

16 Bodhisattvas
Self and Soul Koan, I
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Since we have a number of people who have not much or no experience with koans, I'll just say a word or two briefly about what they are and where they come from, or at least one version of that.

Koans began to be used in China over a thousand years ago and they've been used consistently ever since, first in East Asia — China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam — and now in the West, in some Zen traditions. And, initially they were something simple. They were reports of things that happened. They were reports of conversations that occurred among pilgrims of the way. Sometimes between students and teachers, sometimes a couple of students, sometimes a couple of teachers, sometimes groups. But the thing that's so interesting about them and makes them unique among teaching stories — if you think I'm wrong, let me know — is they don't have a 'moral of the story' in the way we usually think of, that there's a point we're supposed to 'get'. They're records of things that happened in which there was a shift or a transformation of consciousness, and somehow — this is the mysterious thing about koans — if we bring them into our meditation, we can experience the same shift of consciousness that is recorded in the story from 1200 years ago, or 5 minutes ago, depending on how old the koan is.

That's something quite interesting, that they are actually occasions for the transformation of consciousness, not stories with points we're meant to get. Over time, because the tradition is so long, although the first ones were these records of actual conversations, the tradition began to gather in all kinds of things like the story from the *Surangama Sutra*, about the bodhisattvas going into the bath. Someone saw the potential in that story to be taken up as a koan. Bits of poetry in there, popular songs, sayings....one of the things we'll look at today is a saying from the great Daoist texts, the *Daodejing*, that was taken up as a koan. The body of literature began to expand, but it is a body of literature. So it's as much an art as it is a spiritual science or technology.

The 'koan way,' which is a form of Zen, or Chan — Chan is the Chinese pronunciation of the words that's pronounced 'zen' in Japanese — has a few assumptions that are important for us to have as foundational before we start. Maybe the most important assumption is that from the

perspective of the koan way, having a heart-mind is not a problem. It's not something we're doing spiritual practice in order to fix, which is important to say, because it is an assumption, I think, in a lot of spiritual practices that being a human being is really a problem, and that meditation or a spiritual practice is about fixing that problem.

The koan tradition comes from a completely different assumption, which is that being a human being is an amazing, rare, precious, disturbing, complicated, gorgeous, devastating experience that we ought to take full advantage of. And, that through taking full advantage of the experience of being human, we have the chance to participate in the co-creation of the world. This world we're living in is constantly being co-created by every being that's a part of it. So, one of the goals — to the extent we can say there are goals of the koan way — is to get better at participating in the co-creation, removing the things that separate us from life, refining our skills for being helpful in life, so that we can be *in* and we can be *in* even when it's difficult, and that's not a problem, either. So just because things are difficult, what's the problem? That's kind of the attitude.

One thing you'll notice is that I said from the koan tradition having a human heart-mind is not a problem. There's only one word in Chinese for both heart and mind. It is the same character, so you've got the sense of a wholeness of the self that's being spoken about that includes both the heart and the mind.

One of the koans that we often take up at the beginning of things, although we won't today, is a very simple one :

There was a woman in Japan who had lost her husband at a very young age and was filled with grief. And she went into a temple and she asked the teacher "What is Zen?" which is a very common question, but the subtext of the question is : What can Zen do for me in my grief? *I can't get over this, I need help.* And the teacher responded, "The heart of the one who asks is Zen."

So there's the fundamental assumption : know your heart-mind. Become intimate with your own heart-mind, and that's the gate, that's the way in. Not something to be escaped or fixed, but something to be known intimately and, do I dare say, loved.

If that's our relationship with the interior world, we have the same relationship with the so-called exterior world, the rest of creation. And our fundamental attitude as it is toward our own heart-mind, our fundamental attitude toward the rest of the world, is one of warmth and curiosity.

These are what the koans would suggest are useful ways to be in the world — with warmth and curiosity.

Awakening, which is an ongoing process that takes a lifetime, that's never done, even probably when you die it's never done, awakening is a natural interest in and caring about the world which is able to be freely felt and freely expressed. And the koan way is all about uncovering that natural interest in and warmth toward the world, and showing us ways of freely feeling it and freely expressing it. Pretty simple, and takes a lifetime.

So I will pass out the koans because I might refer a little bit to them.

[Koans get passed out. Refer to the 'Self and Soul Koans' PDF.]

So there's a bit of aggression in the koans today. And this way of what the koans believe is our natural warmth and curiosity toward the world. That's our natural state and all this other stuff gets in the way, so in order to rediscover that natural state there's usually a bunch of obstacle-removing that needs to be done. There's a bunch of stuff, mostly made out of thoughts and feelings that gets between us and the world, and so maybe the first part of the koan work is to clear away those obstacles. And the first koan :

Quickly, quickly, without thinking good and evil, before your parents were born, what is your Original Face?

