

Koan, Hua-t'ou, and Kensho

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The zen of 'encounter dialogue' (in koan stories, koan dialogues and transmission stories) is a captivating form of zen, more so than the Soto variety of just sitting or 'silent illumination'. Koan zen is colourful and exciting to our imagination though the Soto shikantaza is the more widely practiced form. The practice of shikantaza or just sitting has its own problems, but the koan practice is more problematic and provokes many questions. Here I would like to focus on the koan practice. I will not be focusing on the problems of koan history, culture or the social-political realities but rather on practice as such.

When zen developed in China in the 6th century, it was rather the Indian form of dhyana or meditation, which was silent seated meditation. Gradually the pragmatic students and masters began asking questions as to what was unique to zen, and how the Buddha-nature was present in sentient beings and what constituted liberation and enlightenment. It led to a radical simplification of doctrines, to awakening in the here and now and to oneself as no other than the Buddha-nature. It involved the existential question of trust and faith embracing the self, the teacher, and the teaching. This led to the so-called 'encounter dialogues'—questions and answers between students and masters, often the master's word or gesture provoking a 'sudden' awakening in the inquirer. Mazu Daoyi (709—788) seems to have been the pre-eminent master of such dialogue practice. The Tang Dynasty period (618—906) was the Spring time of such encounter dialogues and dynamic masters. It was however during the Northern and the Southern Sung period (960—1279) that such dialogues and the history of the masters were self-consciously codified and constructed; facts and fictions were interwoven and the zen dialogues became ritualized dialogues, and enlightenment dramas of the masters were de rigueur (see Cole, 2009).

Silent Illumination versus Dahui

During the 12th century zen entered a decline due to socio-political conditions. At the same time a new form of Soto zen (*Caodong* in Chinese) revived the fortunes,

particularly with the educated classes, the literati. The main proponent of this form of zen, referred to as ‘silent illumination’, was Hongzhi Zhengjue (1091-1157). A quotation from Hongzhi:

“The correct way of practice is to sit simply in stillness and silently investigate. Deep down there is a state one reaches where externally one is no longer swirled about by causes and conditions. The mind, being empty, is all-embracing. Its luminosity being wondrous, it is precisely appropriate and impartial. Internally there are no thoughts. Vast and removed, it stands alone in itself without falling into stupor. Bright and potent, it cuts off all dependence and remains self-at-ease.” (qtd in Child, 2012)

This approach to practice provoked the rivalry of Dahui Zonggao (1089—1163) of the *Linji* (Rinzai in Japanese) school. Dahui seems to have been genuinely concerned with the experience of zen awakening being undervalued; but the rival school gaining most of the patronage of the educated elite was likely to his chagrin, too. In opposition to silent illumination, Dahui portrayed zen as a drama of heroic effort and sudden breakthrough to kensho or enlightenment. He posited the hua-t’ou as the best means for this breakthrough (Lachs, 2012). Hua-t’ou is translated as critical phrase, viewing the phrase, head-word, or punch-line (*hua-t’ou* in Chinese, *wato* in Japanese, *hwadu* in Korean).

Until then, koan zen and encounter dialogue were usually based on zen stories of masters and monks, on catch phrases such as ‘What is the meaning of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West?’ or on one’s present situation. Dahui’s hua-t’ou was one word or phrase taken from a zen story, like the words *What*, *Who*, *Why*. Most often, he used the story of Joshu and the dog, taking the one word of Joshu’s Mu/Wu as the hua-t’ou. He instructed a student working on another koan:

“You must in one fell swoop break through this one thought—then and only then will you comprehend birth and death. Then and only then will it be called accessing awakening....You need only lay down, all at once, the mind full of deluded thoughts and inverted thinking, the mind of logical discrimination, the mind that loves life and hates death, the mind of knowledge and views, interpretation and comprehension, and the mind that rejoices in stillness and turns from disturbance” (in Buswell, 1987).

