

Koan Practice – Zen of Wasting Time



Zen koans are short sayings from masters of the past that have been collected over the ages. Their concise prose carries both potency and penetrative insight, which were used to open the minds of Zen monks and practitioners to a higher understanding and realization of the nature of the mind. Some of them are very condensed, direct teachings, while others assume the form of a riddle or puzzle. These riddles are designed to confront the mind with its own impotence, so it gives way to a deeper, non-conceptual truth.

Zen Understanding: Substance and Function

Before we can begin to explore the nature and utility of Zen koans, we must first understand the foundation of the Zen perception of reality. According to Zen philosophy, there are two main elements of reality: substance and function. Substance is our true nature, while function is our expression, including our perception of the outer world. The concept of the unity between substance and form is expressed the famous Heart Sutra (Heart of the Perfection of the Transcendent Wisdom), which is chanted every day in Zen monasteries:

Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, when practicing deeply the Prajna Paramita, perceives that all five skandhas are empty and is saved from all suffering and distress. Shariputra, form does not differ from emptiness, emptiness does not differ from form. That which is form is emptiness, that which is emptiness form (...)

*So proclaim the Prajna Paramita mantra, proclaim the mantra which says: gate gate
paragate parasamgate bodhi svaha.¹*

The major philosophical challenge in Zen, whose basic conception of reality is non-dual, is therefore to reconcile the absolute with the relative. For example, how can an enlightened being be beyond suffering and yet still have physical and emotional needs? Some more extreme adherents of non-duality have tried to transcend all suffering and desire by numbing their humanity through self-mortification, repression or even losing bodily consciousness, all with a view to achieving an essentially artificial and false ideal of freedom. However, in Zen it is said that denying one's relative nature is to have 'one eye,' or to see only half of truth. Its view is more sophisticated and, within the limitations of monastic life, promotes in a down-to-earth way the integration of human functioning with the enlightened state.

According to Zen, the whole truth is actually composed of two 'levels' each of which has validity in itself. This was perhaps most clearly expressed by Nagarjuna, one of the most influential Buddhist philosophers of the Mahayana tradition. Nagarjuna spoke about higher truth and lower truth. Higher truth is that of emptiness and no-self (the three characteristics of non-abidance: not coming, not going and not staying); lower truth is that of the manifested world and our relative human self (simply put, our everyday experience). Nagarjuna tried to resolve the non-dual paradox by stating that, although ultimately nothing inherently exists – there is neither nirvana nor samsara, enlightenment nor ignorance – relatively speaking, we still exist in the lower level of reality as well. Therefore, there is a process of moving from the lower to the higher truth, from ignorance to liberation. Within the broader Zen tradition, we could say that Nagarjuna's higher truth is the substance of reality, while the lower truth refers to its form and function.

Zen monk Hakuin, who lived in 18th century Japan, strongly influenced the proliferation of koan practice throughout the Zen tradition. He used the 'Five Ranks of Tozan' as a part of his koan training. These five ranks show with great clarity the relationship between substance and function through pointing to the intricate relationship between enlightenment and integration. The five ranks are:

¹ Commonly translated as: "Gone gone, gone beyond, gone altogether beyond, Oh what an awakening! All Hail!"

1. *Relative within absolute (realization of emptiness)*
2. *Absolute within relative (seeing the world from the absolute)*
3. *Coming from within the absolute (correct function from the state of enlightenment)*
4. *Arrival at mutual integration (integration between the inner and the outer)*
5. *Unity attained (transcending the dichotomy of inner and outer, enlightenment and everyday life)*

Zen koans can be said to be pointing to the truth of any one of these five stages: that is, to the higher truth, to the lower truth or to various levels of their coexistence, including the final stage, in which any trace of discrimination between lower and higher truths is transcended. So, while practically speaking, the goal of koans is to activate insight into our true nature, this could mean either direct insight into formlessness (substance), or insight into the integration of our pure nature with both form and function. However, all of them fundamentally aim to show the unity of these two, and moreover, to go beyond the conceptual distinction between them.

