

Corso di Studi Triennale in Buddismo Zen

Koan Investigation,  
*Seeing through the eyes of the  
Buddha Ancestors*

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## **Koan Investigation, *Seeing through the eyes of the Buddha Ancestors***

Koans are recorded dialogues between masters and students of old that express the teaching in a nutshell. They can stimulate us to study and to forget the self and be enlightened by the situation they present. The Japanese word koan is derived from the Chinese gong an, which literally means “public case” and, in the Zen context, it implies a standard of insight that can be—and has been—verified throughout the ages. Koans are meant to inspire practitioners but also to provide teachers with a tool to check their students’ understanding on a regular basis as they oversee their progress. In actual practice, the teacher gives a student a koan as a meditation topic and expects a lively presentation of its implications in dokusan.

Non-rational in character, the koan challenges you to cut through dualistic thinking and allows you to experience yourself and the world as one undivided whole. More advanced koans deal with the endless variety within this unity, the inseparability of these two aspects, and the way we can express this in kind speech and beneficial action.

Since koan practice can prompt us to question our usual frame of mind quite urgently, it requires a lot of faith. We have to be willing to be wrong and make mistakes. In fact, without that willingness, we may never come up with responses that arise directly from our original nature, rather than from conventional understanding.

The Zen tradition recognizes three essentials to accommodate this process: great faith, great doubt, and great determination. Faith is, of course, an indispensable starting point. We need faith in the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha, for instance; faith that we can all share in the experience of enlightenment.

However comforting this faith may be at times, here it is primarily considered to be essential for generating great doubt, or deep questioning. In fact, much of our Zen training is geared towards generating enough faith to dare to question ourselves: If we are all originally awakened, why is it that this experience so obviously escapes us?



Great faith and great doubt together make for great determination; the resolve to really break through our delusive mindset. Sometimes a fourth essential is considered to be necessary for increasing our determination: Great anger, a profound dissatisfaction with our own misunderstanding. There are many ways to deal with anger, but in this regard we often joke that it is too precious an energy to be wasted on others.

Traditional koan collections consist of many cases that are usually dealt with in sequential order, although a teacher may also choose specific ones that seem suitable for a student to work on. In either case, there are certain criteria to be met before students can pass any koan and move on to the next one. However strange it may sound, koans can give experienced teachers a chance to gauge the depth of their student's insight with remarkable accuracy.

There are hundreds of koans, collected in various books or records, so there is plenty of choice. The list of koans used by the White Plum Lineage of Maezumi Roshi includes an anthology of koans transmitted by Koryu Roshi, the Mumonkan (The Gateless Barrier), Hekiganroku (The Blue Cliff Record), Shoyoroku (The Book of Serenity), Denkoroku (The Transmission of the Light), a series of precept koans, and Tozan Goi (Tozan's Five Ranks). Most koans originate in Song Dynasty China but often record the doings and sayings of masters of the Tang Era—known as the “Golden Age of Zen”—a few hundred years earlier.

The cases from the Mumonkan collection seem to deal primarily with the realization of

absolute oneness: seeing that the entire universe is one seamless whole. They are called “dharmakaya koans.” You are invited to identify with whatever the koan presents and become one with it. Yet the koans from other collections shift your focus to the differences in the world and dare you to respond to specific situations.

The ability to see the absolute side as well as the relative side of reality can be tremendously useful. One could say that life situations are koans in themselves. We continuously encounter issues that cannot be resolved by focusing on one side and ignoring the other. So koan practice can give us a broader perspective on life and help us to function in accord with the whole scenario, switching from the absolute to the relative and back without getting stuck anywhere. Sometimes it can get dizzying! We might say that in the realm of oneness, there is nothing to do—except just to be whatever is, which includes how we function. In the realm of differences, there is a lot to do—including absolutely nothing if that seems to be the best course of action in a specific situation.

Some koans have proven to be very effective for stimulating an initial insight, and the most famous one figures first in the Mumonkan. The dialogue goes as follows: “A monk once asked Master Joshu in all earnestness, ‘Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?’ Joshu answered, ‘Mu!’”<sup>58</sup> However tempting it may be, we are not supposed to ponder this dialogue or try to make sense of it in a rational manner. The point is to find out what this Mu really is. That is the question a master will throw at you: What is Mu? Can you show it to me?



The monk who questioned Joshu was probably familiar with the Mahayana principle that everyone and everything has buddha-nature, which is clearly articulated in the scriptures. But he had some serious doubts and wondered: Is it really true? Does any old dog have buddha-nature? Do my sister and her husband have it? And most importantly, of course, do I really have it? If so, why do I not notice much of it, and why do others not seem to notice much of it either?

