



Koans *for* Troubled Times

How do we as Buddhists meet the challenges of our time? An answer, suggests [Joan Sutherland](#), lies in the teachings of two great Chan masters and their response to one of the most difficult periods in Chinese history.

SCULPTURES BY LAURA FORD

Several years ago, in the face of a creeping despair about the state of the world, I began to reread my favorite twentieth-century Russian and East European writers. Those folks knew how to keep small embers alive in a fierce wind: Anna Akhmatova, who turned love into a revolutionary act, and Adam Zagajewski, reassuring us that the good always returns, though at the maddening pace of an old gent on a bicycle, the day *after* the catastrophe.

People are worried, and we're looking for ways to climb onto our bicycles and pedal out to see what we might do to help. Recently, I've been exploring what my own Zen koan tradition has to say about unending conflict, environmental disaster, the starvation of millions, and the small figure in the corner of the painting, tipping her head back to take it all in.

It turns out that the koan tradition was born at a similarly urgent moment in Chinese history. Twelve hundred years ago, a few Chan innovators had a fierce desire to leap out of the usual ways of doing things and into new territory—not to escape the catastrophe looming around them, but to more fully meet it. If they were going to be helpful they had to develop—and quickly—flexibility of mind, an easy relationship with the unknown, and a robust willingness to engage with life as they found it. Perhaps most importantly, they needed a really big view. For them, Chan practice wasn't about getting free *of* the world; it was about being free *in* the world. The first koans are field notes from their experiment in the getting of this kind of freedom.

In the eighth century, Chinese culture was flourishing. It was an age of art and philosophy, prosperity and trade. At the same time, the strains of empire were beginning to show. A huge country with an imperial foreign policy has a long border to defend; the constant warfare took a lot of money to pay for and many soldiers to fight. The people were being taxed into poverty, and able-bodied men were on the borders making war rather than on the farms making food. Authority outside the capital began to break down, and life was growing harsher and more capricious.

Eventually the Tang government had to bring in mercenary armies from as far away as Asia Minor. For a while it worked just well enough: the mercenaries would come in and crush the latest incursion or rebellion, the government would pay them for their services, and they would head back home. But at mid-century this precarious status quo crumbled when one of the foreign armies refused to leave. They set up a rebel stronghold in the ancient capital of Changan, the City of Everlasting Peace.

This An Lushan Rebellion ushered in a decade of civil war, famine, and disease so devastating that two out of three Chinese died. *Two out of three*. And it happened in the blink of an eye. China went from being one of the greatest empires the world had ever seen to a nation devastated by conflict and starvation, and its population had shrunk by two-thirds in about ten years. A kind of order was eventually restored, but it would be centuries before the country fully recovered.

The great poet Du Fu was trapped in Changan during the An Lushan Rebellion, and he wrote a

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poem about it called “The View This Spring.” The poem contains two spare lines that sum it all up:

*The nation is destroyed,
mountains and rivers remain.*

Some Chan practitioners saw what Du Fu saw, from their own perspective: In our world things are always getting broken and mended and broken again, and there is also something that never breaks. Everything rises and falls, and yet in exactly the same moment things are eternal and go nowhere at all. How do we see with a kind of binocular vision, one eye aware of how things are coming and going all the time, the other aware of how they’ve never moved at all? How do we experience this not as two separate ways of seeing, but as one seamless field of vision?

Mazu (Ma) Daoyi and Shitou Xiqian, who became Chan teachers around the time of the An Lushan Rebellion, pushed these questions further. They asked, What does it mean for each of us to be wholeheartedly part of this world? How do we fall willingly into the frightened, blasted, beautiful, tender world, just as it is? Because, as Peter Hershock formulates it in his wonderful study of Chan,¹ “It’s not enough to see what buddhanature is; you have to realize what buddhanature does.”

Perhaps it’s significant that these two creative geniuses came from the margins of Chinese society; in unprecedented times, no one is an expert yet, and anyone might become one. Both lived long

lives that spanned the eighth century, and both had connections to Huineng, the sixth Chinese ancestor; from Ma’s heirs came the Linji (Rinzai) school, while some of Shitou’s descendants formed the Caodong (Soto) line. They never met but had great respect for each other; in their day it was said that you didn’t really know Chan until you had studied with both of them. They had a sometimes spooky connection that had unsettling effects on the students who passed between them. Here’s a typical story: Once a monk went to see Shitou. The monk had carefully prepared for all the challenges he could anticipate, but Shitou caught him off guard by crying “Alas! Alas!” as soon as he saw him. Unable to respond, the monk consulted Ma, who slyly suggested that the next time Shitou cried “Alas! Alas!” the monk should puff twice. The monk went back to see Shitou, but before he could say anything, Shitou puffed twice.