While Zen has a very strong philosophical basis, in its essence, it constantly strives to go beyond any mental constructs in order to experience reality just as it is. The Zen vision is that even the concept of enlightenment should be transcended, since it exists only in relation to its opposite, ignorance. Hence it is said, “When you meet Buddha, kill him.”

The Art of Solving Koans

Contrary to popular belief, koans do have answers and they do make sense. They are not illogical, they simply apply a particular type of logic – Zen logic. Koans are a Zen game and as with any game, one has to learn the rules to be able to play. The most important collection of koans is ‘Mumonkan,’ which means ‘the gateless gate’. It contains 48 koans of the Rinzai School. The Soto School also has a collection of koans, but those are not as well known, because Soto focuses less on koans and more on the practice of ‘shikantaza.’² Master Rinzai (in Chinese, Lin Chi) did not himself establish koans as a system of teaching; he used them occasionally, but not as his main device. At that time, koans were used in both China and Korea solely as a contemplative method called ‘observing the phrase,’ rather than as an object of concentration or a meditative technique.³ It was the aforementioned Japanese monk, Hakuin, who was the first to propagate koans as a system

² Zen master Dogen himself, the most prominent figure in the Soto School, was actually against using koans as a means of gaining ‘kensho’ (insight) or ‘satori’ (enlightenment).

³ An exception to this was the Korean monk, Seung Sahn, who was very active in proliferating Zen in the west and for an unknown reason chose to follow the Japanese approach to koans.

of meditation. He was a man of great depth and passion, but very extreme in his approach to his own practice and to that of his students. This extremism caused him to have a nervous breakdown at a young age, a condition caused by excessive concentration, which is often called the 'Zen sickness.'

Koans are diverse in their structure, form and intention, and it is important to be able to recognize which kind of koan one is reading, so as to apply the correct approach to solving it and revealing its deeper meaning.

Breakthrough Koans

The koans which aim at creating the direct revelation of our pure nature are called the 'breakthrough' koans. Their intention is to manifest a condition of 'great doubt' in the mind, so that the mental dam breaks to reveal the state of emptiness. In practice, 'kensho' (insight) is not really the result of 'solving' the koan, but rather of becoming one with it; it is unity with the essence of the koan which brings one to the non-dual state. 'Great doubt' is a term created by Hakuin to demonstrate the importance of applying psychological pressure as a means for reaching enlightenment. In his own words: "At the bottom of great doubt lies great awakening. If you doubt fully, you will awaken fully."

One of the fundamental breakthrough koans is the 'Mu-koan':

When Master Joshu was asked if a dog has Buddha nature, he replied: "Mu!" ("No!")

Solving this koan is not related to unraveling the meaning of Joshu's answer. His literal message was actually rather straightforward: that a dog does not have Buddha nature because it is not conscious of it. The Zen objective of this koan is, rather, to go beyond the duality of 'yes' and 'no' and realize 'mu' as 'thus' without any trace of discrimination. So the answer to the Mu-koan is simply "Mu." But, to give this answer correctly (rather than just imitate it), an adept has to be one with it. Zen mediators sit for years and years with the Mu-koan in order to experience unity, breakthrough and non-duality. One might think this is absurd - and it certainly is. The wisdom of how to use koans properly to facilitate true insight has, in most cases, been entirely lost.

Another breakthrough koan invented by Hakuin is, "Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?" Again, the answer to this koan cannot be found using literal or linear reasoning: one has to go beyond sound and its absence, beyond duality (two hands) and opposites,

in order to fall into 'sunyata' (emptiness). "The sound of one hand clapping" is not a sound – it is the pure nature of existence. Buddha himself answered many metaphysical questions with silence, but silence is not the Zen answer to this koan: somehow, one has to come back to the concrete reality of the 'one hand,' because that hand is a living manifestation of non-dual truth. In Zen they say, "If you open your mouth to speak, you fall into the pitfall of discrimination, and if you remain silent, you are no better than a stone." The idea is to learn how to embrace the two at once: to express substance through silence, and to express the correct understanding through form and function. In either case, one has to go beyond both speaking and non-speaking in order to capture the non-dual duality of true reality.

