

Zen Bow Article: Working on Koans



(An edited transcription of a teisho given by Roshi Bodhin Kjolhede during the 1992 October sesshin.)

Let me talk about working on koans. You might be able to divide teachers into those who have gone through koan training and offer it as part of their teaching, and those who don't. In the latter category we can find some of the most illustrious names in Zen. Bodhidharma didn't work on koans. Neither did the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng. Ma-tsu, Lin-chi, Hsüeh-feng, Yen-t'ou- the whole koan system came after all of these guys. And the Buddha predated koans by about 1500 years. So obviously it's not really necessary to work on a koan to deepen one's understanding or to realize one's True Nature. But koans are potent devices for liberating our fundamental insight.

Every koan points to this Mind of absolute purity and wholeness. In its own unique way, each one is an expression of this Mind, which cannot be encompassed in words. It cannot be described, this fundamental nature of each one of us that has no limits, that is beyond our ordinary discriminating consciousness, beyond our rational intellect.

The style of Zen offered here is based on that of our immediate ancestors in Japan - Yasutani Roshi and Harada Roshi. We begin with a breath practice, and can actually stay on a breath practice forever. The breath is a profound medium of meditation, and it's used in many kinds of spiritual traditions. But after one has gotten a solid enough grounding in breath practice and has

learned to get some kind of control over the wandering mind, a koan may be better. The student can discuss this with the teacher, and if both feel that it is in the student's interest to do so, then an initial koan will be assigned.

By far the most commonly assigned initial koan or breakthrough koan, at this center as well as throughout the West and Japan, is Mu - "What is Mu?" But when someone feels a natural and compelling need to focus on the inquiry "Who am I?" he or she can do that instead. Typically one will work a long time on an initial koan before moving on to others, but anything is possible. It all depends on one's karma and the ripeness of one's mind. People have broken through their first koan in their first sesshin.

The criterion of when a student is ready to go on from the first koan to subsequent ones has changed over the centuries. In ancient China, monks would typically work for years on a first koan and then, when they finally did have a breakthrough, it was a profound, very thoroughgoing opening. In more recent times, many teachers have recognized that there is much benefit to working on koans subsequent to their first, and that to have even a small opening is enough to enable one to work on subsequent koans. We draw a line and say that until you've crossed this line, your insight into Mu or Who is probably not sufficient to work effectively on later koans. It doesn't mean that your relationship to the koan hasn't deepened. We can say that for every hour that we sit working sincerely on our first koan, we are gaining some understanding of it, of who we are. In a certain way. But it's qualitatively different from the point at which one's understanding is approved. But either way, it's a partial understanding.



After one's initial breakthrough of a koan, which is usually rather light and superficial, one could just stay with that koan and go deeper, and have more thorough breakthroughs again and again. There's no need for one to go on to other koans after gaining this measure of insight into the first koan. I feel that if one wants to stay with the first koan after having an initial insight, fine. But there are extremely valuable things one can learn and qualities one can develop by going on to others. Every koan is essentially comprised in a breakthrough koan. If you have a deep realization of the first koan, then the other koans will be more transparent. But there are some qualifications to be made here. Koan collections originated in China, and any given English translation may have passed through a Japanese filter as well. But in any case, no Western student, regardless of his or her experience in Zen, can hope to match the linguistic and cultural understanding of his Asian counterpart of the tenth or fifteenth or even twentieth centuries. The teacher has to offer what help is necessary at this level, but if he himself has spent little or no time in Asia, he can only offer so much. So even a student with relatively deep insight into the initial koan will have some culturally conditioned difficulties with later koans.

