

Zen Koan Practice by Genjo Marinello

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By Genjo Marinello, Vice-Abbot

Koan is a Japanese word that comes from the Chinese, kung-an, that means public dictate. It is a reference to examples that are meant to guide life; or in the case of Zen, these dictates are meant to be catalysts for awakening one's true/deep/pure nature. They often recount an encounter between master and disciple, where the master's response or question is said to reveal the deep nature of things as they are. Perhaps the earliest example of a koan comes from the fable of the time the historical Buddha held up a flower before an assemblage of followers and spoke not a word. It is said that all remained silent and puzzled except for his disciple Venerable Kasho who is said to have smiled in recognition. What was transmitted when the Buddha held up a flower? "Don't explain it, show me your understanding!", shouts the Zen master. To do so you must at once become the Buddha, Kasho, and the flower! Koans are an advanced tool, and have no inherent power in and of themselves, but can be very enlightening when used properly. I have heard Genki Roshi (Zen master & Abbot) refer to them as a can-opener for the Heart/Mind (kokoro). They are like a door-knocker, they are of no use, unless used properly as a tool to knock on the door of one's Heart/Mind.

Koans should only be used after one's meditation has entered Samadhi. Samadhi is the condition of one's mind when all the silt and ripples (ideas, thoughts, feelings, judgments) have quieted and the mind has become clear, calm, clean, naturally reflective and free-flowing in this moment. If your mind has not yet achieved Samadhi, don't bother with koans. Koans deliberately stir up the waters of the mind, and if the mind is already disturbed, koan practice will only make things worse. This is why Genki Roshi only assigns koans during Sesshins (long concentrated periods of meditation) where reaching Samadhi is more likely. If the mind is practiced at a given level of Samadhi, then a koan can be used to stretch one's Samadhi-mind to a bigger dimension. By resolving a koan, that is to say encompassing the example/dictate/question with one's understanding, small mind is slowly or suddenly stretched and awakened into Big Mind. Koans are NOT answered. Any descriptive response, yes/no response, or this/that response will be rejected. Yet, no response is also no good! How then can one respond at all? When the deep meaning of the koan is understood directly, then a token of that understanding is easy to present. Usually no words are necessary, some poetic or creative gesture will suffice. This is why I say that koans are not answered, but resolved.

To work on a koan is to let a koan work on you. Once a measure of Samadhi is attained, the practitioner calls the example or question to mind. The only volition appropriate in Koan work is calling the question gently but repeatedly to consciousness. Do not waste any time trying to figure the koan out. Let it stretch your mind through the questioning alone, make no effort to solve it. Any analysis is a waste of time, and at best will produce a "fox" or pseudo-Zen response. Koans are a devilish instrument because they deliberately tempt us to make an interpretation, explanation, imitation or analysis; and yet, it is only when we exhaust or give up these lines of investigation that a deeper level of inquiry becomes possible. Often, only when we are able to admit in frustration that we don't know anything, can true koan practice begin. Allow the koan to sit in your belly, there it may begin to feel like you have swallowed a hot iron ball that can not be digested or expelled. Eventually, sometimes after years of practice, the koan will do its work, the mind will open in gentle deep understanding, and any number of simple direct responses will seem obvious.

Koans are questions or statements that are like a challenge to your person, your most fundamental perception of self. Koans act like swords to stab at your ego and draw forth your Buddha Nature (your fully natural nature that is not dependent on your self-definition). The practitioner's job is not to fight or struggle with these attacks, but to neutralize them. This is done by making a genuine, authentic, spontaneous, gut response.

Whenever a response to a koan arises within me prior to dokusan (personal interview between Roshi and the student) I let it go, this is the best guarantee that the response that arises in the dokusan line or in front of the Roshi will be fresh. Now, it is often the case that the response that I make at dokusan is nearly identical to my first inclination; yet, by letting the first and subsequent responses go, the Koan has the best chance to broaden one's understanding into the fullest flowering.

To understand a Koan with your rational mind is only the smallest of beginnings; to understand the koan fully through and through, with every fiber of your being, is just a good start. To respond to a Koan we must learn to manifest our understanding simply and directly without hesitation. To manifest our response is to give a pure reflection of what is being pointed at. For example, the "answer" to the koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping" is SILENCE: the silence that permeates the universe, the Tao itself. Yet, this somewhat rational understanding says nothing. As a response it is already long dead. How will you feel this silence in every fiber of your being, and once this is directly experienced, how will you manifest a token of your experience to the Roshi's satisfaction? Be courageous, do not be just still and frozen; at least say "I don't know." Any response that is turned away will close off a blind alley, or push you down some new direction. Slowly the Roshi will help eliminate any response but a pure reflection of what is being pointed at.

