships with all things is the athlete’s love towards another.

The “formation of a sense of unity” is equivalent to the “formation of a sensation.”

Taking A as the mind of an athlete and B as that of the audience, when A enters the zone, the “inner knowledge” (felt as “inspiration” and “intuition”) accumulated in the collective unconsciousness is elevated to the conscious level and occurs so that the “unconsciousness [is] transformed into the consciousness” and outputted through physical expression. At the same time, this enables B to sense the *Kansei* information that cannot be recognized through the five senses in the unconscious realm while receiving clues from the physical expressions that can be sensed through the five senses in the physical world. This is the “consciousness transformed into the unconsciousness.” This “*Kansei* information

is” is what athletes who function as mediators process as the “inner knowledge” with their *Kansei*. In other words, “the inner knowledge” in the unconscious world is “translated” into forms that ordinary people can recognize in the physical world. The “consciousness transformed into the unconsciousness” for B is equivalent to a “sensation.” A sensation is formed in the condition where both the “consciousness transformed into the unconsciousness” and the “unconsciousness transformed into the consciousness” exist together. In all this combination of “the consciousness transformed into the unconsciousness” and the “unconsciousness transformed into the consciousness” the workings of the *Kansei* force.” What follows is a definition of the *Kansei* force.

Figure 5 has duplicated Figure 3 side-by-side, and A and B represent the conscious condition among teammates and between athletes and the audience.

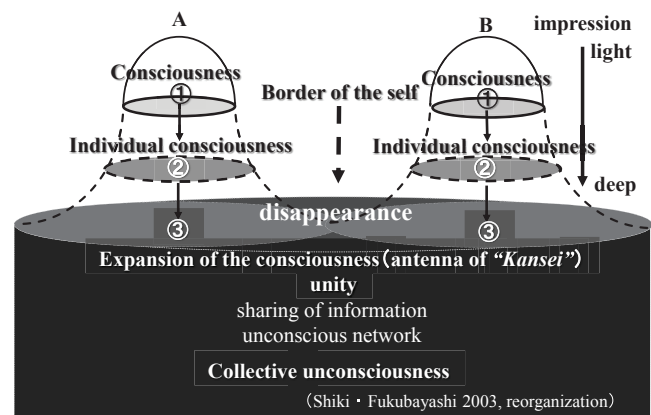


Figure 5 Structure of a sensation and a sense of unity

The *Kansei* force manifests in the process of reaching the collective unconsciousness, when the ordinary consciousness starts removing the distinction between self and others and attaining the state of *muga*, or enlightenment, thus enabling those involved to transform their consciousness into unconsciousness as well as to transform unconsciousness into their consciousness. At the same time, this enables those exposed to the performance created by the manifestation of the *Kansei* force to be endowed with the *Kansei* force and polish their own *Kansei*. As represented by the fusion of egoistic and altruistic or objective and subjective natures, the workings of the *Kansei* force allows a human to transcend secondary phenomena and achieve self-actualization. A first-class performance enables us to feel that all beings are mutually connected, which is deeply involved in inspiring a sense of healing and happiness. Thus, it helps translate the so-called “inner knowledge” into forms understandable to us in our daily lives.

Therefore, to “enter the zone” and to “create a sensation and a sense of unity” is equal to the manifestation of the *Kansei* force itself.

Goethe said “the most supreme and excellent element of a human being is being amorphous. Nothing should be done other than manifesting its morphology through a noble de-

ed” (Goethe 1947). The zone experience is a kind of aesthetic experience, one that achieves the “manifestation of morphology through a noble deed” through human *Kansei*.

The future vision

If we track the origin of the word “heal,” we find that it goes back to a word meaning “to become a part of a whole.”

The sense of unity by which athletes and audience in the zone feel electrified in the stadium evokes the “*Kansei* of becoming a part of a whole.” Those who experience the zone and the audience electrified by their performance can actually feel interconnected with all beings through the collective unconsciousness and with each one’s *Kansei*. In other words, to be exposed to the zone of human beings evokes the “*Kansei* of becoming a part of a whole” in the depth of a human’s memory, helping enhance a deep *Kansei*. This depth of sensation creating a strong impression corresponds to the level of *Kansei* manifested by the individual who produces the performance.

In general, it is said to be important to be exposed to high-end material in order to polish *Kansei* because high-end *Kansei*, which easily enters the zone, exhibits high-power *Kansei*. Therefore, it is thought that being exposed to a performance in the zone and feeling the resulting sensations leads to well-being in a broad sense.

Csikszentmihalyi says, “*flow* improves the quality of life,” and the zone will also enhance the quality of life comprehensively for human beings. The sense of value gained in the zone may be contributing to the spiritual health of human beings.

Suzuki says that the so-called “universal unconsciousness” and cosmic unconsciousness cannot be actualized unless we transcend the limitations established by the various sciences that conduct analytical research on the human consciousness (Suzuki 1964). In the future, academic research that integrates the viewpoints of neuroscience, *zen* or *yuishiki* (“mind only”), the so-called “aura” and life energy, as well as analyses of the zone experience will be beneficial for the wellness and happiness of all humankind.

Conclusion

The zone experience, a kind of a *Kansei* experience, symbolizes the spiritual arousal of human beings and represents an opportunity to stimulate spiritual development and transform one’s sense of values.

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