

Practicing with Koans in Soto Zen

Introduction

Koans (*kung-an* in Chinese, literally “public or legal case”) are brief, seemingly enigmatic, illogical statements that defy common sense (“Keeping your tongues still and lips closed, how will you speak?”), nonsensical questions, or otherwise puzzling dialogues or anecdotes (A monk asked Zen Master Tung-shan, “What is Buddha?” Tung-shan said, “Three pounds of flax.”) that are among the best-known and distinctive characteristic of Zen (Ch’an in China, Son in Korea) Buddhism. The word “koan” has several meanings and is associated with a variety of different uses. An informal definition of a koan is anything that is baffling like the routine of our daily lives (“Should I move to Seattle or not?”). A formal definition is “any text that combines, at a minimum, the following two formal features: (1) a narrative that has been excerpted from the biography or discourse record of a Ch’an, Sōn, or Zen master, and (2) some sort of commentary on that narrative, i.e., a discrete unit of text in which an old case is cited and commented on.”¹ Among the many uses of koans are as a literary genre intended to amuse Chinese literati in medieval China, a medium to display the enlightened mind of a master or student, a tool to trigger enlightenment in religious training, an expression of the mind that cannot otherwise be expressed in words, and a process that shows us the limitations of words and concepts.² Most fundamentally, koans are based on the Buddha’s insight that suffering comes from our own thinking and, to be free of suffering, we have to remove the delusions that are in large part a consequence of self-harmful narratives spun by words and concepts.

This primer briefly reviews the history of koans as a literary genre in Buddhism and their use in Soto Zen, which is the tradition of Zen practiced at the Minnesota Zen Meditation Center (MZMC). It also provides three examples of the use of koans in actual practice, as well as notes and further readings for readers interested in exploring more deeply the history and use of koans in Zen Buddhism.

History

As a literary genre, the koan has its origins in (purported) spontaneous dialogues between masters or between master and student modeled after the Chinese literary game in the “golden” T’ang dynasty period (618-907) of Chinese Zen.³ Although not much is known for certain about their origin and purpose, these oral repartees and anecdotes may have been recorded (simply) in order to preserve the teachings of famous masters of the period. Beginning in the mid-tenth century and running through the eleventh century, these “encounter dialogues” were gathered together in transmission of the lamp hagiographies (reverential biographies of ancient masters), recorded sayings of masters, and other texts.⁴ The practice of commenting on the sayings of ancient masters as a means of demonstrating one’s own spiritual awareness dates to this period.

For a variety of intertwined political, social, popular culture, and spiritual reasons, the emphasis shifted in the twelfth century more thoroughly to the dialogues themselves (that is away from the lives of the ancient masters).⁵ The dialogues were presented in formally structured koan collections in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Today, the three best known collections are the *Wu-men kuan* (The Gateless Gate; *Mumonkan* in Japanese), which was compiled by Rinzai master Wu-men Hui-k’ai (1183-1260), the *Pi-yen lu* (*Blue Cliff Records*; *Hekigan-roku* in Japanese), which was first compiled by Hsüeh-tou

Ch'ung-hsien (980-1052) of the Ummon school of Zen and later expanded by Rinzai master Yüan-wu K'o-ch'in (1063-1135), and the *Ts'ung-jung lu* (*Book of Serenity*; *Shōyō-roku* in Japanese), which was compiled by Soto Zen master Hung-chih Cheng-chüeh (1091-1157).⁶

Koans in these collections are typically divided into a number of parts that were contributed by more than one master. At the heart of the koan is the “old case” (One day, Yanguan called to his assistant, “Bring me the rhinoceros fan.” The assistant said, “It is broken.” Yanguan said, “In that case, bring me the rhinoceros.”). The “old case” is typically preceded by an introduction (called the “introduction pointer”) and followed by prose and verse commentaries; there may also be “capping phrases” (generally a short sentence fragment) that comment on some aspect of these four segments (introduction, case, verse, and commentary). These added comments provide opportunities for later masters to display their own understanding of an enlightened mind.⁷