Dynamic Action Koans

Dynamic action koans do not aim at creating revelation into one's pure nature (substance), but rather seek to point the adept toward the integration of substance with function, or to the nature of correct functioning from the place of no-mind. For instance, there is this story:

Master Sekiso said: 'You are at the top of the 100 foot high pole. How will you make a step further?'

Here, the top of the pole represents enlightenment, and the 'step further' the transcending of attachment to emptiness and re-entering the world of function from the place of non-duality and freedom. Zen Master Ummon said, "The world is vast and wide; for what is it you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?" From the place of illumination, our everyday life may seem petty and meaningless, but in Zen, to integrate the transcendent with the mundane is an expression of a higher enlightenment; it is the realization of true oneness with total existence. Master Ummon is speaking about containing our empirical existence in the state of enlightenment in order to live in the world of truth. "Putting on the seven piece robe" is to follow one's daily routine as part of being human. It might be considered to be a lower truth, but in Zen, the lower and higher truth are one; to disregard our natural functions in the world in the name of enlightenment is proof of ignorance.

In Zen, 'function' not only points to activity in general, but to correct action, which flows from the wisdom and compassion of our higher nature. Some dynamic action koans, therefore, aim to stimulate correct action. For instance:

Nansen saw the monks of the eastern and western halls fighting over a baby cat. He seized the cat and said, "If any of you can say a word of Zen, you can spare the cat. Otherwise I will kill it." No one could answer, so Nansen cut the cat in two.

That evening Joshu returned and Nansen told him what had happened. Joshu thereupon took off his sandals and, placing them on his head, walked away. Nansen said, "If only you had been there, you could have saved the cat."

This koan pushes the adept to inquire into the nature of his actions and reactions. What is the correct response to Nansen's dilemma? The monks could not take the cat away from their master, because that would be an act of disrespect. They could not beg the master to save the cat, because that would be in contradiction with direct action. They stood and did nothing, but because this 'nothing' was not an expression of the correct response to that immediate situation, the cat was 'killed.' When master Dogen later contemplated this koan, he criticized Nansen and challenged him by asking: "Can you cut the cat into one piece?" However, this was a misunderstanding, because the koan is not trying to point us to substance or non-duality – it is about correct expression.

One of the accepted answers to this koan is to offer one's own life as a sacrifice for the cat. This is, again, incorrect. First of all, it is both unrealistic and idealistic, and hence against the practical spirit of Zen. Secondly, it assumes that Nansen had truly intended to kill the cat, which is a direct insult to the truth he represented and his integrity. The correct action here is, in fact, very simple – compassion. Not all functions are meant to be expressed externally; to feel is the heart of true enlightened expression. From that place, one cares more about the cat than about gaining the approval of the master by being self-sacrificial or presenting a clever answer. Instead, one might ask, "Master, has the cat been fed yet?"

What Nansen was really asking his monks was, "Are you truly alive?" The proper compassionate response is indicated in Joshu's subsequent actions. Putting one's sandals on one's head was a symbol of mourning in China. Joshu did not care what the answer should have been. The cat was already dead, so he just expressed his sadness. It is highly unlikely Nansen really killed the cat; the story is meant to be read symbolically. His knife was not directed against the cat, but against the unfeeling aspect of the Zen mind.

Another koan directed at demonstrating correct and incorrect function is:

There was an old woman who supported a hermit. For twenty years she always had a girl, sixteen or seventeen years old, take the hermit his food and wait on him.

One day she told the girl to give the monk a close hug and ask, "What do you feel just now?"

The hermit responded, "An old tree on a cold cliff; midwinter – no warmth."

The girl went back and told this to the old woman.

The woman said, "For twenty years I've supported this vulgar good-for-nothing!" So saying, she threw the monk out and burned down the hermitage.

