

OPENING A MOUNTAIN: KŌANS OF THE ZEN MASTERS.

By *Steven Heine*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. 200 pp.

THE KŌAN: TEXTS AND CONTEXTS IN ZEN BUDDHISM. *Edited by Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000. 322 pp.

The Zen koan is mysterious to many and its significance remains disputed by scholars. Is it a challenging therapeutic device, to be left behind like a raft after crossing the river, or a self-transparent statement of the liberated mind? Is it a logic-defying paradox or does it have its own performative rationality? Is it a spontaneous and often irreverent oral expression or a complex and staged literary form understandable within its context? Is it a narrative with multiple levels of meaning or something that potentially interrupts the work of meaning, narrative coherence, and conventional understanding?

Although paradoxical and even shocking language occurs in other traditions, these two provocative volumes illustrate the uniqueness, significance, and interpretive difficulty of one of Zen's primary practices. Both works are valuable contributions to understanding the context, development, and meaning of the koan from its origins and growth in T'ang and Sung China to later Japanese developments.

Steven Heine's *Opening a Mountain: Kōans of the Zen Masters* includes translations of sixty koan cases, selected traditional commentary, and his account of each case. This rich work gathers significant koans about Zen's encounter with its "other" from a variety of koan collections compiled in Sung China and Kamakura Japan.

The volume is organized around the theme of "opening a mountain." Masters opened up mountains for Zen by confronting and converting local spirits, hermits, and other forces that would prevent or endanger its practice. It refers more broadly to the confrontation and contest between Zen masters and figures representing supernatural forces, indigenous and popular religiosity, and rival forms of practice such as that of the isolated hermit without vows and outside the Buddhist community.

The koans are presented and discussed in five sections concerning: (1) supernatural mountain landscapes; (2) irregular rivals such as hermits, wizards, and dangerous women; (3) supernatural experiences in which bodhisattvas, demons, and magical animals are encountered in dreams and visions; (4) the use of symbols of authority and transmission such as the flywhisk; and (5) experiences of confession, repentance, self-mutilation, death, and the afterlife.

Heine argues that emphasizing the ritual, symbolic, and cultural dimensions of the koan complements understanding it as using paradoxical language to free one from the reification of language through aporia and double-binds. He insightfully shows through his translations and discussions the often ignored mythological and religious dimension of many koans. Even when koans use mythic or supernatural elements ironically, it is still in reference to such a context of belief. Since the out-

comes of these confrontations between Zen iconoclasm and irregular practices and unconventional beings are often uncertain, the koan embodies these tensions between supernaturalism and iconoclasm, ritual and meditative clarity, devotion and enlightenment. Zen masters are not always unambiguously victorious in their confrontations and competition with popular religion in these stories of opening mountains and taming and converting spirits, shamans, hermits, unconventional and rival women (such as the “Zen grannies” and the nuns of cases 23–26), and other irregular practitioners and dangerous forces.

Zen iconoclasm is best exemplified by Lin-chi (J.: Rinzai), known for his advice to kill the Buddha and the patriarchs, who forbade travel to Mount Wu-t’ai, where popular devotional Buddhists believed Mañjuśrī appeared (see cases 13–15). Lin-chi’s Mañjuśrī cannot be seen on sacred mountains but is manifested in your own activity. However, even some koans involving Lin-chi focus on his ambiguous success in dealing with P’u-hua (cases 16, 57), an irregular practitioner attributed with magical powers. Despite such warnings, the bodhisattva of compassion’s sacred mountain continued to appeal to ordinary Buddhists and even Zen practitioners. In these koans, Zen is not simply demythologizing. It is playing a dangerous game of ironic ambiguity and reversal. This indicates that Zen recognizes a degree of validity in other and rival approaches and practices even while attempting to transform and open them up.

Steven Heine and Dale S. Wright’s *The Kōan: Texts and Contexts in Zen Buddhism* collects significant articles by leading scholars of Ch’an and Zen Buddhism. The editors argue that a number of historical and interpretive problems hinder understanding the Zen koan (Ch.: *Ch’an kung-an*). First, the koan is often interpreted according to one important characteristic, the use of logic defying double-binds and absurdities. This has created the impression that the koan is intrinsically incomprehensible. However, recent critical approaches have shown how the koan is comprehensible within its sociocultural contexts.

Another issue is Zen’s self-interpretation and how the polemics and conflicts that constitute its history are portrayed. The standard reading of the controversies between the Northern and Southern Schools during the T’ang dynasty, the disputes over the significance of the koan vis-à-vis silent illumination in the Sung, and the sectarian debates between the Rinzai (Ch.: Lin-chi) and Sōtō (Ch.: Ts’ao-tung) lineages in Tokugawa Japan has become increasingly questionable. Instead of seeing the multiple and shifting, sometimes forgotten, sources and meanings of the koan, the Western reception has been shaped by the recent Japanese Rinzai account. This view, popularized by D. T. Suzuki, sees the koan as a psychological technique aimed at achieving mystical experience. The editors appropriately emphasize the diversity of approaches to koans and their historically shifting roles.

