



Let's start with three *koans* well known in Zen circles:

1. *If you know what sound two hands make, what is the sound of one hand?*
2. *Student: What if it's a disaster?*
Teacher: That's it, too.
3. *If you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.*

Paradox, Breakthrough, and the

WHEREVER YOU LOOK at you will find paradox. If I think I have free will, how do I know that my thought isn't predetermined? If I have an "enlightenment" experience, can I know whether it was the consequence of earnest meditation methods or of my past karma or just something with no cause—a quantum-level joke? Paradox also seems to be built into language, the greatest instrument and developer of consciousness. The 6th-century Cretan, Epimenides, used to say, "All Cretans are liars," which was a prejudice of the time, and I imagine him enjoying the confusion of his audience the way a stand-up comic might today. Zen Buddhism takes this feature of consciousness and employs it to free the mind from its preconceptions, a necessary condition when you are confronting sticky problems.

This is an interesting strategy if you think about it for a moment: fighting paradox with paradox. The idea



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is to use paradox itself to unwind or disentangle consciousness and language. One such method for this untangling is the Zen *koan*, which is a brief saying, question, story, or snatch of conversation that the student of reality takes up and examines. Unlike most religious paths, Zen makes an ally of doubt. Whenever the mind offers a thought, it is really offering a hypothesis about reality: *The stock market will go down. My partner ought to be nicer to me. The new Prius looks sharp.* Paying attention to everyday thoughts like these, we notice that there is room for error. They either can be tested, which means they might be wrong, or they can't be tested, which means, empirically, that they have no truth value. What does sharp mean, and if you get a Prius will people really admire you? And what about nicer—do you mean she ought to do what you want instead of what she wants and that this will lead to happiness? Hmmm. Doesn't seem likely, does it? When we live by

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Zen Koan

thoughts like these, we are living by propositions without any anchor in reality.

In the Zen creation myth, koans were brought to China by an Indian barbarian called Bodhidharma.

The Emperor asked Bodhidharma, “What is the main point of this holy teaching?”

“Vast emptiness, nothing holy,” Bodhidharma replied.

Zen treats all thoughts as delusions, as being more or less tangential to reality. They can't be repaired or shored up, though most press releases and religious doctrines are an attempt to do just that. This means that most religions lead to an inner conflict between their doctrines and our sense of the truth. Zen offers freedom by going the other way, into the midst of paradox and doubt.

Such an embrace is not confined to Zen. The renowned anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson was tremendously aware of the nature of paradox and the double binds of the thinking mind. Ilya Prigogine formulated the theory of Dissipative Structures to describe certain chemical reactions such as those involving chemical clocks. In these reactions, when a system has fallen out of equilibrium and drifts further toward instability, there is the sudden appearance of a new level of order instead of escalating chaos. This is a pretty good metaphor for the way Zen is supposed to work. Someone who spends time with a koan goes deeper into the puzzle of reality rather than seeking a quick return to a previous equilibrium.

The mind believes its own thoughts, its own hypotheses about what is real, and the Zen koan undermines this belief by showing the paradox involved. Sometimes a koan makes a thought seem absurd by suggesting that the opposite proposition might be just as useful. A koan might run everything backwards. For example:

In old China someone gave the Governor a rare fan made of rhinoceros horn—an expensive, useless object. The Governor handed it off to the local Zen master and it was forgotten. One day, the Zen master remembered it and asked, “Bring me the rhinoceros fan.”

“Umm, it's broken,” said the secretary.

“In that case, bring me the rhinoceros.”

People spend so much of life trying to mend the broken fan. You thought you had a job or a partner or good health or were rich and suddenly you don't and you aren't. Well, that's familiar. Or it can work the other way. You thought you were unhappy but you look and suddenly you are not. It's this last discovery that Zen depends on—a flip that applies to other areas of life as well. The creative breakthrough is waiting for you as soon as you stop trying to save your old theory or mend the fan.

You are not enlightened, goes the thought, and, according to Buddhism, that is why you suffer. But what if you run that thought backwards? What if, at this very moment, you are happy? As long as you don't think something is missing, nothing is missing. Everyone knows that there is no security in life, and nothing to rely on. ➔

Trust doubt, doubt certainty

WHEN I TRIED TO FIND OUT what koans are, it became clear that “koan” is a Japanese word that has entered the English language without bringing a clear sense of its meaning. It is usually taken to refer to some sort of riddle or odd question. A koan actually has its origin in sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life.

Koans originated when Chinese culture flowered about thirteen hundred years ago, at the period of the Arthurian legends in England. In China it was a time of willow pattern ceramics, wood block printing, great poets and painters, and, just as in Europe, civil war. It was also a time when people grew seriously interested in the technology of the mind. Certain spiritual teachers became known for a deep and free understanding of life, and people came to learn, hoping to gain the insight that a teacher had. Some left farms, homes, and jobs in the bureaucracy to form monastic communities; some traveled a thousand miles on foot. These students worked, studied, meditated, and asked questions. Others maintained their work and family life and dropped in for periods of study. The teachers weren't trying to achieve something; they just responded to the needs of their students, and it turned out that some of their improvised decisions kept the process interesting. First of all, they trusted doubt and rewarded questions. This is rare in religion and an example of the Zen way of treating what is usually thought of as a problem—in this case, doubt—as a strength.