The old woman wanted to test the monk, and saw in his cold response to the girl's embrace that he had not manifested the correct function of love and compassion. As a consequence, she burned his hut and withdrew her support.

Deconditioning Koans

Some koans do not point directly to either form or function. Rather, their purpose is to free the mind from spiritual conditioning and dissolve any traces of what they call the 'Zen-stink.' An example of a deconditioning koan is:

One day Tokusan came to the dining room from the Meditation Hall, holding his bowl. Seppo saw him coming and asked, "The dinner drum is not yet beaten. Where are you going with your bowl?"

Tokusan went back at once to his room. Seppo told Ganto about this incident. Ganto, said, "Tokusan as he is, has not penetrated into the ultimate truth of Zen."

Tokusan heard of this and sent an acolyte to ask Ganto to come to him. "I have heard," told Tokusan, "you are not approving my Zen." Ganto whispered to Tokusan what he meant. Tokusan said nothing, leaving Ganto there.

The next day, ascending the rostrum, Tokusan delivered an entirely different sermon to the monks. Ganto went forward in the Hall, clapped his hands, laughed and said, "What a happy thing! The old man has got hold of the ultimate truth of Zen. From now on, no one in heaven and on earth can surpass him."

In this koan, Zen master Tokusan went to the dining hall before the customary bell was rung, which Seppo perceived as a lack of mindfulness on the part of his master. Disappointed that Tokusan had not acted in a perfect Zen way, he went to Ganto, who in turn made fun of him by saying that Tokusan's realization of Zen was still incomplete. The deeper meaning of this koan lies in the fact that, when confronted with his mistake, master Tokusan simply acknowledged it and turned back to his room. By doing this, Tokusan taught Seppo a lesson of humility and simplicity, a lesson of true Zen, but Seppo was too inept to grasp and learn it.

Another deconditioning koan is:

Kyogen said, "Zen is like a monk hanging by his teeth in a tree over a precipice. His hands grasp no branch, his feet rest on no limb, and under the tree another man asks him, 'Why did Bodhidharma come to China from the West (India)?' If the man in the tree does not answer, he misses the question, and if he answers, he falls and loses his life. Now what should he do?"

The question: "Why did Bodhidharma come to China?" is a customary way of asking about the meaning of Zen. The correct answer is that he never came to China: his message was beyond coming, going or staying. According to the koan's intent, the monk has to present the right answer to such an important question, even if he has to sacrifice his life in order to do so. Will the monk choose to fulfill his duty to speak the truth of Zen, or hold on for dear life instead? One of the accepted answers to this quandary is that the monk should let go and die screaming (this screaming being the answer to why Bodhidharma came to China). However, this answer is incorrect, because it represents an attachment to being 'correct' and behaving in the correct way. To really answer it, our mind needs to be free from such preconceived ideas and Zen conditioning. From this place, not answering at all would be the correct action. Such silence is not a clever, Zen silence. It is more simple than that: why would you answer a fool who, seeing you are close to death, is asking you a stupid intellectual question, rather than helping you?

'Second Great Doubt' Koans

The 'second great doubt' koans follow on from the breakthrough koans. They are intended to break all the rules, meaning that, for the mind, they deliberately don't make any sense. Their purpose is not to arrest the mind or to reveal emptiness, but to cut off any attachments to previous attainments and facilitate a deeper realization. By creating what Hakuin called, 'the second great doubt' they help deepen one's satori. An example is:

A mouse eats the cat's food, but the cat's bowl is broken.

From the nonsensical style of this koan, we can immediately say it is intended to free us from attachment to both substance *and* function; its very absurdity can open us to a deeper space of non-conceptualization. But we still need to inquire to decode its deeper meaning. To answer it by emulating the act of eating (demonstrating suchness) is incorrect. To enact the cat pouncing on the mouse would, again, be missing the deeper point. We must start by asking ourselves why the mouse is eating the cat's food in the first place. What is wrong? Perhaps the mouse is not just eating from the broken bowl, but eating from it *because* it is broken.