Hua-t’ou, Dahui insisted, should be practiced in non-reflective concentration, without any narrative content, meaning, insight or linguistic access. Great Doubt, tireless effort and deep faith were the sine qua non. If one was all one-pointed day and night on the hua-t’ou, there would come a breakthrough. Paradoxically,

this non-intellectual, single-minded and faith-based practice is not that different from the steady shikantaza of silent illumination. The main difference, it would seem, was the emphasis on heroic effort in practicing hua-t'ou and on serene abiding in stillness in the other. Already during the Ming period (1368—1644) the hua-t'ou was practically replaced by *nembutsu* of Pure Land Buddhism, and zen and Pure Land Buddhism were not seen as very different. Thus, as he is said to have destroyed the famous literary commentaries of his own master on the *Blue Cliff Record*, so also his approach to zen contributed to the demise of zen as such. Zen in present day China is not much different.

Korean zen

Korean zen derives directly from Dahui's hua-t'ou zen, centering on Great Doubt and the investigation of the hua-t'ou. Korean zen master Chinul (1158-1210) and his disciple Hyesim (1178-1234) established koan zen in the country while the silent illumination did not take root. During the Japanese occupation of Korea in the last century, the Japanese establishment tried to impose the Japanese Soto zen on Korea, but there was a violent reaction against Soto zen.

At present there seem to be three approaches to working with hua-t'ou (cf. Ryan Bongseok Joo, 2011, for information on the masters). Some masters focus exclusively on the hua-t'ou, coordinating it with breathing. The meditation is supposed to become automatic throughout night and day, coupled at the same time with relentless effort. Enlightenment is evaluated in terms of the effort prior to kensho, the intensity of the doubt and the quality of concentration on the hua-t'ou.

Another group of masters decry the mindless concentration on the hua-t'ou; they ask the students to investigate the meaning of the hua-t'ou, for example, the why of Mu. They would focus on the context and the meaning of the hua-t'ou, would regard the coordination with breathing as hindrance, and would posit constant meditation on the hua-t'ou, even in dream or dreamless state, as a necessity.

The third group of masters focus on the answers to the hua-t'ou; such a focus is supposed to be helpful to the lay followers. They do not worry about first calming the mind before focusing on investigating the hua-t'ou. The doubt and the effort are supposed to produce bodily sensations, too. These teachers also focus on the pre-enlightenment experience.

In addition to the hua-t'ou investigation, all these teachers focus on the actual moment of awakening. All of them believe in the innate, inherent Buddha-nature of the self, and the clouding of the rational mind has to be removed in instant,

sudden awakening. This ideology of *sudden awakening* has led Korean zen into confused knots. Of the three traditional requirements of the way of zen, Great Faith, Great Doubt and Great Effort, Doubt has a central place in the Korean practice. It is said that Doubt is the beginning and end of hua-t'ou practice. I will offer questions to and criticisms of the Korean practice later.

Japanese Zen

Unlike in China, zen in Japan is split into two major sects, Soto and Rinzai. The Obaku sect is a minor one. Dogen Kigen (1200—1253) traveled to China during the 13th century and brought back the zen of silent illumination with a sectarian identity. Myoan Eisai (1141—1215) went to China and studied under a Lin-chi master and returned and established the Rinzai school. It was only in the 18th century with Hakuin Ekaku (1686—1769) that Rinzai zen became well organized with a proper koan curriculum and discipline. It was two disciples of Gassan Jito (1727—1797), the heir of Hakuin, who fixed the 'Hakuin zen' into two teaching styles current today. There are some variations in the two systems and also with each Rinzai school; however, overall the koans and their standard answers are fixed. The koan curriculum comprises the initial koan of Joshu's Mu or Hakuin's the Sound of One Hand, followed by some miscellaneous koans and then the traditional koan collections such as the Mumonkan, Hegikanroku, Rinzaieroku, Kidoroku and so on. The student has to go through the main case of the koan and then the subsidiary cases as well. Furthermore, for each koan a capping phrase has to be chosen from an established collection and has to be presented to the master in dokusan.