A famous dispute between Hung-chih Cheng-chüeh and Ta-hui Tsung-kao in twelfth century Song period China further defined the emerging differences between the Soto and Rinzai schools of Zen, and the use of koans in Zen practice.⁸ Hung-chih, a leading Soto school monk, defended the use of “silent-illumination” (shikantaza or “just sitting”) as the core of Zen practice. Ta-hui, a Rinzai monk who was the Dharma heir of Yüan-wu K'o-ch'in (the editor of the Blue Cliff Records), vigorously promoted a short-cut type of koan use known as k'an-hua (“contemplating phrases”). Rather than looking over the entire koan exchange and commentary (which could lead the mind to distraction), Ta-hui had his followers work with the “critical phrase” (a single word like “no” or a short phrase like “avoid picking and choosing”) of a root case. The goal was to attain

enlightenment in a sudden breakthrough by frustrating the discursive intellect. Ta-hui also argued against the notion that koans were a suitable focus of literary endeavors (but were rather tools for realizing enlightenment), emphasized the importance of doubt over faith in practice, and maintained that the everyday suffering of an individual was an important context for enlightenment (rather than something to be alleviated, as in the four noble truths). Some scholars maintain that this “bare-bones” practice led to the decline of Zen in China after the Song period, because of its lack of appeal to the literati (who at the time were the main source of funding for Buddhist residential institutions).⁹

What might be called the extended commentarial tradition of koan study was promoted in Kamakura period Japan (1185-1392) by Dogen’s (1200-1253) “wraparound” style of commentary and Daito Kokushi’s (1282-1337) use of capping phrases (a short utterance that caps, or completes, the solution to a koan). Though often more closely associated with “just sitting,” Dogen was one of the greatest masters of the koan.¹⁰ Even though the use of koans in practice was widely used in medieval Japanese monasteries, their use was suppressed in the Soto school during a late eighteenth and nineteenth century reform movement that emphasized “just sitting,” which incongruously was then considered Dogen’s sole practice. In the Rinzai school of Zen, training with koans was systematized into a curriculum of graded koans by Hakuin Zenji (1685-1768) in the eighteenth century.¹¹ Today, formal training using a graded curriculum is primarily associated with the Rinzai school of Zen and the Soto Zen White Plum asanga created by Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi. Members of the White Plum Asanga, which is in the Harada-Yasutani lineage, include Jan Chozen Bays, Bernard Glassman, Joan Halifax, John Looi,

and many other notable Zen teachers. Many other Soto Zen sanghas engage in informal koan study.

Besides their seemingly illogical wording (“What is the sound of one hand clapping”), the use and understanding of koans as a focus of practice in the West today remains problematic for a number of reasons.¹² Three of these reasons are mentioned here. First, and perhaps most important, koans are deeply rooted in the poetry, works of prose, and culture of Medieval China. Few Westerners read Chinese and have a firm understanding of that context. Second, the present-day focus on the three major collections mentioned above, each of which has its own distinctive view, obscures the wider variety of views expressed in the many other collections of koans put together during the Song period (thus we have a limited view of the diversity of koan practice in the past). And third, largely through the influence of D. T. Suzuki and his concentration in his many books on twentieth century Rinzai Zen, it is widely assumed by western practitioners that successful practice with koans results in some kind of ineffable awareness about reality as “it really is.” In actuality, koans were used in a variety of ritual, social, literary, and popular religious contexts.¹³ Koan practice in Soto Zen centers in the West today is in general a product of these problems.

Use of Koans in Soto Zen in the West Today

In contrast to the Rinzai school’s use of a structured curriculum of koan study, the Soto school (at least in the West) tends to strike a balance in its use of koans between dharma talks by Zen teachers on what the intended point of a koan is and long-term (perhaps for a lifetime) meditative contemplation by practitioners on the critical phrase of one or only a few koans. Since as a literary genre it is assumed that koans have a point, the dharma talk

provides an opportunity for teachers to convey what they believe that point is, and of course to display the nature of their own enlightened mind. For the practitioner, the purpose is not to decode the koan's intended point but to use the koan to become better acquainted with oneself, that is, to "excavate" into one's own subconscious. Here, the question is not "What does the koan mean?" but "What does intense concentration on the koan bring up when one practices intensely with the koan?" The practice for the practitioner is to immerse oneself with vigor in the saying, both on and off the mat, without intellectual pondering or any other form of discursive examination.

It is unclear at present how many Soto Zen centers use koans in this active manner. A guess from experience is that most centers focus on just sitting. In just sitting centers koans are occasionally referred to in dharma talks and are the focus of an occasional class or two, but are not used as an essential focus in practice.¹⁴

Three Examples

The following three examples illustrate how koans might be used as a focus of practice in a Soto Zen center. In actual practice, the meaning of the koan and the means of working with the central point would be flushed out.

1. **What is this?** This question derives from an encounter between the Sixth Patriarch, Huineng (618-713 C. E.), and a young monk, Huaijang, who became one of his foremost disciples:

Huaijang entered the room and bowed to Huineng. Huineng asked, "Where do you come from?" "I came from Mount Sung," replied Huaijang. "What is this and how did it get here?" demanded Huineng. Huaijang could not answer and remained speechless. He practiced for many years until he understood. He went to see Huineng

to tell him about his breakthrough. Huineng asked, “What is this?” Huaijang replied: “To say it is like something is not to the point. But still it can be cultivated.”