The mouse is a symbol of our lower self, the ego, while the cat represents our pure nature. The bowl is the container of our pure nature and, in this case, it is broken, which to use Zen terminology, represents a 'leakage' of consciousness. Overall then, this koan describes very incomplete satori. It is incomplete on two levels: First of all, our relative me is not aligned with our pure nature, and is therefore disturbing it through its own unconscious tendencies, 'feeding' on our pure consciousness. Secondly, as we said, our pure nature is not embodied; it is 'leaking' as symbolized by the broken bowl. The whole situation represents a very unintegrated and limited realization which requires urgent fixing. The bowl has to be mended, so it can serve as a perfect and seamless container, and the ego (the mouse) has to be put into its rightful subservient place, as mere expression of our higher self.

Here is a final great doubt koan:

Wuzu said, "It is like a water buffalo that passes through a lattice window. His head, horns, and four hooves all go past. The tail can't pass through. Why?"

Wumen commented: "If it passes through, it will fall into a ditch;

If it turns back, it will be destroyed. This tiny little tail – What a strange and marvelous thing it is!”

The head of the buffalo that passes through represents the initial awakening. The horns and the four legs that pass through indicate a realization that is almost complete. But why can the tail not pass through? The buffalo cannot go through and cannot go back. The questions the koan poses are: Which part of him is still not fully realized? What is this tail? Is it a real analogy or another Zen trap?

In the context of our awakening, we could say that the tail again represents our lower self or relative, human me. That me is the most stubborn aspect of our identity. Even the greatest masters have had to confront the problem of this tiny tail. It may be tiny, but it is also huge, because it prevents the buffalo (as the symbol of our true self) from fully moving into the beyond. Because of this tail, our soul remains stuck in the dimension of presence. This koan points to deeper realization than the previous cat and mouse koan. Here, our me is much more aligned with our true self, and our pure nature is already fully embodied. And yet, there is still a disturbing dichotomy that needs to be transcended.

Why does Wumen say: “If it turns back, it will be destroyed?” There is no way back for those who enter reality; they have to go forward or die trying. And why, when it passes through, will it fall into a ditch? Our relative me cannot simply pass through into reality. It has both to pass and not pass through, it must be dissolved and yet also merged with our pure self. It must undergo a fundamental metamorphosis in order to be aligned and merged with our true nature. This process was never properly explained in Zen. Even though Tozan spoke about the integration of the relative with absolute, that relative aspect was not properly understood, because the dimension of me is not illuminated in Zen understanding. In spite of that, this koan represents an intuitive understanding of the challenge of merging with the relative me. The tail is in an ultimate dilemma: it can neither go back nor pass forward, and it certainly cannot stay stuck in the window. The window is an exquisite symbol: it is the window between the outer and the inner realms, between illusion and reality, presence and absence, me and I am. Moreover, it is not just a door that we pass through, but also the transparent glass through which we perceive both worlds and embody total existence.

In this context, we can more fully understand what the ‘second great doubt’ is about. The first great doubt is obviously about our true nature, about whom we really are beyond the construct of the

mind. The second great doubt is about me. On some level, it is an even deeper doubt – it is the ultimate doubt. Did Zen manage to resolve this doubt? It is very unlikely, considering the limitations of the Buddhist perception of reality. The more likely scenario is that the second great doubt was somehow suspended through a more thorough and deep identification with the impersonal, absolute nature of existence. This kind of identification can emulate integration and unity, but without attaining true wholeness – if you look closely, the tail has still not passed through.

Koans Revealing Suchness

‘Suchness’ is one of the most beautiful concepts in Buddhism. It means to see reality ‘as it is.’ How can we see reality as it is? It is not about perceiving it in deep or meaningful way (like seeing that matter is empty, or made of energy and so on). Suchness does not so much define the quality of the perceived, but rather, that of the perceiver. Even if the perceiver makes an error in identifying what occurs in his field of perception, so long as his erroneous perception happens from the right place – it is still suchness. To see ‘thus’ is to see from the pure ground of unmodified perception, which is our fundamental consciousness. When the foundation from which we cognize creation does not change – meaning it is perfect and absolute – all we see is ‘such,’ is truth. Suchness not only refers to perceptual reality, but also to our dynamic expression, our functioning in the world.