For 'passing' the first koan of Mu (or the Sound of One Hand), the student has to concentrate on mu one-pointedly day and night, similar to the practice of hua-t'ou with Dahui or the Korean way. Sometimes, the student is advised even to shout out 'Mu'. The aim is to 'become one' with the koan so that the koan possesses one and it can even be said that the koan becomes the agent. Of course this can be achieved in some measure, and not completely; if totally, it would be psychosis! No doubt, with enough effort and practice, one can get into an ersatz emotion. In the process, one can also have some psychic experiences such as hallucinations, auditions, and visualizations. When one can show to the master that one has 'become one' with the first koan, one is certified as having passed the koan or having awakened. To call it 'awakening' is a euphemism. One example of honest disappointment with such awakening is the case of the famous philosopher Nishida Kitaro (1870—1945). He was working on the koan

Mu, and Kōju roshi acknowledged his passing of Mu and attaining kensho. Nishida wrote in his diary: “7 a.m., listened to the talk. Evening, a private audience with the master. I was cleared of the koan ‘Mu’. But I am not that happy” (Yusa, p. 72). Another such case was that of Yamada Kō’un of Sanbo Kyodan, who was quite disappointed with the confirmation of his passing of the first koans with Asahina Sogen roshi of Engakuji.

Then follow the capping phrases and the subsidiary koans to the main koan, then the miscellaneous koans and subsequently the traditional koan collections or selections from them. In the end, the Five Ranks could be added, the Precepts, and so on. When going through these koans, unlike in the beginning koan, one has to get into the stories, grasp the main point, or visualize and ‘become one’ with the main phrase or image. One has to learn clever repartees, ritualized language and gestures and be submissive to the master’s diktat and arbitration. With the Rinzai tradition, ‘post-enlightenment’ refinement and maturation is seen as vital. However, whether genuine maturity and depth of zen vision arise is questionable. Running through the course of the koans requires crafty intelligence, skill and the help of companions and others. The koan answers are mostly stereotyped ones, set in the old Chinese/Japanese cultural, ritualized forms.

Critique

I would like to focus on two major problems with the current koan practice. When one takes the whole of the zen tradition, there are resources for authentic awakening and realization. But the methods and techniques of Dahui as well as of the Korean and Japanese Rinzai zen are inadequate and wanting in authentic awakening and realization. The one-pointed, non-intellectual concentration on the hua-t’ou (or Mu) is a pressure-cooker tactics, a reduction to a technique which can produce some psychic experiences. These methods and techniques are forced efforts which can even run on auto-pilot. They can produce experiences but not prajana wisdom. Some speak of ‘investigating’ the hua-t’ou, but it is rather a matter of concentration, which sometimes can provide insights, yet no more than that. When awakening is reduced to a product of performance of techniques, it is betrayal of one’s heart and mind. Some teachers even promise that observing the correct method and technique will automatically lead to awakening. This is but magic as well as deluded scientism. Furthermore, finding the correct answers to the koans or ‘passing’ the koans is not awakening either.

The so-called kensho experiences are only passing experiences, not enduring self-/world-transformation.

With regard to experiences: There are experiences which are particular and passing. These are the ones which one 'has'; they can be deep, shallow, great, wonderful, good, bad and so on. Zen rejects these kinds of experiences as *makyos*, illusions. On the other hand, there are experiences which can be transforming of self and world, and the transformation will be enduring. Such experiences are the so-called metaphoric processes, or they may be structure-antistructure reversals (see Samy, 2005, 2007). The first sort of experiences will come and go; they depend upon our bodily conditions and brain states. Furthermore, experiences are open to multiple interpretations. The social milieu and our world-views condition and colour our experiences. Experiences can be also produced, manufactured and manipulated. There is thus a politics of experience.

Having or undergoing an experience is no guarantee of the truth or the validity of awakening. There has to be a transforming world-view, enduring and non-dualistic, for an authentic awakening. Such a transformation of world-view is a matter of life-and-death, it is death and rebirth. However, this is not a matter of mere will-power and effort but one of awareness, understanding, and judgment. Furthermore, the awakening has to be interpersonally authenticated between the master and disciple. And moreover, it is in action that the realization of non-duality is manifested. It is self-appropriation and self-constitution in love and freedom (see chapter 12 on Meditation and Therapy in Samy, 2010).

Authentic Awakening

The pre-requisites for zen practice and awakening are said to be Great Doubt, Great Faith and Great Effort. I will focus on Doubt first.