The teachers also treated all questions as if they were relevant, no matter what their content. “Why did I lose my love?” would have the same spiritual value as “What happens when I die?” A question is a place of embarkation, and any question was treated as being about enlightenment, whether the student was aware of it or not. There was a trust in whatever forces had brought the student to the point of asking.

Finally, instead of giving kind advice, or step-by-step instructions, the teachers responded to the students as if they were capable of coming to a complete understanding in that moment. A teacher's words often made no rational sense, yet possessed a strangely compelling quality. For example, someone had this

exchange with a great teacher:

“I am Qingshui, alone and destitute. Please help me.”

Caoshan said, “Mr. Shui!”

“Yes!”

Caoshan said, “You have already drunk three cups of the finest wine, and yet you say that you haven't even wet your lips.”

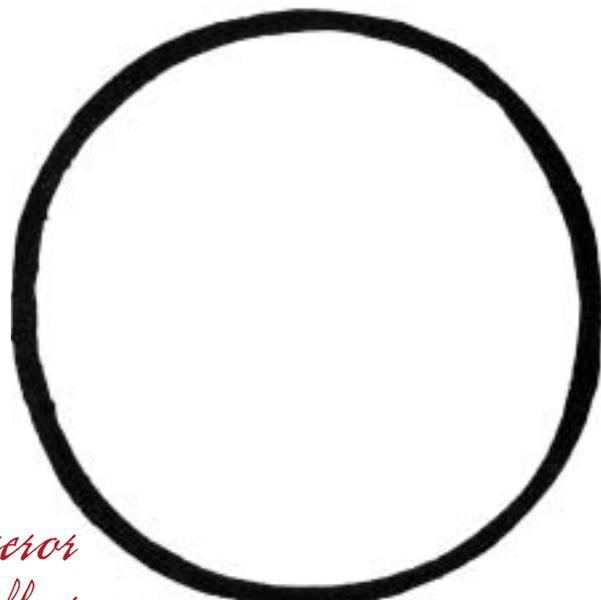
Of all the answers the student might have been hoping for, he probably wasn't expecting to be involved in a call and response and to be told that he was rich. Yet, when you think you are desolate, it can be an intriguing and hopeful thing to be told that you are not. After such exchanges, a student who had been stuck and unhappy might be suddenly full of joy. More often, the words would work away in the mind, gradually drawing the student out of a limiting view he or she held.

A koan need not be grim or a struggle; it encourages you to notice that things are clear, or to throw overboard the idea that things are not already clear. You could find that courses of action appear to you out of nowhere just the way the next moment does. Your navigation could unfold by itself, and the universe might provide the beauty and happiness you seek. When you forget your carefully assembled fiction of who you are, you can find a natural delight in people, in the planet, the stones, and the trees. There is no observable limit to this beauty, and no one is excluded from it. Then, if you are fighting an enemy, you may be fighting them as well as you can, but you won't be a true believer. You will know that an enemy is not truly other and that the fighting is some kind of misunderstanding. The worries that lead to quarrels may still be present, but they are not the main thing. Your problems could be a kind of dream, very powerful when you are in it, and yet a dream. You might notice that, even deep in dreaming, you are near to waking up. And the more you are awake, the kinder the world might seem.

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The Emperor asked Bodhidharma, "What is the main point of this holy teaching?" "Vast emptiness," Bodhidharma replied.

This is why shopping malls were invented—as a consolation prize. But what if instead of having *faux* security, you start relying on the insecurity? Paradox is generated when we try to rely on what we can conceive of about reality. Unfortunately, anything really interesting, such as love or quantum mechanics, has a large portion that is outside what we usually conceive of. The point about koans is not to make that inconceivable area conceivable, but to operate while resting in the openness of uncertainty and doubt.

The Emperor's next question to Bodhidharma was, "Who are you, standing in front of me?"

Bodhidharma responded, "I do not know."

Koans don't get rid of painful thoughts and put nice ones in their place. They ditch the painful thoughts and what comes next is up to you. That's what enlightenment, and, in a sense, creativity, is all about—operating in the vastness outside of the usual maps of thought.

The quest for consciousness and enlightenment has elements of a beautiful game, and a koan the structure of a joke. In a joke you walk into one reality and discover that something is wrong, that the world you expected is

really quite different. Then you laugh. In a similar way, you look for enlightenment and freedom artificially constructed quality of consciousness, but bless it as well. The well-known joke about Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson going camping has this form.

They wake up in the middle of the night and Holmes says, "Watson, what do the stars make you think of?"

"Well, Holmes, I suppose I think of infinity, of the mysterious beauty of the universe, and of how much there is to discover. What do they make you think of?"

"Well, Watson, they make me think that someone has stolen our tent."

Discovery is based in this sort of revision of understanding. Paradox awakens our sense that reality has huge dollops of fiction in it, and this sense can be a source of fear and also of hope. Arthur Conan Doyle, the inventor of Sherlock Holmes, complained that Holmes had become more memorable and believable to the readers

than he, the author, was. He tried to kill off his character and in the process made him live the more. Just as the old Zen teacher tried to kill off the Buddha and brought him to life as someone you might meet on the road.



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