The whole story is considered the koan, and the question itself, “What is this?” is the central point – the *huatou* in Chinese. The practice is very simple. Whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down, you ask repeatedly, *What is this? What is this?* This is not really a question to be answered with the conceptual mind or mental analysis, but more a way of *being* with things with an openness and inquisitiveness into “what is.” As thoughts, feelings, and experiences arise, however “good “or “bad,” painful or pleasurable, we don’t fight that arising, but instead just remain in mindful awareness of what shows up, as best we can. This staying with “what is” is the practice, for our story lines will struggle to take control. Working patiently and compassionately with the “What is this?” koan is a very skillful way to start loosening up the tight grip of the ego on our lives.¹⁵

2. **I don’t know.** This koan is the story of an encounter between Bodhidharma and Emperor Wu.

The emperor of southern China asked the great master Bodhidharma, “What is the highest meaning of the holy truths?”

Bodhidharma said, “Empty, without holiness.”

The emperor asked, “Who is facing me?”

Bodhidharma replied, “I Don’t know.”

The emperor did not understand. After this Bodhidharma crossed the river into northern China.

This is a foundational Zen story that plays on the tension between the two truths of Mahayana Buddhism, the absolute and the relative. The absolute is what is beyond words (the One in the Many; emptiness; timeless impermanence); the relative is what is created through the use of words, which includes individuals, trees, and lakes, as well as suffering, hurt, joy, and happiness. The crucial point here is that we are all subject to the action of the relative and absolute. While Emperor Wu's questions are asked from within the realm of relative truth, Bodhidharma's answers are firmly anchored in the realm of absolute truth. The practice here is to repeatedly say, "I don't know" (as in the first example above). In this case, working patiently and compassionately with the "I don't know" koan is a very skillful way for us to become aware of the fabricated nature of the relative truths we live by, as well as the profundity of the "emptiness" of the realm of absolute truth.¹⁶

3. **Everyday mind is the Way.** This koan is about an encounter between Nan-ch'an and his student Chai-chou.

Chao-chou asked Nan'ch'an, "What is the Way?"

Nan'ch'an said, "Everyday mind is the Way."

Chao-chou asked, "Should I turn toward it or not?"

Nan'ch'an said, "If you turn toward it you turn away from it."

Chao-chou asked, "How can I know the Way if I don't turn toward it?"

Nan'ch'an said, "The Way is not about knowing or not knowing. When you know something you are deluded, and when you don't know, you are just empty-headed. When you reach the Way beyond doubt, it is as vast and infinite as space. You can't say its right or wrong."

With these words Chao-chou had sudden understanding.

This is another foundational koan, for it stresses that we are inextricably anchored in our everyday life. Here the question “What is the way?” is actually asking two questions, “What is true (real, essential, etc.)?” and “How do I live that practice?” In Nan-ch’an’s answer, “Everyday mind is the way,” everyday means normal, repeated, and so on. It’s just the way mind is, the way consciousness is, how things are, the ordinary – *this* is the way. We don’t (and shouldn’t) have to make up anything beyond this. But there is everyday mind and everyday mind. We have to live our life fully as it is, but we have to make some effort to break out of our normal habits to really experience our life, not to change it. By repeatedly saying “Everyday mind is the way” (with the same intensity as in the two examples above), we learn to rest, fully aware, in our ordinary, everyday life (and “waking up” in Buddhism is nothing but a more perceptive understanding of that everyday life).¹⁷

Notes

- 1 T. Griffith Foulk, “The Form and Function of Koan Literature” in Heine and Wright (eds.), *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism*, p. 27.
- 2 For histories of koan use in Buddhism, see Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright (eds.), *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (2000) and John Daido Looi (ed.), *Sitting with Koans: Essential Writings on the Practice of Zen Koan Introspection* (2006).
- 3 For the roots of koan dialogue, see John R. McRae’s “The Antecedents of Encounter Dialogue in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism” in Heine and Wright’s *The Kōan* (pp. 46-74) and relevant pages in his *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (University of California Press, 2003). For the Chinese literary game, see Chap. 4 in Victor Sogen Hori’s *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice* (Wisdom Publications, 2003).