T. Griffith Foulk and John McRae examine the literary and historical origins of the *kung-an*. Whereas Foulk explores the medieval Chinese literary, ritual, and social functions of the *kung-an*, McRae considers the emergence of the koan from the Ch’an encounter dialogue and earlier antecedents. He argues that from the beginning it is a written literary form that cultivates the appearance of oral spontaneity.

Foulk shows how the “Zen of contemplating phrases” originated in an older literary tradition of collecting and commenting on the dialogues of the ancient masters. He suggests that each koan contains a demand for interpretation that is indicated in its very selection as a koan and that is implicit in its “critical phrase” (Ch.: *bua-t’ou*; J.: *watō*). Although the demand for interpretation is justified by the goal of sudden enlightenment, the literary framework is necessary to establish the rich context that drives the exercise of mental concentration. The *kung-an* is a rather late development of Ch’an Buddhism, only coming into vogue in the twelfth century. “*Kung-an*” is a juridical word meaning “court case.” Its use draws a comparison between the Ch’an master and the civil judge. Both sit in judgment and render a decision. The *kung-an* was later understood as an analogy between Ch’an and legal records as publicly available written documents. Decisions about previous *kung-an* would themselves become part of the record such that exercising authority opens the master to criticism in which the judge becomes the judged. This openness and dynamic tension of the koan is due to the reversal in which the awakened person takes the master’s position by demystifying the koan and the master’s authority.

Albert Welter analyzes the doctrine of silent transmission outside the sutras and challenges the “golden age hypothesis” of T’ang era preeminence and Sung decline. The famous story in which only Mahākāśyapa understands Śākyamuni’s flower, and thus becomes the first Zen patriarch, seems to be a Sung fabrication. Welter argues that the Sung is the crucial period for Ch’an, and that Sung developments were retrospectively attributed to the T’ang masters, Bodhidharma, and the Buddha for legitimation. This was the case with the establishment of a basic Ch’an ideology based on four theses: (1) awakening involves a special transmission outside the teaching; (2) do not establish words or letters; (3) directly point to the mind; (4) see one’s own nature and become a Buddha. This doctrine, which had the effect of suppressing Ch’an’s eclectic and pluralistic background, was developed by the Lin-chi lineage during the Sung dynasty in opposition to alternative views advocating the harmony between practice and scripture, meditation and teachings. This syncretism is seen in the pluralism of skillful means of the Fa-yen lineage, which Welter contrasts with the Lin-chi lineage’s anarchic transmission outside of language and antinomian abandonment of the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion toward all sentient beings. He warns against attachment to emptiness and misinterpreting the limits of language to deny language and scripture. After all, Hui-neng’s mind-to-mind transmission occurs through his hearing the Diamond Sutra.

Ishii Shūdō also discusses the differences between T’ang and Sung Ch’an visible in the development of the *kung-an*. This development indicates the attempt to get beyond concentration to illumination into one’s formless original nature through the use of crucial phases like the “not/no” (*wu*) of Chao-chou’s dog. Shūdō textually examines the influence of and transformation from T’ang and Sung editions of recorded sayings and encounter dialogues to the Sung *kung-an* collections.

Heine characterizes the Ch’an master by his interaction with his students. These challenging, intense, and personal interactions notoriously include verbal paradox, hitting, and shouting. Shock therapy works through seemingly unhelpful practices

of humiliation, ridicule, and hazing in order to help the adept overcome obstacles to liberation, especially his own self. This raises questions such as “how do contest and competition shape the *kung-an*?” and “how is the ambiguity between the ideal of Ch’an and popular religiosity negotiated in the *kung-an*?” Heine contends that we need to consider Zen’s social and ideological dimensions in addition to its personal and psychological dimensions. *Kung-an* are not self-contained but should be understood in the context of Ch’an’s relations with other religious modalities. These are typically transformed rather than suppressed. Koans involve double-edged self-deconstructing uses of language pointing at the very emptiness of language without thereby abandoning it. This is especially visible in transformative turning words that reverse expectations and perspectives, indicating early Ch’an’s flexible multiperspectivism.