Doubt can be understood on many levels and dimensions: epistemological, metaphysical, psychological, ethical, religious. Descartes is well-known for his methodological doubt. Doubt basically means an attitude of questioning and vacillation between two opposite poles. It falls between certainty and nihilism. Scepticism, cynicism, credulity, pride and all such attitudes are enemies of genuine doubt. Doubt is founded on humility, openness, honesty, sincerity and trustfulness. Doubt is inherent to religious life and knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, doubting is simply a matter of questioning our beliefs and experiences. For example, when the young Dogen was studying with the Tendai teachers on Mount Hiei a question began to nag at him. His teachers told him that 'all beings are endowed with Buddha nature'. Dogen asked, 'If that being the case, why was it necessary to practice and seek enlightenment?' It is said that you begin zen practice with the belief that you are originally Buddha-nature. But what is Buddha-nature? Is it permanent? Or impermanent? Or interdependence? Is it the self? Or, no-self? The Buddhist sutras can yield diverse even contradictory interpretations. And all these assertions are only that, assertions. Doubting means putting to question all such assertions and beliefs. However, it does not mean that you will come to assent finally to the belief that you are innately Buddha-nature or to find some secure ground. The questioning will go on asking what this Buddha-nature means, how it obtains, what is its truth and validity and so on. Not only this belief, but all beliefs such as: self, no-self, impermanence, Buddha, original nature, heaven and hell, all are put to question. Finally you will stand facing an abyss as this Hasidic story of the 'Fiftieth Gate' demonstrates (Wiesel, 1978):

“Rebbe Barukh of Medzebozh had a disciple who was caught too much in intellectual questions. The Rebbe could not answer all his questions. The disciple withdrew from the Rebbe and the community, and began to dig more and more into his own doubts and questions; all of which only leads him deeper and deeper into despair and thoughts of suicide. The Rebbe one day goes in search of him and stands face to face with his disciple:

‘You are surprised to see me here, in your room? You shouldn’t be. I can read your thoughts. I know your innermost secrets. You are alone and trying to deepen your loneliness. You have already passed through, one after the other, the fifty gates of knowledge and doubt—and I know how you did it. You began with one question; you explored it in depth to discover the first answer, which allowed you to open the first gate; you crossed and found yourself confronted by a new question. You worked on its solution and found the second gate. And the third. And the fourth and the tenth; one leads to the other, one is a key to the other. And now you stand before the fiftieth gate. Look: it is open. And you are frightened, aren’t you? The open gate fills you with fear, because if you pass through it, you will face a question to which there is no answer—no human

answer. And if you try you will fall. Into the abyss. And you will be lost. Forever. You didn't know that. Only I did. But now you also know.'

'What am I to do?' cried the disciple, terrified. 'What can I do? Go back? To the beginning? Back to the first gate?'-'Impossible, said the Master. 'Man can never go back; it is too late. What is done cannot be undone.'

There was a long silence. Suddenly the young disciple began to tremble violently. 'Please, Rebbe,' he cried, 'help me. Protect me. What is there left for me to do? Where can I go from here?'—'Look in front of you. Look beyond that gate. What keeps man from running, dashing over its threshold? What keeps man from falling? Faith. Yes, son: beyond the fiftieth gate there is not only the abyss but also faith—and they are next to one another....' And the Rebbe brought his disciple back to his people—and to himself."

In the question of ultimate reality and of the self, there can be no sure and secure knowledge and certainty. Our ultimate ground is an unknowing and mystery. One zen koan challenges you: "Standing nowhere, let your mind come forth!" We stand nowhere and that is our ground and selfhood. Abide where there is no abiding, as another zen saying goes. The ultimate ground is groundless ground, and it cannot be defined as Buddha-nature, nor original self, nor God-self, nor atman/brahman, nor inside, nor outside, nor immortal, nor impermanent, nor co-dependent. But it is not nothing. It is best pointed to by the zen idiom 'Emptiness'. Zen would say that Emptiness has to be emptied, too!