That's a koan about removing obstacles at one level. There's something there that's saying if you wish to, here's some methods. In this one sentence is almost all the method you need both for working with koans and having a good life. And it's great that they're the same thing. We'll go into that a little bit more. What does 'quickly, quickly' mean? What does it mean 'before your parents were born?' What is it mean not to think of good and evil? What it is like to respond in the moment before all of those things? And the suggestion is that the moment before all of those things is where your Original Face is revealed. So first there's the clearing of the obstacles by these methods that we'll talk about more. And at the same time the koans aren't just doing the work of deconstruction. They're also giving us moments of freedom. They're giving us moments when we are aware not only of our original faces, but of the original faces of everyone and everything we encounter. So our relationship with the world becomes more and more one of original face meeting original face. And that's really nice, too. So you have the sometimes painful

and difficult work of deconstruction, but you don't have to wait to find out what it's like when the obstacles are gone, because those moments will come more and more freely.

Koan introspection, which is what the meditation is called, is a way in which we bring the koans into our meditation and we also, as part of it, carry them around in our pockets, and bring them into life with us. And we're sort of keeping company with them all the time, letting them keep company with us. When we do bring them into our meditation, something that's different from many other forms of meditation is that koan introspection works with the dynamic quality of the heart-mind. The goal is not necessarily to get and stay still and quiet. The goal is to have your relationship with the koan. So you're not trying to smooth things out. You're actually trying to engage and can feel elation and distress, moments of great clarity, moments of complete confusion. And that's all part of the process.

The idea is that we live in this world, in this giant field of things rising and falling all the time. It's a complicated, noisy, movement-filled, emotion-filled, thought-filled world — all the time. And what we're trying to do is become at ease with the world as it is. As I said at the very beginning, to find that through line, underneath sound and silence, motion and stillness, all of that, and keeping company with koans is a way to do that, so that over time we no longer need the special circumstances of quiet and stillness in order to be in touch with that through line and to be in touch with the vast, roaring stillness that's underneath everything in the universe. When I say that, I'm not saying there's something wrong with stillness and quiet. It is wonderful and we also do that kind of meditation, and that's important, too. It's just that we also do this.

If I would ask you to take one thing away from today it would be that the koans are not — despite the way they are sometimes used and misused — they're not tests. They're not tests; they're invitations, most importantly. And the nature of the invitation is an invitation to freedom. So, when you're keeping company with a koan and you don't know where to start, start looking for the invitation to freedom and see what happens when you do that.

Because they're not tests but invitations we're not looking for answers. There isn't a right answer to get. We're looking for responses, because responses include not only the tradition that the koans represent but your own experience. We're working at the intersection of the tradition with your experience, so everybody's response will be their response, and that is full and complete.

We value not knowing, not being certain. The goal is not to flip the light switch on as quickly as possible. The goal is to sit in the dark and see what the dark is like. So that brings us to the second koan from the *Daodejing* :

In the dark, darken further.

What's it like if we don't reflexively reach for the light switch? What's it like if we don't think that the idea is to illuminate where it's dark? What if we imagine that if it's dark if we don't know, if we can't get it yet, we're not certain, what's it like if we stay with that and feel fully what is possible in that darkness? What is present in that darkness that we miss if we go for the light switch too quickly?

The last thing that I'll say is that in the koans, in the third koan we have this conversation. It's kind of classical koan where there's a conversation between two people. And that's important because from the perspective of the koan tradition, awakening / enlightenment happens in relationship. There has to be some kind of relationship, even if it's between you and the feeling of water when we step into the bath like the Sixteen Bodhisattvas. There's some connection and relationship with something from the world. It doesn't, it can't happen in isolation. In Chinese, one of the synonyms for enlightenment — you've got enlightenment and realization and awakening and all the things we're used to — but another of the Chinese synonyms is 'becoming intimate.' And of course to become intimate you have to become intimate with something. It requires a relationship.

There's a kind of playful and creative relationship with the world that is embodied in the last koan. We'll see what happens with that. And, to say something that we often say to close about this tradition, is about making ourselves fetchable. If it's about relationship, if there's something about becoming intimate with the world, we need to be open for the chance of that to happen. So the koans make us fetchable by the world, by removing the obstacles, by opening us up to the invitations to freedom that are there all the time. By putting us into a kind of relationship with intimacy, we become fetchable, and the world is just dying to come get you. All you have to do is sit still long enough for it to come, and it will.