Morton Schütter investigates the underappreciated role of *kung-an* in the Ts’ao-tung tradition by exploring the debate between the Lin-chi (Rinzai) and Ts’ao-tung (Sōtō) lineages in the twelfth century. The standard account of Sōtō and Rinzai is that the former uses silent illumination and the latter *kung-an* introspection. Yet the Ts’ao-tung lineage, including the masters of “silent illumination” and Dōgen, also used *kung-an*. This traditional view is not far off the mark, since the Lin-chi lineage’s critiques target the whole twelfth-century Ts’ao-tung tradition. This critique responded to the growing popularity of silent illumination meditation with the laity. Since enlightenment is encouraged through repetition of the catchphrase in order to realize what it is getting at, the Ts’ao-tung masters continued to use *kung-an* in their teaching, especially catchphrase *kung-an* such as “why did Bodhidharma come to the East?” However, because silent illumination meditation aimed at the original mind or inherent Buddha-nature beyond words, *kung-an* were unused in meditation. Ta-hui rejected this “mere sitting,” insisting that enlightenment required *kung-an* meditation, and developed meditating on the punchline, such as Chao-chou’s “*wu*,” as an appropriate path to the breakthrough moment of sudden enlightenment.

Dale Wright discusses Zen’s transformative language by tracing the idea of sacred language in Buddhism from the sutra to the *kung-an*. Since it remains connected with the awakened mind beyond language, Buddhism retains a sense of reverence and awe for the sacred word in sacred formulae, devotional recitations, and visualization and conceptualization contemplations. These latter koan contemplations are precursors to the meditation that intensifies the *kung-an*’s strange and paradoxical character. The author describes the *kung-an* as an estrangement from the everyday that transforms one’s relation to it through a reversal of ordinary relations. But are they strange or transparent to the awakened mind? Although the Ch’an tradition contains both interpretations, Wright argues that early Ch’an emphasized its paradoxical character and the later tradition its clarity to the enlightened mind. Wright reverses the standard view by arguing for the importance of silence in the Lin-chi tradition and of the word and *kung-an* in the Sōtō tradition. He analyzes the decay of the *kung-an* as it is (1) reabsorbed into *zazen*; (2) displaced by the growing priority of faith and rejection of the ethics of achievement in late Medieval China, with a corresponding insistence on an anti-intellectual Zen fundamentalism; (3) reified in the separation

of Zen from the larger intellectual community; and (4) standardized by the loss of its iconoclasm and creativity. The later Ming and Ch'ing era turn to metaphysical and psychological explanations, which seek to conceptualize the nonconceptual, produced meta-narratives about the reason of unreason in Zen. These apologetic narratives inform Zen's introduction, through authors such as D. T. Suzuki, to the West.

Alexander Kabanoff explores the work-context and use of koans in the poetry of Ikkyū Sōjun, one of the most well-known monk-poets of Muromachi-era Japan, whereas Ishikawa Rikizan examines *kirigami* (secret initiation documents with magico-religious, occult, and ritual aspects) used to interpret the hidden meaning of koans in medieval Sōtō Zen.

Michael Mohr describes koans in Rinzai Zen since Hakuin and argues that recent sectarianism has been projected backwards. For example, koan use was only recently purged from Sōtō in order to accentuate its difference from Rinzai. Mohr suggests that interpretations stressing paradox ignore the monastic context where koans are used as personal training devices between master and student. Despite deemphasizing paradox, Mohr describes the deepening and condensation of doubt resulting in a knot demanding resolution and use of contradiction. For Mohr, understanding the koan means demystifying it. Meditation occurs in and through everyday activities, combining doubt and distress, and resulting in satori as a changed relation to the ordinary world. Satori is the ongoing integration of awakening in daily life and practice, constantly "going beyond" to prevent attachment and reification.

For Mohr, three events transformed Zen during the Tokugawa period: (1) increased government control of Buddhist temples; (2) the arrival of Chinese Rinzai monks who claimed to be the true heirs of Lin-chi, thus challenging the established Rinzai lineage; and (3) the merger of this *ōbaku* current with the still marginal Myōshinji group around Hakuin, the great reformer of the Tokugawa era. This confluence made his reforms possible, including the systematization of koan practice. This reveals that Rinzai Zen is more complex and heterogeneous than is often thought.

G. Victor Sōgen Hori interprets the koan and *kenshō* in contemporary Rinzai monastic practice. He rejects the view that koans are clever psychological devices designed to induce a mystical state. Koans are not incomprehensible but develop discriminatory awareness such that they are not instruments but paths of realization. Koans are grasped only performatively in the transformation of behavior. *Kenshō* (seeing one's nature) is accordingly something one does, since koans are ways of seeing instead of objects. Satori is not an otherworldly breakthrough but a breakdown of the duality of subject and object suggesting a changed relationship to this world. The rejection of the dualism between duality and nonduality means the integration of awakening and ordinary life.

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