In middle age, Shitou settled down on South Mountain in Hunan province. At first he built a meditation hut on top of a large flat rock, which is where he got his name, Shitou, or Stone Head. When the Buddhist temple next door invited him to live there, he refused, preferring the independent life of a mountain recluse. “Better to drown at the bottom of the sea for eternity than to seek liberation by following the wise,” he once remarked.

Shitou might have been a hermit, but he was a hermit in a lively neighborhood. South Mountain was one of the Five Holy Mountains of Chinese Buddhism and also the home of Taoist temples and a Confucian academy. Hundreds of recluses lived and practiced in the area, and Shitou also attracted many students over the years. Open-minded and

¹ *Chan Buddhism*, by Peter Hershock
(University of Hawaii Press, 2005)



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Armour Boys, 2006

curious, he was deeply influenced by Taoism and Huayan Buddhism, and the An Lushan Rebellion apparently only deepened his conviction that sectarianism causes nothing but suffering. He had seen where grand schemes and big ambitions could lead, and while differences between people were natural, he taught, when we start attaching values to the differences, we open the door to heartache. “In the Way, there are no Northern or Southern ancestors,” he said; there are only ancestors common to us all. No red states and blue states, he would say today, just Kansas and California and Georgia, in all their complexity.

Mazu Daoyi was born in the far west of China near the border with Tibet, the son of the town garbage man. He began studying Chan when he

was still young, and his studies eventually brought him to central China. For more than twenty years, during the time of the An Lushan Rebellion and its aftermath, Ma walked from one temple to another through the devastated countryside. Eventually he settled down in Jiangxi province, and his monastery became the great Chan training center of the age. Chan teachers usually take their name from the place they live and teach; Ma is the only one who is known by his family surname (Ma) and an honorific usually translated as Great Master (Zu).

Ma’s teaching style was direct, uncompromising, and often physical. It was clearly influenced by what he saw on his long walk through a devastated land. In those days, people came to the monasteries for a lot of reasons, from spiritual turmoil to



It's as if Mazu Daoyi were saying, "We need you to get clear *right now* about your own nature and the nature of life, so that you can roll up your sleeves and do something about it."

the promise of steady food. But anyone who was looking for escape at Ma's monastery was in for a shock. When he was once asked about the essence of his school, he replied, "Oh, it's just the place where you let go of your body and your life." That was quite a statement during a time when everyone knew people who had lost both. From Ma's perspective, the situation was so urgent, and the need was so great, that there wasn't time for people to despair or lack confidence or run away. It's as if he were saying, "We need you to get clear *right now* about your own nature and the nature of life, so that you can roll up your sleeves and start doing something about it."

Shitou and his descendants tended to emphasize reconciliation and the restoration of peace and stability in times of chaos. Ma's line valued

Chan's independence from the mainstream, which allowed it to offer both a critique of the status quo and an alternative to it. Neither thought he had the one true way or tried to impose his view on the other. Ma and Shitou had different temperaments and ways of teaching, but they shared something fundamental: both were deeply affected by the sorrows of their age, and as a result both were determined to reimagine what Chan was for.

Until then, Chan was largely an introspective meditation practice; you looked inward to find your true self. Huineng, for example, described meditation as "clearly seeing your original nature inside yourself." Shitou and Ma raised the eyes of Chan to the horizon. In Shitou's words, "What meets the eye is the Way." This true self you are looking for, they said, is not just here, in your own

heart/mind, but everywhere. Everything you see is buddhanature; everything shines with that light. Everything you see is *you*—and this at a time when what you saw included blighted fields, refugees starving by the roadside, deserted towns, parents mourning their children killed in the wars. There’s something moving about the large and generous spirit of these two men who responded to the devastation around them by saying, *This is all me. This is all you.* They showed that the way to come to terms with life’s pains is not by turning away from them but by moving deeper into life and encouraging as many others as possible to join you. They embraced the great matter of their time: What do we do now, we one in three who survive?

Before Ma and Shitou, formal Chan teaching had consisted largely of lectures given to groups of students. The heart of Shitou’s and particularly Ma’s teaching was something new: an intimate meeting of two people, either alone or in front of a group. Awakening, they saw, happens in relationship. We meditate together and talk together, we hear birds calling and cars laboring up a hill. We tend a feverish child and recite the words of the ancestors. As Ma and Shitou did with each other, we find a deep communion with someone we’ve never met.

