

# WHAT IS A KOAN

## AND WHAT DO YOU DO WITH IT?

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Koan practice is a catalyst to awaken as Gautama Buddha did. Early Chan (Chinese Zen) encounters and statements are precursors of koans. Eventually these impromptu encounters and statements led to the practice of focusing on the koan as one's own deepest question. The point is to directly awaken no-self, or being without self. This was done through rousing the basic religious problem known as great doubt. This doubt calls into question the very nature of one's being, and that of all others. Over time, koan cases and commentaries developed to explore and express awakening from a dream world or nightmare of isolation and opposition. Particularly in Japan, koan curricula developed to foster awakening and to refine it in all aspects of life. Scholars have examined koan practice in light of its history, texts, social and political contexts, and sectarian conflicts. The aim here is to clarify what koans are and how they are used in authentic practice.

The koan tradition arose out of encounters between teachers and disciples in Tang Dynasty (618-907) China. The koans now used in monastic training and in lay groups worldwide grew out of this tradition. Admirers tend to consider koan practice a unique and peerless spiritual treasure. Critics see koan practice as little more than a hollow shell. There are good reasons for both views. By inviting readers to directly open up to their own great doubt, this paper provides a sense of what koan practice is from the inside.

Scholars have described koan practice as both “instrumentalist” and “realizational.” Koans can be instrumental in providing an irrational problem or challenge to provoke awakening. They can also be realizational, meaning they explore and express awakening with a logic all their own. There are two major schools of Zen Buddhism. In Rinzai Zen, koan practice tends to be instrumentalist. The use of koans in Sōtō Zen tends to be realizational. Scholars have even argued that koan practice is little more than ritual reenactment, or a form of commentary on a spiritual text.<sup>1</sup> The value and limit of such scholarship will become clear as we progress.

For over a thousand years, countless people have devoted their lives to koan practice in the Zen Buddhist tradition. If the story of Gautama Buddha’s life stirs something in us – if we have ever had to deeply question who we really are – then great doubt is not far away and we can discern the point of koan practice.

Gautama Buddha’s life, however, has been embellished with myth. So has the Zen tradition. Recent scholars have shown how classic koans have fictional elements or are legends. They are not historical events. Over time, koans were added to or even created for spiritual or other purposes. In actual practice, however, the point is to resolve great doubt – the basic spiritual dilemma at the core of one’s own being.

### *Beginnings: Muzhou and his Genjō-kōan*

The word koan (Ch. *gong’an*) did not begin as a Buddhist or religious term, but as a Chinese legal term. It referred to a public case put before the local magistrate. In early Chan Buddhism, koans retained this legal sense, often with a scathing, accusatory tone – and penalty attached. During the Tang dynasty, when Muzhou Daoming (780-877) saw a fellow monk approaching, he would declare: “It’s an open-and-shut case, but you’re released from thirty

blows!” Muzhou used the now popular term pronounced in Japanese *genjō-kōan*, meaning manifest koan or case at hand. This term is closer to the legal phrase *res ipsa loquitur* – the thing speaks for itself – so it has been rendered here as “an open and shut case.” One time he said: “Ever since this old monk [Muzhou] came to preside here, I’ve not seen one person truly free. Why don’t you come forward?” A monk approached. Muzhou: “The supervising monk is not here, so go out of the gate and give yourself twenty blows.” Monk: “What have I done wrong?” Muzhou: “You’ve just added chains to your cangue [a pillory worn by criminals]!”<sup>2</sup>

Taken lightly, such exchanges may seem amusing but trivial; taken seriously, great doubt may arise. For it presents the monk, and us, with a challenge that stops us in our tracks: What is wrong with the way I am? What did Muzhou discern in the seeking monk? What did Gautama discern that made him leave home and seek the Way? There is, as yet, no method to the seeming madness. Encounters spontaneously occur and take up whatever is at hand. Then they are over. No mention is made of meditating on them or commenting on them. Eventually these “encounter dialogues” were retold, written down, discussed, and became the focus of meditation as koan cases.

In practice, when a koan works, it directly arouses one’s own great doubt.<sup>3</sup> Cutting through traditional Buddhist thought – and one’s own discursive thought and being – koans tend to use common words, familiar concerns, and immediate situations. Let’s consider six classic koans.

## *Classic Koans*

1) *Without thinking this is good or that is bad, right now, what is your original face?*

As mentioned, early exchanges were sometimes altered and some were invented. Sectarian and socio-political concerns also came into play. This koan, and its larger legendary context, is a prime example of these issues. It is attributed to Huineng (638-713), also known as the sixth patriarch of Chan. The koan is found in standard editions of his *Platform Sutra*. “Original face” is a simple and direct way of pointing out buddha-nature, one’s selfless, true nature. Does one put on a face for others? For oneself? “Without thinking this is good or that is bad” uses paired opposites (good-bad) to suggest “prior to all opposing positions that arise from discursive mind.” This is made clear in the fuller statement of the koan ending, “...before the birth of your parents” or “...before your parents gave birth to you.” The paired opposites mother-father represent the causes and conditions from which self, and self-deception, arise.

