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On the Koan Study

Zen is “without words, without explanations, without instruction, without knowledge.” Zen is self-awakening only. ~ Master Sasaki

Goal of Zen: Kensho “Insight into one’s real nature” via direct experience

- Kensho is like coming back to life again having lost our hold on the edge of a precipice and fallen to your death
- The moment you die a great death
- That which great life manifest itself

Japanese Zen Master Hakuin on Kensho

You may ask: “If, as you say, there is no Buddha outside mind, how can one awaken one’s own mind and get to the bottom of it?” I reply: “Is it mind that asks this question? Is it nature? Do you call it spirit, or do you call it soul? Does it reside on the inside, on the outside, or in the middle? Is it blue or yellow, red or white? You yourself must examine closely. When you are standing, examine closely; when you are sitting, examine closely. While you are eating your rice, while you are drinking your tea, while you are speaking, while you are silent, carry on this investigation intently and earnestly. Under no circumstances search among the teachings of the sutras or in written words. Never ask your teachers to explain. But when your activity of mind is exhausted and your capacity for feeling comes to a dead end, if something should take place not unlike the cat springing upon the mouse or the mother hen hatching her eggs, then in a flash great livingness surges up.

Satori or Enlightenment – Kensho

The satori or enlightenment that the old masters experienced was ineffable and incommunicable. It had not come about as the result of thinking or reasoning. It was, indeed, an experience beyond and above the intellect. Understanding this only too well, they did not, on the whole, attempt to describe their experiences in words. They knew that verbal explanations were useless as a means of leading their students to the realization itself. They had to devise other means.

Three Essential Elements for Study of Zen

1. **Great Faith** - The belief that every man possesses his own intrinsic nature into which he can attain insight, and that there is a Fundamental Principle which can be completely penetrated.
2. **Great Doubt** - The questioning and investigation of the mystery that is Buddha Nature The deathless and birthless.
3. **Great Determination** – Rubbing two sticks together.

Zen Three Kinds of Training

1. **Zazen** - Reduce mind wandering and establish concentration needed for Koan practice.
2. **Study of Koan** - Kanhua (Khán Thoại) or Hua Tou (Word head).
3. **Daily Life** - Usage of dynamic koans to cut through delusions in everyday life.

Lin-chi 臨濟 or Rinzai - Koan only uniquely found in Zen

Best Definition of Koan

Chung-fêng ho-shang kuang-lu, the “record” of the Lin-chi master Chung-fêng Ming-pên 中峰明本 (Chūhō Myōhon, 1263–1323), who lived during the Yüan 元 (Gen) dynasty (1260–1368).

The koans may be compared to the case records of the public law court. Whether or not the ruler succeeds in bringing order to his realm depends in essence upon the existence of law. Kung 公 (Kō), or “public,” is the single track followed by all sages and worthy men alike, the highest principle which serves as a road for the whole world. An 案 (an), or “records,” are the orthodox writings which record what the sages and worthy men regard as principles. There have never been rulers who did not have public law courts, and there have never been public law courts that did not have case records which are to be used as precedents of laws in order to stamp out injustice in the world. When these public case records (koans) are used, then principles and laws will come into effect; when these come into effect, the world will become upright; when the world is upright, the Kingly Way will be well ordered. Now, when we use the word “koan” to refer to the teachings of the buddhas and patriarchs, we mean the same thing. The koans do not represent the private opinion of a single man, but rather the highest principle, received alike by us and by the hundreds and thousands of bodhisattvas of the three realms and the ten directions. This principle accords with the spiritual source, tallies with the mysterious meaning, destroys birth-and-death, and transcends the passions. It cannot be understood by logic; it cannot be transmitted in words; it cannot be explained in writing; it cannot be measured by reason. It is like the poisoned drum that kills all who hear it, or like a great fire that consumes all who come near it. What is called the “special transmission of the Vulture Peak” was the transmission of this; what is called the “direct pointing of Bodhidharma at Shao-Lin Temple” was a pointing at this.