Some koans carry the message of suchness, and point to the realization of suchness in the adept:

A monk asked Joshu, "With what intention did Bodhidharma come to China?" Joshu answered, "The oak tree in the front garden."

Or in another example:

A monk told Joshu, "I have just entered this monastery. I beg you to teach me." Joshu asked, "Have you eaten your rice porridge?"

The monk replied, "I have."

"Then," said Joshu, "Go and wash your bowl." At that moment the monk was enlightened.

Suchness is often represented within a koan through the form of calling and answering:

Kokushi, the teacher of the emperor, called his attendant, Oshin, three times and three times Oshin answered, "Yes!"

Kokushi said, "I thought that I had offended you, but in reality you offended me!"

Calling and answering is Zen. There are no adornments, no decorations – it is ‘just- like-that.’ Why does Kokushi call three times? He does it to make sure that Oshin understands him. However, by calling three times, he offends his attendant; once is enough! But Oshin does not have to answer three times; once is enough. By answering Kokushi three times, Oshin offends him. They both offend each other: this is Zen of suchness.

Calling and answering is used again in this conversation between Ananda and Maha Kashapa:

Ananda asked Maha Kashapa, "Buddha gave you the golden woven robe of successorship. What else did he give you?"

Kashapa said, "Ananda!"

"Yes!" answered Ananda.

"Knock down the flagpole at the gate!" said Kashapa

In saying “knock down the flagpole at the gate” Kashapa declares the interview is over. But, just before that, Kashapa calls and Ananda answers: that is the meaning of Zen. Calling and answering is the direct presentation of suchness – not just the suchness of perception, but also of function.

Contemplative Koans

Contemplative koans are more intended to narrate and demonstrate the nature of reality than to pose a riddle to be solved. To encounter this type of koan and give a traditional ‘Zen’ answer would be to miss its real meaning. For example, there is this story:

In the time of Buddha Shakyamuni, Manjusri went to the assemblage of the Buddhas. When he arrived there, the conference was over and each Buddha had returned to his own Buddha-land. Only one girl was yet unmoved in deep meditation.

Manjusri asked Buddha Shakyamuni how it was possible for this girl to reach this state, one which even he could not attain. "Bring her out from samadhi and ask her yourself," said the Buddha.

Manjusri walked around the girl three times and snapped his fingers. She still remained in meditation. So by his miracle power he transported her to a high heaven and tried his best to call her, but in vain.

Buddha Shakyamuni said: "Even a hundred thousand Manjusris could not disturb her, but below this place, past twelve hundred million countries, is a Bodhisattva, Mo-myo, seed of delusion. If he comes here, she will awaken."

No sooner had the Buddha spoken than that Bodhisattva sprang up from the earth and bowed and paid homage to the Buddha. Buddha directed him to arouse the girl. The Bodhisattva went in front of the girl and snapped his fingers, and in that instant the girl came out from her deep meditation.

To give a Zen answer to this koan, snapping one's fingers for instance, misses the whole point. To give a proper and correct answer, our discriminative intellect is required to contemplate its deeper intent. Why could Manjusri not wake the girl up, if a bodhisattva of a lower degree could do it so easily? The trap for the mind here is to assume that the bodhisattva did something extraordinary that Manjusri was incapable of doing. However, the real reason why Manjusri could not arouse the girl from samadhi is that, for him, there was only samadhi. True samadhi is the nature of existence, it is beyond polarities of samadhi and its absence. For the bodhisattva, on the other hand, samadhi was a state in contrast to no-samadhi, an artificial absorption or temporary trance outside of our everyday experience. So the purpose of this koan is to reveal the higher meaning of samadhi: if we are ignorant, nothing is samadhi; if we have realized the pure nature of existence, everything is samadhi.