Each Koan begs for a uniquely individual response within the frame of the question. If a Koan is like a fist to the head it is useless to respond with a kick to the shins. If the Roshi asks for an apple, bring your own variety; but understand that an orange or a loaf of bread won't do.

Koans are like seeds of awakening. Sometimes there is a prolonged and difficult growing period, sometimes the growing period is short and direct. Always, we await the fruit of one's response to ripen and fall of its own accord. To fully resolve a koan one must allow it to grow to full maturity; a koan must reveal itself. To nurture and care for a koan, simply and repeatedly prod your awareness with the essence of the "question" or "encounter." For example, if the koan is "Bring me the essence of the temple bell sound," then first we nurture the ground in which the koan will be planted by settling into samadhi (the condition of one's mind when we are completely and naturally calm, balanced, and so fully present and involved in this moment that our activity flows easily like water down hill). Once samadhi activity is established (sitting, i.e. zazen, walking, i.e. kinhin, working, i.e. samu), we plant the koan gently, repeatedly and attentively by bringing the koan to our awareness and allowing it to rest in our abdomen. There it will grow and ripen without any further effort on our part. In the example of the essence of the temple bell sound, we allow the sound of the temple bell to resonate in our abdomen until it can flow out of us without any rational discrimination, analysis, or hesitation. At this moment of awakening, the fruit of the koan will spontaneously erupt from our core as a clear resonating response without any coloring of "it" or "me." Nothing will separate the practitioner and the sound, they will be one without interference from discriminating consciousness.

Over the years of doing koan practice with four different Roshis (Zen masters), I have come to understand that koans fall roughly into five different categories. Actually, any number of sub-divisions could be devised, and all are ultimately meaningless, a koan is just a koan. However, for the benefit of trying to communicate the flavor of koan work, I have dreamed up the following five groupings. Some koans beg the practitioner to drop the barriers between oneself and nature. Koans like "bring me the sound of rain," "the essence of flower," or "a mountain on a rope," all move a practitioner in this direction of expanded awareness. Other koans beg the practitioner to drop the artificial and conceptual barriers between oneself and Buddha. Koans like "bring me the essence of the standing altar statue," "bring me the essence of Zen master activity (Gutei, Zuigan, RinzaiÉ)," or "If hanging from a branch by your teeth over a precipice, with your hands and feet unable to grasp a branch, how will you respond to a sincere request to reveal the Dharma (Truth/Zen essence)?" Some koans beg the practitioner to open all the doors to the human condition by asking "bring the essence of old man (or women, child, infant, trickster, fool, priest, monk, teacher, death, birth, friend, foe, joy, sorrow)." Some koans beg the practitioner to reveal the Tao itself (the foundation of Reality that transcends life and death, form or no form, right and wrong, yin and yang, male and female, and all other dualities). Koans that get the practitioner to stretch their awareness in this direction might ask "what is the sound of one hand clapping," "reveal the essence of Mu," "show me the source of earth, wind, fire, and water."

Finally, there are koans which beg the practitioner to put it all together and reveal ordinary activity as fully awakened activity. Koans that prod us to open in this way can ask "reveal the true nature of the universe while washing bowls," "what do you do after you reach the top of a hundred foot pole (after enlightenment then what?)," "How do you climb Buddha mountain," "where is master Rinzai's person of

no-rank and no-post right now." All koans beg us to wake up right now and live fully in this moment without any filter between us and the rest of reality.

When formal koan study is well on its way, we discover that our life itself is the greatest of all koans. Any problem or condition that seems to separate us from ourselves, or anyone or anything else, can be used as a koan. Plant the problem in your gut as described above and wait for it to ripen and fall without trying to fix, change, or analyze it. You will discover that all problems are illusions of one kind or another. To see reality clearly is to remove all the barriers within and between one's self and other than self. The third Dharma ancestor in Zen has said that nothing is separate or excluded, all things move and intermingle without distinction. For example, I am often obsessed by various thought patterns that seem to repeat endlessly; yet, if I step back from the pattern or pain and hold it gently and attentively in my belly or lap, then in fairly short order the pattern or pain dissolves, sometimes revealing a previously unseen truth or story, sometimes just dissipating without a trace. Sometimes the relief is temporary, sometimes it is permanent, but always with gentle attentive awareness there is some resolution or at least evolution.

I was once asked if responding to a koan was like acting, and I said: "yes, like very good acting where, in pure genuineness, there is nothing separating the actor or actress from the role being played."