This is certainly a question we can all ask ourselves. We are told that we are fully endowed with buddha-nature, but can we verify that with our own experience? Investigating Joshu's answer "Mu" can prompt us to do so. Mu literally means "no," and here it is used as an all-pervasive negation. When we manage to completely focus on the single word Mu—without any reservation, even for an instant—it strips us of all our ideas and concepts, leaving us with the bare essence of life. "What is Mu?" is supposed to become a burning question that eventually turns something around deep inside of us. A moment of total negation is followed by a moment of total confirmation. It may feel like death and bring up fears that we have of dying, but there is no need to worry: rebirth is instantaneous.

It may be hard to believe, but you can work on this koan for years until there is nothing left to hold onto, and then suddenly feel completely fulfilled. I have never seen anyone pass "Mu" and then say, "I feel so empty now." When you really get to the bottom of it, what comes up is incredible fulfillment and all things start to shine in their true colors. This is an experience that gives you a very different view of the world and marks the beginning of a whole new life. But there is still a long road ahead in koan practice. First there is a series of testing questions, such as "What is the source of Mu?" When you really dare to go there, it turns out to be a never-ending adventure. And yet, it is possible to give a clear response to such a question that would satisfy all the ancestors. So, what could that be?

It is a miracle to me that the words of old Chinese masters can still have so much impact on the minds of stubborn Westerners like me. I often call the koan "Mu" a wonder pill and congratulate students to whom I am able to prescribe it. We are so lucky! This ancient formula has been tested by generations of practitioners from many different nationalities—Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and others—and can reveal bodhisattva qualities that may otherwise remain obscured.



One could argue that the buddha mind seal that has been transmitted throughout the ages has no particular shape or form and that it is now up to us to invent new methods that would be more suitable for people of our day and age. And although creativity is certainly called for, it would be a shame to be too quick to discard the models of our predecessors. They have expressed themselves in ways that can help us tremendously in appreciating the timeless quality of our life and prevent us from falling for fleeting trends.

There are two things that I would like to emphasize here. One is that koans can only be dealt with effectively in samadhi. In other words, when one has cut through dualistic notions of body and mind, self and other, subject and object—at least to some extent. Otherwise, koans can easily become a form of intellectual entertainment or lead to indulgence in verbal absurdities.

Secondly, as already mentioned, koan training requires regular face-to-face checkups with an experienced teacher, someone who has gone through the whole process. That is why we will go a little more deeply into the various aspects of the teacher-student relationship further on in this chapter.

Coppens, Anton Tenkei, *Timeless Calling, Timely Response: A Guide for Zen Buddhist Practice* (From: Chapter 2, Kindle edition pp. 73-76)

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Caratteri cinesi che identificano la pronuncia giapponese Kōan.



### **Unmon's Bright Light**

Ummon gave instructions, saying, 'Everyone has his own light. If you want to see it, you can't. The darkness is dark, dark. Now, what is your light?' He himself answered, 'The storeroom. The gate.' Again he said, 'It would be better to have nothing than to have something good.' (*Hekiganroku*, case 86, White Plum curriculum translation)

### **Obaku and the Brewers Lees**

There Is No Teacher of Zen The Chinese Master Obaku addressed his assembled monks and said, 'You are all eaters of brewer's lees. If you go about on pilgrimages like this, when can you meet today? Don't you know that in all the land of T'ang there is no Zen teacher?' A monk stepped forward and said, 'But surely there are those in all regions who reform monks and govern assemblies of disciples.' Obaku said, 'I didn't say there is no Zen, only that there is no teacher of Zen.' (*Hekiganroku*, case 11, White Plum curriculum translation)

### **A Non-Buddhist Questions the Buddha**

A non-Buddhist once asked the World-Honored One, 'I do not ask for words, nor do I ask for no-words.' The World-Honored One remained seated. The non-Buddhist praised him, saying, 'The great compassion of the World-Honored One has dispelled the clouds of my ignorance and enabled me to be enlightened.' Making a bow of gratitude, he departed. Ananda then asked the Buddha, 'What realization did the non-Buddhist have that made him praise you like that?' The World-Honored One replied, 'He is like a high-mettled horse which starts at even the shadow of the whip.' (*Mumonkan*, case 32; translation Shibayama, *The Gateless Barrier*, p. 229)

### **The Sound of Something Struck**

The sound of something struck!—and I have forgotten all I knew.  
Training was not even temporarily necessary.  
In movement and deportment I manifest the Ancient Way,  
And fall not into a possible pessimism.  
Nothing of me remains behind when I pass,  
In speech and manner free of dignity.  
All those who have reached this state of knowledge by experience,  
Without exception tell of this supreme activity-potential.  
(*Shumon Kattoshu*, case 28, White Plum curriculum translation)

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