Another narrative-style koan can help us understand the Zen spirit more deeply:

Gutei raised his finger whenever he was asked a question about Zen. A boy attendant began to imitate him in this way. When anyone asked the boy what his master had preached about, the boy would raise his finger.

Gutei heard about the boy's mischief. He seized him and cut off his finger. The boy cried and ran away. Gutei called and stopped him. When the boy turned his head to Gutei, Gutei raised up his own finger. In that instant the boy was enlightened.

When Gutei was about to pass from this world he gathered his monks around him. "I attained my finger-Zen," he said, "from my teacher Tenryu, and in my whole life I could not exhaust it." Then he passed away.

So the quandary here is: if we try to conceptualize the 'one finger' of Gutei, in doing so we will fail to grasp its very essence. But if we raise our finger (thereby giving the Zen answer), what will prevent the master from cutting this finger off? Is it a real finger or an imitation? There are two approaches to working with this koan. One is, as with the breakthrough koans, to become one with it and go beyond the duality of subject and object. The other is to discover its higher message through contemplation. These two are not necessarily in contradiction, because one can conceptualize non-conceptuality, which is what a real Zen answer actually demonstrates. To understand the one finger of Gutei, we have to embody the unity of substance and function. Only when that finger is raised from the place of having embodied one's pure nature does it become a living manifestation of truth. Otherwise, it is just another finger of ignorance.

Can Koans Really Produce Awakening?

Zen can seem very eccentric, and has certainly developed its own unique forms of expression, its own 'mannerisms,' so to speak. This is especially true of the Rinzai School. As we have said, you have to learn the rules of the game, which is very much tied to the unique nature of Zen language and phraseology. Many of those who work within the koan system falsely assume the Zen way of answering a koan is universal, meaning that any person who is self-realized will, more or less, answer a given koan in the same way, or at least with the same intent. This is absolutely false. For instance, Ramana Maharishi would very likely fail a koan examination. Even Buddha himself might well fail, because these systems were developed a long time after his original teaching.

In addition, the ability to answer all the koans perfectly by using the correct Zen forms of expression, is by no means an indication of true spiritual attainment. This skill can be acquired and learned without reference to having access to our pure nature. Some Zen adepts are very skilled at solving koans, and are therefore promoted up the hierarchy, even though they lack the realization of their pure nature. On the other hand, those who are perhaps less sharp at solving koans, but who have actually awakened their essence, are wrongly regarded as beginners and made to spend days and years solving koans which are both useless and limiting to them. When koan practice is applied without knowledge of the basic principles of awakening, it is not only pointless, but spiritually crippling.

Sometime after their original conception, koans began to be used as objects of concentration for Zen meditators; we can draw parallels with the dharana and dhyana stages of yoga where an adept aspires to merge with the object of meditation. This is clear evidence of the decline of Zen, which is, in essence, a sudden path that does not see awakening as a direct outcome of any meditative practice. Koan practice which is applied with extreme concentration can actually lead to an imbalanced state of mind and energy. The fact that such practices have proliferated in Zen actually points to the flavor of mysticism it contains. It is somewhat of a paradox that, in spite of carrying such a sharp, samurai-like male energy, Zen is also very mystical and abstract. Even though it does have the concept of the 'natural state,' and the perception of enlightenment as 'nothing special,' it tends, at the same time, to be very extreme in its perception of enlightenment and of the practices through which enlightenment is pursued. Seen in this light, the Zen fascination with koans resembles the Sufi intoxication with the divine.

Can practicing with koans in meditation really lead to awakening? When one sits in a condition of extreme concentration on a koan, combined with desperation to reach awakening, and then, through some intuitive means, manages suddenly to let go, that letting go can potentially open up the energetic space beyond the mind, whether it be awareness or consciousness. In most cases, however, such practices are more likely to create a shift into an altered, mystical state than into consciousness itself. The descriptions of kensho found in Zen literature seem to confirm this. And, even if concentration upon koans *can* open the space of consciousness, is it really necessary to go through this whole, artificial process? Why not just turn the light of consciousness directly back onto itself?