On the other hand, St. Augustine said: "If I doubt, I exist!" Descartes said: "I think, therefore I am!" The modern philosopher Bernard Lonergan has said that the very fact of my questioning is the affirmation of my capacity to know reality. However, you can affirm that you are questioning, you can be aware you are questioning. Yet beyond that all knowledge is ambiguous and uncertain. You can go on questioning the questioning and you will not be able to jump out of this cul-de-sac. Even this very doubting can be self-deceiving, Descartes has said. At the same time, we are aware of our body-mind-world, and of our being interpersonally constituted. We can be aware of being aware. Who is that who is aware? Can you ever grasp the 'Who'? If valid knowledge obtains only in judgement, then every judgement is open-ended, opening onto endless further questions and possibilities. It is only in action, inter-personal action, that the judgement is actualized and settled.

Here Great Faith is implicated. Faith means trust and hope. In the above Hasidic story, the Rebbe brings the disciple out of the abyss by asking him to go through the abyss in faith, and thus he brings him to himself and to the community. You cannot really question to the end unless you are embraced and carried by the interpersonal trust and hope, the trust and hope generated interpersonally between master and disciple as well as in the community. It is in the interpersonal space that you can pursue the ultimate questions to their end. Not only doubt and questioning, but also awakening takes place in this interpersonal space. Awakening of course is personal and individual, but it is not apart from the interpersonal acceptance, trust and hope, dialogue and affirmation. It is this trust and affirmation that gives the nameless ground and abyss of the self the import of graciousness and goodness. However, the trust and the self-acceptance go beyond human relationships; they are actualized in unconditional self-acceptance and affirmation of reality in its suchness. They are transpersonal and trans-cosmic (see chapter 12 on Meditation and Therapy in Samy, 2010).

Great Effort involves one's courage, commitment and fidelity to the way. However, when one has come to an impasse, with no-exit on the path of one's 'old world', there comes an 'over-turning of the base' and a new world and new life is born. Great effort means the 'leap of faith' from the in-between of the incomprehensible mystery that is one's ultimate ground and one's phenomenal knowing and willing. Standing in-between the nameless mystery and the known, the self presences itself in the world as the world. To act thus is to let-go and 'to die' and to come to resurrection and new life. It is losing oneself and finding oneself, a coming to be of a new earth and of new heavens.

The self is the world, the world the self

Awakening is first and foremost the realization of the core of one's heart-mind as the unknowing, inexpressible mystery; this is awakening to Emptiness. Awakening is awakening to Emptiness—it is Emptiness awakening to Emptiness, so to say: it is the mystery of No-Self that is nowhere and everywhere. Secondly, it is the realization of this heart-mind as boundless openness to the world: It is the realization of the self as the world and the world as the self. This is the field of the practice of the many koans. 'Becoming one with the koan' is perhaps not such an appropriate phrase. What it points to is the actualization of one's heart-mind's openness to the other and the world. It is letting the other be the other, the world be the world, and at the same time 'welcoming' the other and the

world into one's heart-mind as one's very self; for, one becomes self only in actualizing this selfless openness to the world and to the other. It is not Idealism where the mind is the world, that is, the world only a projection of the mind or the world contained within the individual mind. It is rather one of intentionality—in the intentional sphere, one is the other and the other is oneself (cf. Fasching, 2003). True compassion has its ground and source in this heart-mind. The other is other and is at the same time non-other to the self.

Let me end with a beautiful koan from Hegikanroku, case no. 13 (tr. Sekida, 2005):

Haryō's "Snow in the Silver Bowl"

ENGO'S INTRODUCTION

Clouds gather over the great plain, but the universe can still be discerned.
Snow covers the flowering reeds and it is difficult to distinguish them.
Speaking of the coldness of it, it is colder than frozen snow; as for the fineness, it is finer than powdered rice. With regard to the deepness, even the Buddha's eyes cannot penetrate it, while as for the way it is hidden, devils would be unable to spy it out. I allow you are clever enough to know three corners from one, but how would you speak to shut the mouths of the people of the world? Who has the capacity to do that? See the following.

MAIN SUBJECT

A monk asked Haryō, "What is the Daiba school?"
Haryō said, "Snow in the silver bowl."

SETCHŌ'S VERSE

Remarkable, the old man of Shinkai Temple;
It was well said, that "Snow in the silver bowl."

The ninety-six can learn for themselves what it means;
If they cannot, let them ask the moon in the sky.

Daiba school! Daiba school!
Scarlet banners flapping, the wind is cool!

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