In the *Platform Sutra*, Huineng is a poor barbarian from the south who is unable to read. He makes a living as a woodcutter. Another classic koan comes from a later encounter with a monk arriving at Huineng’s monastery. Huineng asks where he came from and the monk answers that he came from Mount Song. Huineng then challenges: “Who is this that’s come?” Along with these koans, Huineng is renowned for stating “there’s never been a single thing” in response to the head monk’s poem stressing the need to practice constant vigilance. These koans of Huineng and his *Platform Sutra* are classic Chan.

Except for one thing: none of the classic koan statements from the *Platform Sutra* are found in earlier manuscript versions uncovered in Dunhuang in 1900. There is no mention of “original face,” “who’s come,” and “never been a single thing” in these early manuscripts.

Scholars have been teasing out the complex issues involved. These include sectarian arguments about whether awakening is immediate or gradual, and whether it requires constant application. In actual practice, however, these koans are effective because they are palpable and direct. They work as koans despite, or as Zen scholar John McCrae insists, precisely because, they lack historical accuracy.<sup>4</sup> They can strike to the core of our own great doubt.

2) *Who is the one transcending all phenomena?*

This was the Chinese layman Pang Yun's (d. 808) koan. With family and home responsibilities, Pang must have struggled long and hard with this koan in his daily life. Who is this one free from inner and outer entanglements? Who is this one that literally "does not go along with the ten thousand phenomena?" Rather than being summarily sentenced by Muzhou, or asked by Huineng what is his original face or who's come, Pang already had zeroed in on his own natural koan when he visited the two most outstanding teachers of his time. Their responses helped bring Pang back to his real senses.

The first teacher, Shitou Xiqian (700-791), responded by placing his hand over Pang's mouth. Pang had an insight. Later Pang visited Mazu Daoyi (709-788). When Pang put this same question to him, Mazu responded: "I'll tell you when you've gulped down all the water in the West River!" Pang awakened. After meeting with Shitou, Pang famously expressed his newfound miraculous powers in a poem ending: "Carrying water, fetching firewood." But where is the one seeking to transcend all phenomena now? Here is the "miracle."<sup>5</sup> Chan koans and Chan literature are filled with simple, short, and direct expressions of no-self awakening. This contrasts with more traditional Buddhist ways and mores. Traditional Buddhist teachings have

been replaced with the extraordinarily ordinary mind of carrying wood, returning home to sit by the fire, eating, sleeping, and even answering the call of nature.

3) *“What is buddha?” Mazu: “Mind is buddha.”*

Earlier Buddhist sutras and teachers have made similar claims.<sup>6</sup> But Mazu’s brief and direct expressions such as “mind is buddha” and “ordinary mind is the Way,” along with his legendary strikes, kicks, and shouts, place him at the heart of the early koan tradition. In case thirty of the koan collection known as *Gateless Barrier (Wumen guan)*, compiler Wumen Huikai (1183-1260) illumines the koan with this poem:

*A fine day under clear skies.*

*No use foolishly searching here and there.*

*You still ask what is buddha?*

*Pleading innocence with contraband in hand!*<sup>7</sup>

As Chan developed on Chinese soil and was shaped by the vernacular, it aimed at awakening in a manner untamed and unrestrained by discursive mind or logic. Although the term “Chan” refers to “meditation,” an unfettered dynamism also emerges. Figures such as Mazu, layman Pang, and Linji Yixuan (d. 866) provide fine examples. Ordinary mind produces extraordinary situations and actions. This includes striking, yelling, and overturning tables. It also includes extraordinary statements, not just about mind being buddha but about buddha being a privy hole. Anything – even nothing – to help the other awaken to the truth of no-self directly underfoot:

*4) Like a person up a tree, hanging by his teeth for dear life on a high branch, hands cannot grab the bough, feet cannot touch the trunk. Another person comes along and asks the point of Bodhidharma coming from the west. If he does not answer, he fails to meet the questioner's need. If he does answer, he will surely lose his life. Right now, how do you answer?*

Xiangyan Zhixian (d. 898) was a brilliant Chan monk. One day his teacher Guishan Lingyou (771-853) told him that he did not want the results of his great learning. He wanted to hear just a word as to who he is before his birth. Whatever Xiangyan offered his teacher rejected. Finally, he begged his teacher to teach it to him, but his teacher refused. Driven into great doubt, Xiangyan left the monastery and lived as a nameless gravekeeper. Then one day while sweeping, he happened to hear the “tock” of stone hitting bamboo and awakened. His back was covered in sweat and there were tears of joy in his eyes. Xiangyan now knows the great compassion his teacher displayed in giving him nothing.

The bizarre koan of a man literally up a tree and out on a limb is case five of *Gateless Barrier*. It is Xiangyan's.<sup>8</sup> Out of great compassion, he condensed his life struggle into this koan. Koan practice involves answering through one's own life and limb. This is the source of Chan's compassionate action.