If an ordinary man has some matter which he is not able to settle by himself, he will go to the public law court to seek a decision, and there the officials will look up the case records and, on the basis of them, settle the matter for him. In the same way, if a student has that in his understanding of his enlightenment which he cannot settle for himself, he will ask his teacher about it, and the teacher, on the basis of the koans, will settle it for him. The koan is a torch of wisdom that lights up the darkness of feeling and discrimination, a golden scraper that cuts away the film clouding the eye, a sharp ax that severs the root of birth-and-death, a divine mirror that reflects the original face of both the sacred and the secular. Through it the intention of the patriarchs is made abundantly clear, the Buddha-mind is laid open and revealed. For the essentials of complete transcendence, final emancipation, total penetration, and identical attainment, nothing can surpass the koan.

Training was done through living closely with the masters and intimate contacts sharing all phases of daily life and work.

Sometimes **teachings are done in the main** hall by lectures in assembly of monks.

Zen is concerned only with Absolute Mind. Absolute Mind was the masters' one theme, pure, original, basic Mind, and their every word and action was a pointing to and a manifesting of Absolute Mind.

Presenting a student with one or another of these koans and observing his reaction to it, the degree or depth of his realization could be judged. The koans were the criteria of attainment.

Types of Koans

1. **Classic koans** – cases: “Gateless Gate (12th century), Blue Cliffs Records (12th century), Book of Equanimity (13th century)”.
2. **Breakthrough Koan** Hua Tou (thoại đầu) – “word head” One word or a phrase koan – used to experience first kensho.
3. **Dynamic koan** - Arising from spontaneous interactions with the master and everyday life – used to stabilize experience of satori in everyday life and gain deeper insights in awakening wisdom.

Dynamic of Koan Study

1. Interaction with teacher: A koan is given and challenged student to work on.
2. Student comes back after introspection to give answer after observing the phrases and gets a series of checking questions. If the master is not satisfied of clarity of experience, the student go back to observing the koan.
3. If a break through occurred: Kensho – Post-satori practice is done and further koans study are use in unison with Shikantaza. Post satori practice can span 10 to 20 years depending on the practitioner.

Zen of Linji School: k'an-hua ch'an 看話禪 (kanna zen), or "introspecting-the-koan Zen,"

Concentrated introspection of the koan, introspection into which not the slightest deliberation or intellectualization entered. The koan was to be introspected only, introspected deeper and deeper until its full content was revealed.

Zen of the Ts'ao-tung School as mo-chao ch'an 默照禪 (mokushō zen), or "silent-illumination Zen."

Concentrated on Zazen, or sitting meditation practice without and object until the body and mind falls away. Then the kensho experience happens at that moment, when one recognizes that one is beyond body and mind.

Examples of Koans

Bodhidharma

When meditating in Shao-lin mountain, Huike came and seek him out for the dharma. After several days kneeling outside the cave and Bodhidharma refused to talk to him, he chopped his left arm off to demonstrate his determination. Then Bodhidharma asked him:

"What do you want from me?"

"I want you to help me calm my mind" said Huike

"Find your mind, bring it out to show me then I will help you calm it." Replied Bodhidharma

"I can't find it." Said Huike

"I have helped you calm your mind" said Bodhidharma.

At this Huike experienced Kensho

Hui Neng – Six Patriarch on Original Face

Huìnéng asked Hui Ming, "Without thinking of good or evil, show me your original face before your mother and father were born."

Joshu's Dog

A monk asked Joshu, "Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?" Joshu said, "Mu".

Another time a monk asked Joshu, "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" Joshu said "Yes"

Xiangyan Up a Tree

Venerable Xiangyan said, "It is like a man up a tree hanging on a tree branch held in his mouth. He can't use his hands to climb up the branch; his feet cannot step on the tree.

It happens that below the tree a person asks, 'What is the meaning of the Bodhidharma coming from the West?'

To disregard the other who questions is immediately not correct. If on the other hand, if you open your mouth to answer, you'll fall to your death.

At that time what is appropriate; what can you put forth for a correct life?"

Examples of Hua Tou

Two hand clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand clapping? – Hakuin Ekaku

If you meet the Buddha, kill him – Linji

Before your mother and father given you a name, what are you?

What is the sound of the wind not blowing?

What am I?