After being passed on one's first koan, it really won't do to think of oneself in terms of being "enlightened." And it's not just that such a notion would belie one's awakening. It's more than that. Even if that noxious word [enlightenment] is accepted on its own terms, it's debatable whether it applies to what most of us experience when we "enter the first gate." Let's be frank here: although there has to have been a qualitative change in one's insight, it rarely merits the term "enlightenment." The teacher has a battery of testing questions that help him ascertain whether the student has experienced a "shift," let's call it, in perceptual awareness that will free him up enough to work effectively on other koans. Responding to them satisfactorily is "necessary but not sufficient." Other considerations include emotional maturity, how long the person has been practicing, and the soundness of his or her character. Character is especially important. As we know, if it is shaky, the insight can wreak havoc. Going by my contact with colleagues at our annual Zen teachers' meetings, and by my exposure to koan students at their centers, it's fair to say that in modern times passing one's first koan doesn't often imply an earth-shaking experience. (One person wryly noted, "It was nothing to write home about.") Aitken-roshi uses the moderate term "milestone." Here we simply refer to "getting through one's koan," or "beginning work on subsequent koans." Any way you look at it, it's just a beginning.

Roshi once used the example of the sun rising. We begin practice at midnight, when it's pitch dark. Then, gradually, as the hours pass, it starts to lighten up a little towards dawn. This, we could say, corresponds to getting deeper into one's first koan, getting through the initial confusion and feeling of separation,

and starting to find one's way into it. This is this pre-dawn light. And it may grow steadily lighter, but as long as the sun is below the horizon, the base is darkness. When just the upper edge of that sun peeps up over the horizon -that corresponds to an insight into the first koan. It's a long way from high noon, when the sun is blazing down, the shadows are sharp, and everything is brightly illuminated. But at least that little upper edge of the sun is visible, and that alters the base to one of light. In most cases - you can't make any absolute statements about this, there are so many subtleties with the mind - but in most cases that's enough to begin to work with other koans.

Working on secondary koans can be demanding. That's the nature of the training. They confront us with our ever-incomplete understanding, forcing us to leave behind what we thought we knew. Zen Master Hakuin - who is said to have had eighteen major awakenings and countless smaller ones refers in his writings to "those vile koans." So we might as well make peace with the fact that they're always going to give us trouble.

One of the great benefits of going on and working with koans subsequent to your first is that they show you, again and again, in myriad ways, the limitations of words and concepts. Every koan is showing us this and forcing us to see through these words to experience the reality that they're pointing to. In presenting one's take on a koan, one may not explain them in the ordinary sense. Explanations are dead. One has to find a way to demonstrate them, in a living, dynamic, and direct way. Anyone who has worked on many koans knows how habituated the mind is to words and concepts, and how they blind us to experience itself.

There is an outstanding passage by Heinrich Zimmer that Roshi quotes in *The Three Pillars of Zen*. It refers to certain types of meditation, but we can read it as a wonderful tribute to koans. This is Roshi speaking first:

The great merit of koans, which range over the vast area of the Mahayana teachings, is that they compel us, in ingenious and often dramatic fashion, to learn these doctrines [the Mahayana teachings] not simply with our head, but with our whole being, refusing to permit us to sit back and endlessly theorize about them in the abstract.

Then he gives this quote of Heinrich Zimmer:

Knowledge [or we can say wisdom] is the reward of action. For it is by doing things that one becomes transformed. Executing a symbolical gesture, actually living through, to the very limit, a particular role, one comes to realize the truth inherent in the role. Suffering its consequences, one fathoms and exhausts its contents.

As with the breakthrough koan, one can grasp secondary koans at different

degrees of depth. In Zen, we sometimes refer to these different levels in the following way: you can go through a koan like a water-bug, moving pretty fast, but skimming over the surface. Or you can go through it like a horse galloping through shallow water. Or you can go through it like an elephant, slowly lumbering through the depths. It seems to be widely accepted today, in both Japan and this country, that there is considerable benefit in gaining exposure to many koans - and there are many of them. Therefore the teacher does not demand that the student go through each one like an elephant. I have heard one or two students of other teachers boast that with their teachers, you're not passed on a koan until you've gone to the bottom of it, but the understanding of those students belied their claim. Even Hakuin himself spoke of reaching new understandings of certain koans at an advanced age.

