

Koans

for the

Make the Mountains Dance

Retreat

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Koans, Freedom, & Love



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FIRST EVENING

What's at stake, & what we already have

If we were not so single minded about keeping our lives
moving,
and for once could do nothing,
Perhaps a huge silence might interrupt this sadness
of never understanding ourselves
and of threatening ourselves with death.

Pablo Neruda



Someone asked, "One of the ancestors said that
everyone has it, but I'm covered with the dusts of the
world and don't know whether I do or not."

Caoshan said, "Show me your hand." Then he pointed to
the questioner's fingers: "One, two, three, four, five.
Enough!"

FIRST DAY

The Way is the Territory

Quickly, without thinking good and evil, before your
parents were born – what is your original face?

Getting Free

Shoushan said to his assembly, "If you get it the first
time you hear it, you will be the teacher of the buddhas
and ancestors. If you get it the second time you hear it,
you will be the teacher of gods and humans. If you get it
the third time, you can't even save yourself."

A monk asked, "When did you get it?"

Shoushan said, "The moon sets at midnight; I walk
alone through the town."



There was a woman who kept the pilgrim's inn at
Hara under Mt Fuji. Her name is unknown, and it is not
known when she was born or died.

She went to hear a talk by Hakuin, who said, "They say
there's a Pure Land where everything is only mind, a Buddha of
Infinite Light in your own body. Once that Buddha appears,
mountains, rivers, and earth, plants, trees, and forests, all
suddenly glow with a great light. If you want to see this, look
into your own heart. Since the Pure Land is only mind, what
kind of special features would it have? Since this Buddha is
your own body, how would you recognize it?"

When she heard this, the woman said to herself, "This
isn't so hard." Returning home, she meditated day and
night, asking these questions while she was awake and
during sleep. One day, as she was washing a pot, she had
a sudden breakthrough. She tossed the pot aside and
rushed to see Hakuin. She said, "I've run across the
Buddha of In-finite Light in my own body, and everything
is shining with a great light. It's wonderful!" She danced
for joy.

“Is that so?” Hakuin asked. “But what about a cesspool – does it also shine with a great light?”

The woman ran up and slapped him. She said, “Don’t you know the answer to that, you old gasbag?” Hakuin roared with laughter.



Say something without moving your lips or tongue



Are dolphins really as smart as people say they are?



Explain buddha nature to your dog



Make the mountains dance

At Home in the World

Yunmen said, “Sickness and medicine correspond to each other. The whole world is medicine. What is the self?”



How does Guanyin use all those hands and eyes?
It's like someone in the middle of the night, reaching behind her head for a pillow.

SECOND DAY

Soul and Spirit

This koan is based on an ancient Chinese folktale, several English versions of which were published in English by Lafcadio Hearn in 1898

In a provincial Chinese town a long time ago lived a young girl named Qian. She often played with her cousin, a boy named Zhao. They loved each other a great deal, and one day Qian’s father teased them, “When you grow up, you two will marry.” They remembered these words and believed they were betrothed. But when Qian came of marriageable age, her father felt he had to acquiesce to a powerful older man’s desire to marry her.

This grieved the cousins, and Zhao decided it would be better if he moved away. At sunset the next day, he left home without saying goodbye to anybody and sailed away to start a new life. In the middle of the night, he heard a voice calling, “Wait! It’s me!”, and he saw a figure running along the bank. He realized it was Qian, and he welcomed her joyfully onto the boat. The two of them sailed away together to the next province.

They got married and had two children, and they were by all measures very happy. But, as time went by, Qian began to feel the weight of what she had left behind, and the nagging feeling that she had betrayed her parents. So after six years had passed she and her husband agreed to return home to see if they could reconcile with her family. They got back in the boat, went down the river, and docked near her family home. Zhao said, “You wait here; I’ll go first and see how things stand.” He went up to the house, not knowing what kind of reception he would find.

To his surprise, his uncle and father-in-law welcomed him with open arms, saying, "Oh, it's so good to see you. We were worried about you; we always wondered what had happened to you."