Awakening is a function of meeting oneself, but the information of the state itself is meant to be transmitted by a teacher. In the words of Bodhidharma, "Zen is a direct transmission from mind

to mind beyond letters and scriptures.” No koan practice can really produce that awakening. Furthermore, practice with koans only really points to the realization of the nature of the mind; such practice, at best, can facilitate a transformation in the construct of consciousness. Therefore, a koan can never produce the shift into the absolute state; neither conceptualization nor its absence have an influence on vertical surrender to the source.

While one cannot but be amazed by the beauty of koans, they are not meant to be used as a system of meditation. Each one of them came into life in the context of specific circumstances, where it was used to inspire either the awakening or deeper understanding of an individual aspirant. To take these koans out of their original context, such as, for instance, to make everyone sit with the Mu-koan, goes against the very essence of Zen. The sixth patriarch of Zen’s, Hui Neng’s, question to Elder Ming, “Not thinking good, not thinking evil, right in this moment, what is your original face?” was a real koan, in a real situation, challenging a real and concrete person. It was not a ‘method,’ but a transmission of truth. According to the story, Ming is reported to have experienced immediate enlightenment (though this is rather doubtful, considering the ignorant question he countered with). In tears, he bowed and asked, “Is there any meaning behind the esoteric intent of the esoteric words that you have just spoken?” Hui Neng said, “What I have just told you is not esoteric. If you turn your attention around to your own state, the secret is after all in you.”

Imprisoning the Mind in Non-Conceptuality

Not only does practice with koans very rarely lead us beyond the mind, it often does the exact opposite. Zen practice in the koan-based traditions develops exceedingly strong mental energy. When adepts realize the koan cannot be solved by using the linear mind, they may begin to develop a super non-linear mind which builds a powerful net of non-conceptual-conceptuality around the psyche, a net that protects itself within the illusory notion of ‘no-mind.’ This kind of mind can prove much more difficult to get rid of than an ordinary mind. So, ironically, being engaged in solving koans in an unskillful way is the most efficient means of blocking any possibility of moving into the dimension of no-mind. One becomes more and more trapped in the mire of the mind, and grows further and further away from arriving at the state of true emptiness and innocence.

No matter how profound a philosophy is, unless it is in touch with the living heartbeat of life, it becomes a prison for our mind, rather than a tool of liberation. The mind can please itself by solving logical paradoxes, but all the while, the soul is captured in a lie.

There is nothing wrong with the original way koans were used, as a means of ‘observing the phrase’ and developing Zen understanding. Spiritual understanding and insight into its various aspects are indivisible from the path itself. In this teaching, we call it having the ‘correct vision.’ However, as much as koans may be intriguing, creative and interesting, spending all of one’s time trying to solve them as a form of ‘meditation’ is, spiritually speaking, more or less a pure waste of time. Time is precious. We may feel sorry for those who are stuck in wrong and misleading spiritual practices, but who really is to blame? We can blame various systems or teachers, but the path is ultimately a seeker’s own responsibility. Unless we take responsibility for our own path, develop true discrimination and awaken our spiritual intelligence, we will remain just another member of the unconscious herd, walking without a sense of direction, and becoming increasingly embroiled in the dimension of the lost.

Sitting with koans is not meditation: it is a perversion of meditation and an expression of the deterioration of the spirit Zen. Koans were originally conceived of as a means to point directly to reality and to the art of sudden awakening. But Zen teachers who now base their teaching on koans are just copying their own teachers, continuing a vicious circle that began when the knowledge of true teaching had been forgotten. These teachers have lost the ancient knowledge of how to see directly into their pure nature. Now they teach an artificial system – they do not teach the truth.

Blessings,

Anadi

For a full glossary of terminology please visit our website www.anaditeaching.com/glossary