In dokusan a teacher will sometimes give the student clues by way of short comments or questions, without explaining anything, to help the student get back on track if she or he is stuck or going in the wrong direction. If it concerns a particular point in a koan that isn't central to it, the teacher may be more explicit if he feels it simply isn't worth dwelling on. But the value of koan work goes far beyond "getting" the koans themselves. In the process of working on any koan, we become aware of how our mind works. We come to see who we really are.

In facing the koan and struggling with it, we confront the stuff of the mind - the frustration, or discouragement, or even anger. It can be appalling, the depth of our confusion and self-pity and rigidity and blaming. It's like a farmer mucking out the stables. Whatever practice you're working on, it's a painful process getting in touch with these afflictions in ourselves that we've managed to keep in the shadows, that we've defended ourselves against for so long. But we have to go through them to see what is beyond. Zazen scours the mind, stripping away the thought-residue that obscures the Self. Someone once said that doing zazen is like looking at yourself in the mirror in the morning before you've had a chance to wash your face. Ugh.

Being rung out of dokusan can be just as valuable, if not more so, than being passed on a koan. Whenever you're working intently, sincerely, you're purifying the mind. You are never really wasting your time. You can do a lot of that cleansing on your first koan, or you can do less of it there and a lot more after that. It doesn't matter, essentially, what practice one is working on. But it's not just a matter of "six of one and half dozen of the other." We never know when death will come, or when we'll have the opportunity as we do now to gain even a first glimpse into our True Nature.

It takes courage and stamina to keep going back to dokusan knowing that you have little idea of what you're doing. Especially with subsequent koans, because one generally offers some kind of presentation each time. It's a process of having one's understanding rejected, again and again and again:

"Here's what I have, here's my understanding." "No, not yet." It's a terrific process of ego-attrition.

This is how we learn to die. Dying isn't something we just hope to manage somehow when we're on our death-bed: it's a daily, moment-by-moment exercise, if we can see it that way. It's dealing with rejection, dealing with loss, and eventually coming to see that nothing, really, can be lost - and that nothing can be gained.

Koan work also teaches us to respond, and responsiveness is an essential quality to a mind that is freely functioning. In dokusan, one has to respond again and again. The tendency most of us have, when our understanding is probed, is to grab at words and concepts and explanations. But this won't do; it is not acceptable. One is then left with nothing from which to respond. Good! Then you've got to respond out of nothing! And that's the richest resource, the ground out of which all understanding must arise. It would be like a child doing a drawing. Without planning, a house appears, or a dog, or a star.

With hesitation, the intellect has a chance to insert itself, to get in there and tangle us up. Our first response is often our best response. It expresses our original wisdom before it has been mediated and watered down and devitalized with words and concepts. Koan training requires that we find our natural spontaneity, that, instead of calculating and strategizing, we allow our responses to come forth no-mindedly. This demands that we get beyond self-consciousness, which may be the biggest handicap in dokusan. That's what makes dokusan such a great testing ground. You're not going to be able to express your True Nature if you're worried about what the teacher thinks of you. You've got to let go of that. Speak! Move! Respond! Go ahead, try something! What have you got to lose? What can you lose?

The best thing one can do, no matter what one's practice, is to forget about what anyone else's practice might be. The only way to grasp a koan, and advance to others, is to thoroughly lose yourself in it, and not to be thinking about others. Fundamentally they're all the same.

I met a woman once who had worked briefly with Nakagawa Roshi, who was Roshi Kapleau's first teacher in Japan. This woman had gone to dokusan with Nakagawa Roshi a few years before he died. She had been working with him on a secondary koan, and they were poring over a book in which this koan appeared, trying to sort through the words and resolve a fine point in translation - sometimes a thorny process. Then, she said, having tired of the linguistic intricacies, he suddenly took the book and threw it across the room, exclaiming, "Only one koan - Mu!"

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