*5) What is the sound of the single hand?*

In Edo period Japan, a thousand years after Huineng, Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769) created this koan: You know the sound of two hands brought together; what is the sound of one hand? Hakuin's challenge is to directly embody and manifest what is indivisible, prior to opposition. Like Huineng's original face koan, there is no reference to any Buddhist teaching or doctrine.

Hakuin used this koan in training his disciples. He found it more effective in rousing great doubt than Zhaozhou Congshen's (778-897) by then overused and over-interpreted *Wu* koan:

6) *A monk asked: "Does this dog have buddha-nature or not?"*

*Zhaozhou replied: "Wu." [Jp. Mu: "Nope!" or "Not!"]*

All beings have buddha-nature, that is, are without self. Yet here Zhaozhou replied "*Wu*." This koan is the first case in the *Gateless Barrier* compiled by Wumen. Wumen comments: "Rouse a massive doubt with your whole being and inquire into *Wu*." Along with the original face and the sound of the single hand, this is the most well known and often used koan.

In sum, self constantly divides itself into me-you, birth-death, like-dislike, good-bad. It could even be said that self **is** this split, this divisiveness. A living koan opens up the great doubt at the root of this existential dilemma so that it can be resolved, once and for all. As seen in Muzhou's koan, discussed above, Muzhou simply and directly gave his verdict without explanation. A clear formulation attributed to Shitou (Layman Pang's first teacher) essentially challenges: "As you are won't do; not as you are won't do either. Neither will do – now what do you do?"<sup>9</sup> Genuine koan practice serves as a formidable barrier that self cannot enter or get into. In this sense, koans are instrumentalist. No-self awakening is the dissolution of the great doubt that forms this barrier. Now one cannot get out of it: what had been an unsolvable problem or challenge for the self has become wondrous exploration and expression through body, mouth, and mind. Thus koans are also realizational. Genuine zazen meditation can itself be the embodied koan.

## *Yunmen and the Koan Tradition*

Raising spontaneous expressions of the past for the purpose of instruction as well as creating his own, Yunmen Wenyan (864-949) could be considered the father of the koan tradition.<sup>10</sup> In a dharma talk, Yunmen said: “Don’t you know that the moment Deshan [Xuanjian (780-865)] saw a monk enter the monastery gate he drove him away with his stick, and when Muzhou saw a monk enter the gate he would say: ‘It’s an open-and-shut case, but you’re released from thirty blows!’” Note that Yunmen is reminding listeners of previous *genjō-kōan*.

In the same dharma talk, Yunmen explains: “Our predecessors offered entangling vines to aid us.” The term “entangling vines” is one of many synonyms for koans, suggesting how they are both a hindrance that snares us and an aid that saves us. Yunmen then cites three more koans of his predecessors, this time ecstatically redolent and animated ones:

*The whole world is nothing but you!*

*Get hold of this old monk on the tips of the hundred grasses,  
find the son of heaven in the busy marketplace!*

*A particle of dust arises and the whole world is contained therein.*

*On the tip of a single lion’s hair the whole body is manifest!*

Yunmen then brings it home: “Get a good grip and inquire thoroughly; after some time an entrance will naturally open. No one can do it for you; it is each person’s own task.”<sup>11</sup> Yunmen has well summed up koan practice by explicitly quoting entangling vine koans of his

predecessors. According to the Zen tradition, this is due to the great compassion of the teachers as they sought to guide more and more students not primed and ready with their own great doubt in the form of a natural koan.

Over the next two centuries koan practice transformed into a unique Buddhist method that encouraged constant, single-minded inquiry on the *huatou*, the essential phrase or point of a koan, in order to rouse one's own great doubt. As shown below, Dahui Zonggao (1089-1163) in Song Dynasty (960-1279) China is the crucial figure for developing this practice. But first, how does koan practice work?

### *How Koan Practice Works: Through Great Doubt to the Heart of the Matter*

Whether monastic or lay, one needs to live a wholesome life and learn proper meditative discipline. Otherwise koan practice is bound to be counterproductive, like trying to swim the English Channel by attaching weights instead of a lifejacket. Even if some insight were gained, such breakthroughs lead to breakdowns. Genuine koan practice, despite role-playing imitation and shamelessly spurious teachers, is solidly based in the Buddhist tradition and commitment to moral conduct.

Living a wholesome life provides a solid basis to develop sustained concentration. Preliminary concentration practices, such as focusing on the breath, help stabilize body and mind. Gradually all one's energy gathers in the belly, not merely as endless discursive thought in the head. A common mistake is to think about the koan rather than actually being inseparable from it and embodying it. To prevent this, one may be required to gather and sustain all one's energies before one is given a koan. However, a koan may also be given to help bring about this sustained, embodied concentration.