- 4 The *Patriarchs Hall Collection*, which was compiled in 952, is one of the oldest, most reliably dated examples of the practice of commenting on purported old sayings. Many of the (supposedly) original Zen encounters contained in transmission of the lamp histories were recorded in the *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu* of 1004.
- 5 One interpretation is that following the loss of financial support from Song dynasty emperors, monastics turned to regional literati, who found koans an intriguing new literary genre, for support. The first use of the word “koan” to refer to these “old cases” dates to this period (before the twelfth century, they were simply referred to as old cases).
- 6 Examples of publications in English of these three collections are *The Gateless Barrier: the Wu-men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, translated and with commentary by Robert Aitken (North Point Press, 1991), *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record: Zen Comments by Hakuin and Tenkei*, translated by Thomas Cleary (Shambhala, 2000), and *Book of Serenity: One Hundred Zen Dialogues*, translated and introduced by Thomas Cleary (2005 Shambhala reprint of the 1988 original). The present-day emphasis on these three collections is misleading, for there are in reality about two-dozen collections of koans from this period.
- 7 Two recent examples are John Tarrant’s *Bring Me the Rhinoceros: and Other Zen Koans That Will Save Your Life* (Shambhala, 2008) and Richard Shrobe’s *Elegant Failure: A Guide to Zen Koans* (Rodmell Press, 2010).
- 8 For overviews of the dispute and Ta-hui’s use of koans in Zen practice, see Heinrich Dumoulin’s “The Song Period: A Time of Maturation” and Robert E. Bushwell, Jr.’s “The ‘Short-Cut’ Approach of K’an-hua Meditation” in Looi’s *Sitting with Koans*.
- 9 See Dale S. Wright’s “Kōan History: Transformative Language in Chinese Buddhist Thought” in Heine and Wright’s *The Kōan*. Wright suggests that the increasingly anti-intellectual stance of Zen sent “the educated classes in China elsewhere, leading in the final analysis, to the construction of a new tradition that would overwhelm Ch’an Buddhism ...” and force it into a marginal status in China (p. 210).
- 10 See John Daido Looi’s “Dogen and Koans” in Looi’s *Sitting with Koans*. Dogen’s *Shobogenzo*, for instance, is largely a commentary on Chinese koans. Unlike Ta-hui’s emphasis on critical phrases, Dogen commented extensively on all parts of a koan

using innovative imagery. Also see Loori's *The True Dharma Eye: Zen Master Dogen's Three Hundred Koans* (2009) and Steven Heine's *Dogen and the Koan Tradition: A Tale of Two Shobogenzo Texts* (1993).

- 11 For overviews, see Victor Hori's "The Nature of the Rinzai (Linji) Koan Practice" and "The Steps of Koan Practice?" and Philip Yampolsky's "Hakuin Ekaku and the Modern Koan System," all in Loori's *Sitting with Koans*.
- 12 For a review of these and other factors, see pp. 4-5 in Heine and Wright's Introduction to their *The Koan*.
- 13 See Michel Mohr's "Emerging from Nonduality: Kōan Practice in the Rinzai Tradition since Hakuin" and Hori's "Kōan and *Kenshō* in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum" in Heine and Wright's *The Koan*.
- 14 It seems that a survey of the contemporary use of koans in Soto Zen communities, both in the West and in Asia, is in order.
- 15 The comments section of this koan are taken in part from a 2012/02/12 blog by Steven Goodheart and an article in the Fall 2008 issue of *Tricycle* by Martine Bachelor. The koan tends to be a focus of the Korean Zen tradition.
- 16 This is case #1 in the *Blue Cliff Record* and Case #2 in the *Book of Serenity*.
- 17 This is case #19 in the *Mumankan*.

Bibliography, Further Reading, and Other Resources

Classic collections

- Aitken, Robert. 1991. *The Gateless Barrier: Wumen Kuan* (Mumonkan). San Francisco: North Point Press
- Cleary, Thomas. 1993. *No Barrier: Unlocking the Zen Koan* (Mumonkan). New York: Banta.
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- Cleary, Thomas, and Christopher Cleary. 1977. *The Blue Cliff Record* (Pi-yen lu), 3 vols. Boulder: Shambhala.
- Kirchner, Thomas et al. 2013. *Entangling Vines: A Classic Collection of Zen Koans*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
- Yamada, Koun. 2004. *The Gateless Gate: The Chinese Book of Zen Koans*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

General, more accessible readings

- Cleary, Thomas. 2000. *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record: Zen Comments by Hakuin and Tenkei*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Ford, James Ishmael, and Melissa Myozen Blacker (eds.). 2011. *The Book of Mu: Essential Writings on Zen's Most Important Koan*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.
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More academic overviews and commentaries

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