This was not at all the reception Zhao expected. He asked, "Aren't you mad at me? I came to ask for your forgiveness for running away with Qian."

"What are you talking about?" Qian's father replied. "Qian has been sick in bed all this time, ever since you went away."

"But Qian has not been sick. She and I have been married for six years, and we have two children. Don't mock us like this!"

The two men stared at each other for a few moments, and then Qian's father said, "Come with me." He took his son-in-law into the house, to an inner room where a woman lay sick in bed. It was unmistakably Qian, though thin and pale. "She cannot speak," explained her father, but she can understand." He spoke to Qian, "Zhao tells me that you ran away with him!" The sick woman looked at Zhao and smiled but remained silent.

A bewildered Zhao then said, "Come with me to the river, because I assure you that Qian is down there." He took the old man down to the boat, where Qian was waiting.

When she greeted her father, he said to her, "If you really are my daughter, I have nothing but love for you. But there's something I don't understand...Come with me back to the house." As they walked up the path they saw that the sick woman was coming down to meet them, smiling. The two Qians approached each other and then embraced, melting into each other so that only one Qian remained, showing no sign of the one's sorrow or the other's illness.

Her father said, "My daughter has seemed like someone in a drunken stupor. Now I understand that her spirit was absent."

Qian said, "I never realized that I was still at home. I saw Zhao leaving in anger, and that night I dreamed that I ran after his boat...But now I can't tell which one was really I—the one who went away, or the one who stayed at home."

The koan that comes from this story is:

The Chan teacher Wuzi asked, "The woman Qian and her spirit separated. Which is the true Qian?"

THIRD MORNING

Koans to Take Home

Linji said, "There is nothing I dislike."



What is Zen?

The heart of the one who asks is Zen.



The stone woman gives birth in the middle of the night.



Marcus Aurelius said, "Let what stands in the way become the way."



This is the stone, drenched with rain
that points the way.

Santoku



All — is the price of All —

Emily Dickinson



Shenshan was mending clothes with a needle and thread. Dongshan asked, "What are you doing?"
Shenshan said, "Mending."
"How are you mending?"
"One stitch is like the next."
"We've been traveling together for twenty years now, and you can still say such a thing! How could this be?"
"How do you mend?"
"As if the whole earth were spewing flames."



Once Layman Pang was selling bamboo baskets. Coming down off a bridge, he stumbled and fell. When his daughter Lingzhao saw this, she ran to her father and threw herself down next to him.

"What are you doing?" cried the Layman.

"I saw you fall, so I'm helping," replied Lingzhao.

"Luckily no one was looking," remarked the Layman.



"In the day there is sunlight, at night there is firelight. What is divine light?"

Zhaozhou replied, "Sunlight, firelight."



Yunmen asked, "See how vast and wide the world is. Why do you put on your clothes at the sound of the bell?"



All things die and all things live forever;
but our task is to die,
to die making roads,
roads over the sea.

Antonio Machado

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Both are translations of the Chinese collection Wumenguan (Japanese Mumonkan); they include contemporary commentaries on each koan, which make them a good place to begin exploring the tradition

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A translation of the Japanese Denko Roku, written by Keizan Jokin in the early 14th century; it presents a legendary Zen lineage from Shakyamuni through Dogen, telling the enlightenment story of each ancestor in the form of a koan, with biographies and commentary

Trevor Leggett, *Samurai Zen: The Warrior Koans* (Routledge, 2003)

A collection of Japanese koans from the Kamakura era (13th century), including traditional poems and checking questions; one of the best sources for koans involving women

Victor Sogen Hori, *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice* (University of Hawai'i Press, 2003)

The most extensive collection of capping phrases, brief original writings or quotes linked to a koan; includes a detailed description of contemporary koan practice in Japan

John Tarrant, *Bring Me the Rhinoceros: And Other Koans to Bring You Joy* (Harmony Books, 2004)

A new book by my collaborator in developing this way of working with koans, exploring a dozen koans in depth, from a thoroughly western perspective