Either way, the point is to rouse one's own great doubt. Without doing so, koan practice fails.<sup>12</sup> In Chan, a common formulation which points to this doubt is that one does not know where one comes from at birth or where one goes at death. The real point, however, is that we do not know where we are right now – where **this** really is. Here great doubt opens underfoot. Whether the koan arises naturally or is given by a teacher, if one gives oneself to it, eventually the koan coalesces. One can no longer grasp it as something, anything, even nothing. Rather, now one is grasped by it. The koan may have seemed utterly ungraspable, out of reach; now it is inescapable, a bowling ball in the pit of the stomach, solid and unmovable. Rising from zazen meditation, it rises. No longer limited to time on the sitting cushion, it comes to be what is, whatever and wherever one is. Rather than try to analyze or explain away the felt tension, now the koan throws one directly into the sensation of great doubt as the sensation of great doubt throws one into the koan: *What is it?! Who is this?!* Through great doubt, self comes to a standstill and solidifies as the *huatou* or living core of the koan.

The koan has now taken root; but it has not been resolved. Gradually one's existential doubts coalesce around the koan. Self and doubt become inseparable, one massive doubt or doubt block as it's called. Hakuin: "It's all a matter of raising or failing to raise this doubt block. It must be understood that this doubt block is like a pair of wings that advances you along the way."<sup>13</sup> Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238-1295) stated in his *Essentials of Chan*: "In India and China, in the past and the present, of all the worthies who spread this light, none did anything more than simply resolve this one doubt. The thousand doubts, the ten thousand doubts, are just this one doubt. Resolve this doubt and no doubt remains."<sup>14</sup>

As Yunmen said: "No one can do it for you; it is each person's own task." If available, however, the genuine guidance of a living exemplar is most helpful, serving as a mirror when

one comes in all sincerity, as a formidable wall when not. (Recall Muzhou.) One continues boring into it, without escaping and without wandering into discursive thought about how, when, or why. This state is described as “tasteless” since the usual seeking and evading through sense experience and discursive thought has dried up. Self and all its contortions through intellect, emotion, and will, have come to a halt. Self has nowhere to go. All that I think I know, all that I think I am, becomes as if frozen – good and stuck. Hakuin described it like being “encased in a great sheet of ice,” “seated inside a bottle of purest crystal” such that “all the workings of mind – thought, consciousness, emotions – hung suspended...”<sup>15</sup>

In his *Essentials of Chan*, Gaofeng Yuanmiao describes his experience with the koan “All returns to one; to where does the one return?” (*Blue Cliff Record*, case forty-five):

Unexpectedly in my sleep, there was the doubt: “All returns to one; to where does the one return?” The doubt suddenly arose of itself. I stopped sleeping and forgot to eat, could not distinguish east from west, day from night. Spreading out my sitting mat or putting out my eating bowls, defecating or urinating, active or still, speaking or silent, everything was “to where does the one return?” Without any discursive thought – even if I had wanted to think of something else, it was impossible. Just like being nailed or glued to it, however hard you try to shake loose, it won’t budge.<sup>16</sup>

Great care is needed here as well since insights and experiences may explode on the scene and be mistaken for awakening. From an account of Xueyan Qin (d. 1287):

All the actions of daily life between heaven and earth, all the things of the world, things seen with the eye and heard with the ear, things I had up until now disliked and discarded, as well as ignorance and the defilements – I saw that from the outset they are my own wonderful brightness and flow from my true

nature. For half a month no other characteristics of movement, not even tiny thoughts, arose. Unfortunately, I did not encounter the worthy eye of an expert. I ought not to have just sat in that state. An ancient called this “not dropping off understanding, blocking knowing things as they really are.”<sup>17</sup>

No matter how profound the insight or experience, that alone will not do. Yet as long as one thread of self-attachment remains, fear may hold one back. Thus self remains in this half-frozen state; thus the seemingly ice-cold words and actions of a compassionate teacher, and the extreme rigor of Zen monastic life.

“Die the one great death, then return to life!” is a common expression for the breaking up of this great doubt, as is “the mind of samsara [birth-death] shattered” and “the iron mountain crumbles.” More everyday expressions abound, such as “the pail of lacquer smashed,” and “a bean buried in cold ash explodes.” Being without self, the inviolable dignity of each and every thing is now manifest. Chan teacher Ziyong Chengru (c.1645-?) sums it up in a dharma talk she gave during retreat:

The wise men of old spontaneously pointed at things around them then uttered a phrase. These exclamations were *huatou* that drove practitioners into pitch darkness. Suddenly the doubt block shatters – then for the first time you realize people now are no different than the wise men of old and the wise men of old are no different than people now. Thirteen years ago, this mountain monastic [Ziyong Chengru] embraced her *huatou*. Forgetting sleep and food, simple and steady like a fool, I was as if dead. Now thirteen years later: soft spring sun in clear blue sky illumines everywhere without exception!<sup>18</sup>

This is what koan practice is for, at least initially: this is one's original face, the mind that is buddha.

*From Koan to Huatou: Dahui and Honing the Heart of the Koan*

Edo period Japanese Zen scholar-monk Mujaku Dōchū (1653-1744) described Dahui's approach this way. "Dahui considers the shattering of the mind of samsara to be the most important thing. This is not necessarily bound up with zazen meditation."<sup>19</sup> By the time of Dahui in the twelfth century, simple koans had already been turned into detailed cases. This led to literary feats by learned monks that explored and expressed awakening. Dahui, on the other hand, fixed the focus of koan practice on the *huatou*, the heart of the koan. Compiler-author of the *Chan Whip Anthology*, Yunqi Zhuhong (1535-1615), described *huatou* as the koan's "compelling single word or phrase." Zen scholar Jeffrey Broughton adds "*that presses in upon one – so urgent, of such great moment that one must do something right now.*"<sup>20</sup> *Huatou* is the slippery abyss of the koan where one falls into it. No longer "a koan" or "the koan," now it is one's own living doubt that must be resolved.