We spend a lot of time in the company of our thoughts and feelings, and sometimes we are a companion to silence. Even a hermit sits in a web of connections with things visible and invisible. Our meditation is made not just of the vastness and the deep engine of concentration; it is also made of these relationships. And then one day, for no apparent reason, something in particular comes to fetch us: the cook coughs or the morning star rises, and we fall open. A particular intimate meeting with a particular other opens us to an intimate relationship with life itself.

Practice is about making us fetchable. It helps us to recognize what gets in the way of our being fetched, and then it gives us a method to deconstruct the obstacle. Most people find this difficult to do on their own, and for Ma and Shitou, that’s where the power of intimate meetings comes in.

The earliest koans are records of Ma’s encounters with his students—encounters that could be mild, probing, or literally upending, but are never about winning an argument or making someone feel stupid. Over and over again—tirelessly, relentlessly—they are an invitation to freedom. In a time of crisis, talking about freedom or even modeling a free life wasn’t enough; these intimate meetings allowed people to experience freedom for themselves.

When Shitou was helping his questioners recognize and dismantle what stood between them and freedom, he tended to ring variations on *Are you sure about that?* His method was to take nothing for granted and to question everything, especially someone’s most cherished beliefs.

“What about liberation?” asked a monk.

“Who binds you?” countered Shitou.

“What about the Pure Land?”

“Who corrupts you?”

“What about nirvana?”

“Who keeps you in the cycle of birth and death?”

Ma, on the other hand, startled people out of their habitual thoughts and into another territory entirely, where the thoughts just didn’t exist anymore—the method of a high-risk demolitions expert compared to Shitou’s plank-by-plank approach. Once, when a questioner named Shuiliao asked Ma the meaning of Chan, Ma kicked him in the chest, knocking him down. This awakened Shuiliao, and he stood up grinning and clapping. Later he said, “Since the day Ma kicked me, I haven’t stopped laughing.”

Neither Ma nor Shitou allowed his questioners to remain for a moment in the position of someone who doesn’t get it. But they weren’t interested in replacing that position with a better one: *I didn’t used to get it, but now I do.* Their project was more radical: *What’s it like to have no position at all?* Shitou would challenge his questioner’s self-doubt, which is often the unacknowledged basis of a position.

Someone asked Shitou, “What am I supposed to do?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Where else can I find what I’m looking for?”

“Are you sure you lost it?”

Shitou’s responses aren’t dismissals; he really means what he’s asking. Why do you assume that you need to ask me, and what’s it like when you do? What is your deepest longing, and what if you realized that you already have what you long for?

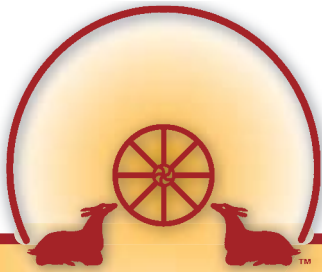
In a similar way, Ma would challenge the assumption that if you don’t understand something, that’s a problem to be fixed. Someone once told Ma that he didn’t understand one of Ma’s famous sayings, that mind is Buddha. Ma replied, “The mind that doesn’t understand is exactly it. There’s nothing else.”

When we think there’s something wrong with not getting it, when the mind makes up commentaries about what it means not to get it—well, that’s

To engage and entangle ourselves with whomever and whatever we meet, to care about them, to throw our lot in with them—that is the Way.

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mind being Buddha, but it's usually hard to see it. To be wholeheartedly unsure, to sincerely take up a question like, *What does it mean that mind is Buddha, I wonder?* without veering off into commentary—that, Ma found, was a much more direct way for people to experience for themselves the mind that is Buddha.

But even that was sometimes too much chitchat for Ma's taste. When someone froze because they didn't know how to respond to his question, or tried to present the answer they thought displayed their accomplishment or would please him, Ma was likely to hit or kick or brusquely send them away. He'd put his hand over someone's mouth just as they were about to speak. He tweaked noses and shouted so loud it deafened people for days. This style of teaching later became a menace and a cliché, but originally it arose from the urgency of the times.