As seen above with Gaofeng Yuanmiao, the *huatou* of the koan "All returns to one; to where does the one return?" is "to where does the one return?" With layman Pang's koan, "Who is the one transcending all phenomena?" the *huatou* is "Who is the one?" This is what is locked onto, rather than "transcending all phenomena," which can lead to endless discursive thought. Dahui even suggested that the *huatou* of this koan inspired him to use *huatou* as a basic teaching tool.<sup>21</sup> The Korean tradition has faithfully followed Dahui's *huatou* practice; the most basic *hwadu* (*huatou*) in Korean Zen is almost the same: "What is this?" It derives from Huineng's response to the monk who came from Mount Song: "Who is this that's come?"<sup>22</sup> On the other

hand, in Japan the distinction between koan and *huatou* is largely ignored, with the word koan covering the basic meaning of both terms.<sup>23</sup>

Unlike koan practice, *huatou* practice developed in Song Dynasty (960-1279) China specifically for laypeople. Monastics stayed for long periods of sustained practice under a teacher; laypeople usually could not. *Huatou* took the more complex, literary practice developing around koan cases in the monasteries and streamlined it. Then the basic work could be done in the world on one's own. Dahui and others such as Gaofeng Yuanmiao described the lay world as the ideal place for *huatou* practice.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Chan term most commonly used for this sustained focus on the *huatou* was not a technical Buddhist term, of which there were many. Rather, the individual was to concentrate (*gongfu* 工夫; Jp. *kufū*) on it the way artisans carefully focus on their work. The term suggests paying constant attention to and carefully working on what is at hand.<sup>25</sup>

Dahui's *huatou* focus is considered a key innovation in koan practice. It served to correct serious dangers he saw, such as attachment to "silent illumination"<sup>26</sup> (a term he used disparagingly to mean a meditation practice that neither rouses great doubt nor expresses awakening) and "lettered Chan."<sup>27</sup> Genuine concentration (*gongfu*) brings the koan down to its essential point or *huatou*. This is none other than one's original face, mind as buddha. As innovative as Dahui's *huatou* practice seems, it was the natural conclusion of koan practice in the world.<sup>28</sup> It was also a return to the roots in an effort to free koan practice of its top-heavy literary leanings.

*The Koan of Literary Zen: Living Words, Not Dead Words*

Dahui focused on the *huatou* for good reason. There was a strong tendency in his time toward “lettered Chan.” Intellectual understanding and clever repartee took precedence over experience. Dahui often criticized Confucian literati and scholar-officials, many practicing under his guidance. They gave brilliant answers to everything under the sun, but failed to shed light on the one great doubt underfoot. He recommended a healthy dose of dullness.<sup>29</sup>

Dahui’s teacher Yuanwu Keqin (1063-1135) stressed live words or phrases instead of dead ones.<sup>30</sup> This was not a matter of avoiding certain dead words and using others that are live. Rather, it was to breathe life into the words used. Certainly some words are more abstract and tend to remove the reader or listener from them, rather than usher them into the subject at hand. More than the words themselves, however, it is a matter of how they are handled. Words can be used to transcend words, to illumine **this**.

*Gateless Barrier* is a fairly straightforward, direct koan textbook. *Blue Cliff Record*, on the other hand, is a masterpiece of Chan literature. *Blue Cliff Record* is a collection of koans compiled and co-authored by Dahui’s teacher Yuanwu. It is based on an earlier work by Xuedou Chongxian (980-1052). Simple koan cases are turned into elaborate texts woven with several layers of poetry and prose. According to Zen scholar Robert Buswell: “A more complex genre of literature can hardly be imagined, rivaling any of the exegetical commentaries of the doctrinal schools.”<sup>31</sup> In Japan, it is common for teachers to go even further and add their own commentaries.

The account of Yuanwu’s awakening reveals the subtlety and sublimity with which he would imbue *Blue Cliff Record*. One day when Yuanwu’s teacher Wuzu Fayan (1024?-1104)

was visited by an official, the teacher recited the following verse to the official, but it was Yuanwu in attendance who got it:

*Repeatedly she calls [her servant] Little Jade, though she needs nothing;  
She just wants her beloved to hear her voice.*<sup>32</sup>

Through this verse, teeming with worldly sentiment, Wuzu Fayuan adroitly expressed effortless, freeflowing sense experience – freed of the very self-attachment and yearning normally associated with it. Thus his attending disciple Yuanwu awakened upon hearing his teacher reciting it. Later, Dahui found students in one-on-one encounters blindly repeating statements memorized from *Blue Cliff Record*. As a result, he is said to have destroyed his teacher’s work. And it does seem to have gone out of circulation for well over a century after that. An afterword in a Yuan Dynasty (1279-1368) reprint states that Dahui burned the *Blue Cliff Record* to save students from making such mistakes. It then adds: “The intention which originally compiled this book and that which burned it were one. How could they be different?”<sup>33</sup> It seems that treating koans as little more than “commentary on a scriptural text” and “ritual reenactment” can be traced back at least to Dahui’s time.

### *Koan Practice as Kōjō: Continuing On, Ever Further*

From the outside, awakening may seem like the end of koan practice. It is also the beginning of “after-awakening practice” – literally “after-satori (悟後) practice.” Terms such as satori and *kenshō* (見性: literally “seeing the nature”) were synonyms for awakening. They have been avoided here since in much modern writing and practice they have been trivialized into mental states, insights, and glimpses. What is after-awakening practice? In a word, awakening

directed toward a specific purpose, such as to remove any stink of attainment, to bring it to life in various circumstances, and to serve others in need. For example:

Qingliang Taiqin (d. 974) said to the assembly: “At first I intended to pass my time secluded deep in the mountains. But troubled by the unfinished koan of my teacher, I emerged and am now completing it for you. A monk came forward and asked: “What is this unfinished business?” Qingliang struck the monk and said: “What the ancestors leave unfinished, their descendants must deal with!”<sup>34</sup>

A more general term in Japanese for after-awakening practice is *kōjō* (向上). This refers to continuing on, ever further. Hakuin often mentions, “The further you go the deeper it gets.” This sums it up. In its broader sense, *kōjō* can refer to the entire practice after awakening. Inspired by Hakuin, several koan curricula have developed in Japan containing hundreds and hundreds of cases. These cases often have several koans each, not to mention capping phrases. This has made koan practice more approachable as a kind of common currency. It has also subjected it even further to role-playing imitation and ritual reenactment. The general outline of these koan curricula has already been introduced in English.<sup>35</sup>

Zen scholar-monk Victor Sōgen Hori has detailed how koan practice is both quintessentially Buddhist and Chinese. He has even shown how the antecedents to koan practice can be found in Chinese literary games.<sup>36</sup> This in no way dilutes the basic point of koan practice: awakening – truly being without self – is not an end in itself. How could it be? By its very nature, it does not remain stuck to itself, or to anything. It freely and compassionately expresses being without self in thought, word, and deed, without leaving a trace. Why would it? This is body and

mind, sense experience in its entirety, resurrected – freely flowing directly from the source rather than through the lens of self.

### *The Koan of Koan Practice: Awakening as the Standard*

Muzhou's younger brother in the Dharma, Linji (Jp. Rinzai) – called the father of koan Zen – clearly struggled with his own great doubt: “In the past, when I had as yet no realization, all was utter darkness.”<sup>37</sup> Several statements attributed to Linji have become classic koan cases. However, Linji did not use the term “koan.” And when he used similar terms, he was condemning their abuse: “worthless contrivances of the men of old,” “seize upon words from the mouths of those old masters and take them to be the true Way,” “inscribe the words of some dead old guy in a great big notebook, wrap it up in four or five squares of cloth, and won't let anyone look at it... Blind idiots! What kind of juice are you looking for in such dried-up bones!”<sup>38</sup> Koans were clearly not Linji's standard for awakening.

Guishan Lingyou (see koan four above) lived at the same time as Muzhou and Linji. Guishan was known for the statement: “Take awakening as your standard.” Centuries later Dahui often used it in his letters to laypeople.<sup>39</sup> It puts the eccentricities of figures like Muzhou and Linji, not to mention Guishan's refusal to teach his disciple Xiangyan, in a suggestive light. It serves as a departure point for genuine koan practice and a fine koan in its own right.

### *The Koan of Authority or the Authority of the Koan*

By contrast, several centuries later Zhongfeng Mingben (1263-1323) stated: “If there is something about a Zen student's realization that the student cannot settle on their own, they will ask the teacher and **the teacher, on the basis of the koans, will settle it for them.**”<sup>40</sup> With

Zhongfeng, previous koan cases, rather than the living source from which they come, have taken on a life of their own and become the standard. Perhaps this view of koans as a standard had something to do with how koan practice developed in Japan from around this time.

Zen scholar T. Griffith Foulk argues: “It is a convention of the dialogue genre in Chan/Zen literature that the voice of the master...always represents the standpoint of awakening, speaks with the greatest authority... The mark of the master, or rather the formal position of master, is to have the last word and pronounce the ultimate judgment.”<sup>41</sup> The literature can be read in this way, and Zhongfeng might even agree. However, it has little to do with living koan practice. The formal one-on-one interview, commonly called *dokusan* or *sanzen* in Japanese, does begin with the student bowing to the teacher. Once this is done, however, the two face each other without a hair’s breadth between. In fact, for a genuine one-on-one encounter, both teacher and student must drop everything – all premise, pretense, and posturing. Ritual reenactment or scriptural commentary will not do here. “Realization equaling the teacher’s diminishes its worth by half; only realization surpassing the teacher is worthy of continuing the lineage.”<sup>42</sup> This statement of Baizhang Huaihai (720-814), a leading Dharma heir of Mazu, is celebrated in the Zen tradition. It rejects blind authority or imitation and expresses what is required of a worthy student – and teacher.