Ma knew the power of our habits of bondage, and he also knew the power of being free of them, if only for a moment. He pulled the rug out with the hope of surprising us into free fall. The art critic Peter Schjeldahl² once described the encounter with beauty in a way that Ma would entirely recognize: Beauty stops you in your tracks, so that it's suddenly impossible to continue in the direction that a moment before seemed inevitable. Something pleasurable or attractive (like replacing old, flawed positions with new and improved ones) enhances the feelings you already have (*NOW I've got it*). On the other hand, genuine beauty, like suddenly having no position at all, stops the flow of your feelings (*Nothing I thought applies anymore*), and when they resume they're moving in a different direction entirely.

Behind the shock tactics, Ma's perspective was deeply optimistic and encouraging. Right here and right now, he invited, find your footing as a realized human being. Meet me eye to eye, as an equal. Drop the notion that there's something to get. You already have it; let's see it. In the language of his descendent Linji, let us be true persons without rank together, and let us see what becomes possible when we do.

Once we've done some serious deconstruction and experienced falling freely,

we have to do something with that experience. A monk who carefully observed Ma's method wrote about the time Ma kicked Shuiliao in the chest: "Emptiness, that idle land, is shattered. The iron boat sails straight onto the Ocean of the Infinite."

Even the purity of emptiness, in which nothing ever happens, has to be left behind. There is a boat to build and sail, a vast sea to navigate. There are refugees to feed and orphans to rear, art to rescue from the bonfire and songs to write so people won't forget. Ma was passionate that responding to our time is an essential part of realization. He once said that from the point of view of the bodhisattva, burying oneself in emptiness and not knowing how to get out is like suffering the torments of hell. As our hearts and minds open in meditation, it is actually painful not to open our hands as well. For Ma, hell wasn't the trouble he saw all around him; hell was turning away from it, trying to escape into a separate peace.

Why is it an unfloatable iron boat that we have to sail? In Chan, iron boats take their place next to flutes without holes and stone women who get up to dance, representing the moment-by-moment miracle that emptiness appears as all the things of the universe—as redwood trees and freeway overpasses and the dark matter we can't even see. We're participating in the same miracle when, having experienced the free fall of emptiness, we step back into the thick of life to turn our awakening into matter.

How do we do that? Well, Shitou and Ma didn't think it was by way of a practice that requires all kinds of special conditions to do it correctly. This may be the place where you lose your body and your life, but there's nothing special about it, and certainly nothing that you can control through fear and fussiness. Ma maintained that "a person bathing in the great ocean uses all the waters that empty into it." We launch that iron boat by truly understanding that wherever we find ourselves, whatever we're faced with, that's the Way. There are no detours from the Way; we can't lose our Way. To engage and entangle ourselves with whomever and whatever we meet, to care about them, to throw our lot in with them—that is the Way. Every moment, every circumstance, is another chance to experience things as they are, rather than as we wish or fear them to be.

² "Notes on Beauty" (1994)

We turn the same warmth and curiosity toward our own heart/minds. Ma famously said that ordinary mind is the Way. We don't reject our own thoughts and feelings; even in a desperate time, the grieving, the rage, the flashes of bravery and generosity in ourselves and in others—all of that is the Way, too. Even, maybe especially, the mind that doesn't understand is exactly it. In our own time, anyone who claims to have an explanation for what's going on probably doesn't, whether it's from a political or metaphysical or conspiratorial or any other perspective. It's a good time to be asking questions, to appreciate the grounding of the ordinary mind in its impulses to make a warm breakfast on a cold day and to research what it would take to become carbon-neutral. In other words, there is a unity between our inner lives and the outer world, a continuum that only appears to be separated into pieces that are sometimes in conflict. Turn too far toward your own heart/mind and you become self-obsessed; turn too far in the other direction and you burn out. Bring an attitude of warmth and curiosity to both and the Way begins to open on its own. This is what Ma called living a natural life according to the times. Be part of what's going on around you, and "just wear clothes, eat food, always uphold the way of the bodhisattva." We might chuckle and think, Oh sure, clothes, food, way of the bodhisattva—nothing to it, right? Just so, according to Shitou. "Your essential mind is absolutely still and completely whole, and its ability to respond to circumstances is limitless."

This fundamental wholeness and responsiveness is what Ma urged people to experience for themselves; it's where Shitou invited us to rest. It's the freedom of having no position; there's no running around in circles waving our hands, no updating the inventories of everything that's missing, and no illusion that what we're capable of is determined solely by our will. Put all that down and things get big and alive. Our essential mind isn't bounded by our skull, and our capacity to respond isn't either. This aspect of realization also has everything to do with relationship: we feel whole and at peace and able to respond because we know we're part of something very large. Remembering this even some of the time can make a huge difference; it can make us bold. **BD**



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