What, finally, is a koan? T. Griffith Foulk states: “The idea that ‘anything can serve as a koan’...is a modern development; there is scarcely any precedent for it in the classical literature....”<sup>43</sup> While his point is well taken, classical Japanese Zen teacher Nanpo Jōmyō (aka Daiō Kokushi; 1235-1309) stated: “Although the number of koans are said to be only one thousand seven hundred, actually the mountains and rivers, the great earth, the grasses and trees,

the forests – whatever is seen by the eyes, whatever is heard by the ears – all of these are koans.”<sup>44</sup> Almost anything can serve as a koan – provided it is taken to the root.

Properly used, koan practice serves as a direct and immediate method that gets to the root of the problem. Many koans originated naturally as a person’s great doubt that had to be resolved at that time and place. They did not begin as handy cases plucked from published collections with standard answers appended. Over time, koans were passed down or developed specifically to help rouse great doubt by focusing on the challenge inherent in the *huatou*, which is none other than the problem in and as oneself.

This paper opened with the bold declaration that koan practice is a catalyst to awaken as Gautama Buddha did. While this is true, it needs to be tempered with a humble awareness that koan practice often fails. This is a troubling facet of koan practice that requires great care and wisdom. Koans are constantly in danger of becoming literary playthings. Koan practice, too, is constantly in danger of becoming imitation and reenactment, or greed seeking after some insight or experience. Seeking to have all one’s problems magically solved through a koan can be a huge problem. It can blind one to the real issue underfoot. Self can corrupt anything it comes into contact with – including zazen meditation and koans. Tragically, even these may be used as escapes from the basic problem they were meant to reveal and heal. Indeed, depending on what one does with them, koans are priceless treasures or hollow shells.

A living koan is not found in a book or transmitted from someone on high. It is found a bit closer to home. The signboard at the entrance to Zen temples throughout Japan welcomes visitors with “Look underfoot.”<sup>45</sup>

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- <sup>1</sup> See Victor Sōgen Hori, “Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum,” in S. Heine & D. S. Wright, *The Koan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 280-315 and Victor Sōgen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 5-15. For koan as problem, challenge, probe, and expression see Jeff Shore, “Koan Zen from the Inside” (Kyoto: Hanazono University, 1995): [<https://beingwithoutself.files.wordpress.com/2011/10/koan-zen-from-the-inside.pdf>]
- <sup>2</sup> *Jingde Transmission of the Lamp*: T2076 .51.0291a28-b03. In English, see Chang Chung-yuan, *Original Teachings of Ch’an Buddhism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1971), 107-115.
- <sup>3</sup> On the meaning and significance of great doubt, see Boshan, J. Shore, *Great Doubt: Practicing Zen in the World* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2016).
- <sup>4</sup> John R. McCrae, *Seeing through Zen* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), xix, 5-6. Also see John R. McCrae, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2006), xiv. Dunhuang version in Philip Yampolsky, *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). The original face koan can be found in case 23 of Zenkei Shibayama, *Zen Comments on the Mumonkan [Gateless Barrier]* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974). T2005 .48.0295c22.
- <sup>5</sup> See Yoshitaka Iriya, *Hō-koji Goroku* (Tokyo: Chikuma Shobō, 1973). In English, see James Green, *The Sayings of Layman P’ang: A Zen Classic of China* (Boston: Shambhala, 2009).
- <sup>6</sup> See Mario Poceski, *Ordinary Mind as the Way: The Hongchou School and the Growth of Chan Buddhism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 168-170.
- <sup>7</sup> See case 30, Shibayama, *Zen Comments*. T2005 .48.0296c27.
- <sup>8</sup> See case 5, Shibayama, *Zen Comments*. T2005 .48.0293c01.

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<sup>9</sup> See Yoshitaka Iriya, *Baso no Goroku* (Kyoto: Zen Bunka Kenkyūsho, 1984), 107-110.

<sup>10</sup> “In all major koan collections, koans featuring Master Yunmen are more numerous than those of any other master.” Urs App, *Master Yunmen* (New York: Kodansha International, 1994), 242.

<sup>11</sup> *The Record of Yunmen*: T1988 .47.0547a10-26. See App, *Yunmen*, 107-108.

<sup>12</sup> See Boshan & Shore, *Great Doubt*.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Yampolsky, *The Zen Master Hakuin: Selected Writings* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971), 146, slightly amended. See Katsuhiko Yoshizawa, *Oradegama* (Kyoto: Zen Bunka Kenkyūsho, 2001), 157, 493-494.

<sup>14</sup> Robert E. Buswell, “The Transformation of Doubt,” (2012): [<https://terebess.hu/zen/mesterek/Gaofeng-Buswell.pdf>], 1, slightly amended. Also see Robert E. Buswell, “The ‘Short-cut’ Approach of *K’an-hua* Meditation: The Evolution of a Practical Subitism in Chinese Ch’an Buddhism,” in *Sudden and Gradual: Approaches to Enlightenment in Chinese Thought*, edited by Peter N. Gregory (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1988), 373 note 126.

<sup>15</sup> Katsuhiko Yoshizawa, *The Religious Art of Zen Master Hakuin* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2009), 250. Also see Norman Waddell, *Hakuin’s Precious Mirror Cave* (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2010), 25-26.

<sup>16</sup> Buswell, “Transformation,” 7-8, slightly amended.

<sup>17</sup> Jeffrey L. Broughton, *The Chan Whip Anthology: A Companion to Zen Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 90, slightly amended.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ziyong Ru chanshi yulu*, in *Zhonghua dazang jing di er ji* (Taipei: Xinwenfeng chubanshe, 1987), Volume 39, 820b. See Beata Grant, *Eminent Nuns: Woman Chan Masters of Seventeenth Century China* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 168.

<sup>19</sup> Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 3, slightly amended. Also see Jeffrey L. Broughton, *The Letters of Chan Master Dahui Pujue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 26, 34. Also see Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 95 note 153.

<sup>20</sup> Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> See Broughton, *Letters*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> See Robert E. Buswell, *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 155.

<sup>23</sup> “In Japanese Rinzai Zen the word *watō* [*huatou*] is a synonym for koan.” I. Miura & R. F. Sasaki, *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Lin-chi) Zen* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & World, 1966), 248.

<sup>24</sup> See Broughton, *Letters*, 9-15. Also see Miriam Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment for Laymen: Ta-Hui and the New Religious Culture of the Sung” (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1978), 210-213, 310-311. For Gaofeng, see Buswell, “Transformation,” 9.

<sup>25</sup> See Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 4-5, 64, 80. Also see Broughton, *Letters*, 23-26. Popularly called *kung fu*, though its connection with martial arts is dubious. See Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 4. 工夫 is also written 功夫. See Miura & Sasaki, *Zen Dust*, 257 note 45.

<sup>26</sup> See Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 76-78. Also see Broughton, *Letters*, 16-20 and Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment,” 260-282.

<sup>27</sup> See Buswell, “Short-cut,” 345.

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<sup>28</sup> See Buswell, “Transformation,” 5.

<sup>29</sup> See Broughton, *Letters*, 15-16, 191-194; Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment,” 255-260.

<sup>30</sup> Similar terms can already be found among Yunmen’s disciples. See Ding-Hwa Evelyn Hsieh, “Yuan-wu K’o-Chin’s (1063-1135) Teaching of Ch’an *Kung-an* Practice,” in *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 17 (Summer 1994), 81 note 45.

<sup>31</sup> Buswell, “Short-cut,” 345. For another interpretation, see Hsieh, “Yuan-wu.”

<sup>32</sup> See Hori, *Zen Sand*, 528, slightly amended. Also see Hsieh, “Yuan-wu,” 82.

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Levering, “Ch’an Enlightenment,” 32-33.

<sup>34</sup> Case 75, Thomas Yūhō Kirchner, *Entangling Vines: Zen Koans of the Shūmon Kattōshū* (Kyoto: Tenryū-ji Institute for Religion and Philosophy, 2004), 39, slightly amended.

<sup>35</sup> See the pioneering works of Hori such as *Zen Sand*. Also see Miura & Sasaki, *Zen Dust*, and Shore, “Koan Zen from the Inside.”

<sup>36</sup> See Hori, *Zen Sand*, 5-7, 41-61.

<sup>37</sup> Ruth Fuller Sasaki, *The Record of Linji* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2009), 283, slightly amended.

<sup>38</sup> Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 166, 216, 237, 260, 278.

<sup>39</sup> “Inquiring exhaustively into the Dharma Principle, take awakening as your standard”: 研窮法理以悟爲則. See Broughton, *Chan Whip*, 166, and Broughton, *Letters*, 179, 210, 288, 310, 311.

<sup>40</sup> My emphasis. Quoted in Miura, *Zen Dust*, 6, slightly amended. See Z. Noguchi & S. Matsubara, *Chūhō Myōhon Sanbō-yawa* (Tokyo: Kyūko-Shoin, 2015), 84, 86.

<sup>41</sup> T. Griffith Foulk, “The Form and Function of Koan Literature: A Historical Overview,” in Heine & Wright, *The Koan*, 33-34.

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<sup>42</sup> See Sasaki, *Record of Linji*, 328-329.

<sup>43</sup> Foulk, “Form and Function,” 26.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in William M. Bodiford, *Soto Zen in Medieval Japan* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1993), 146-147, slightly amended. Hakuin writes: “What is true meditation? It is to make everything: coughing, swallowing, waving the arms, motion, stillness, words, action, the evil and the good, prosperity and shame, gain and loss, right and wrong, into one single koan.”

Yampolsky, *Hakuin*, 58. See Yoshizawa, *Oradegama*, 38, 265.

<sup>45</sup> See case 85, Kirchner, *Entangling Vines*, 44. 看脚下; also 照顧脚下 and 脚下照顧: “Illumine underfoot.” Watch your step!”