JOAN SUTHERLAND • BODHIN KJOLHEDE • JUDY ROITMAN

Koans

How We Work with Them
How They Work on Us

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MARK T. MORSE

INTRODUCTION BY ROSS BOLLETER

THE USE OF THE KOAN as a formal teaching tool entered the West through the efforts of pioneering teachers such as Soyen Shaku, who taught Mr. and Mrs. Alexander Russell and their family at their home outside of San Francisco in 1905. (It seems that Mrs. Russell was the first person in the United States to undertake koan study.) Soyen Shaku's student Nyogen Senzaki compiled his *101 Zen Stories* in 1919 and used koans in his teaching in San Francisco at least from the 1920s onward. Sokei-an Shigetsu Sasaki, a Rinzai master who pioneered the Zen way in New York in the 1930s, made use of koans with his students, including Ruth Fuller, who became his wife. Ruth Fuller Sasaki's contribution to the development of Zen in the West through her translations of major Zen texts, including *Zen Dust: The History of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Linchi) Zen*, is inestimable.

ROSS BOLLETER is a Zen teacher in the Diamond Sangha tradition and the senior teacher of Zen Group of Western Australia in Perth. The author of *Dongshan's Five Ranks: Keys to Enlightenment*, he is currently compiling a collection of Western koans.

However, koans have always been with us, and always are. They arise naturally in life situations and out of the dilemmas we face. At times of crisis, as when we lose someone we love through death or separation, we can find that we are facing ultimate questions such as *What is the purpose of life?* In the instance of the death of a loved one, we may find ourselves asking, *Where has the one I love gone?* At such times, we may somehow find the tenacity to stay with a fundamental question until it resolves.

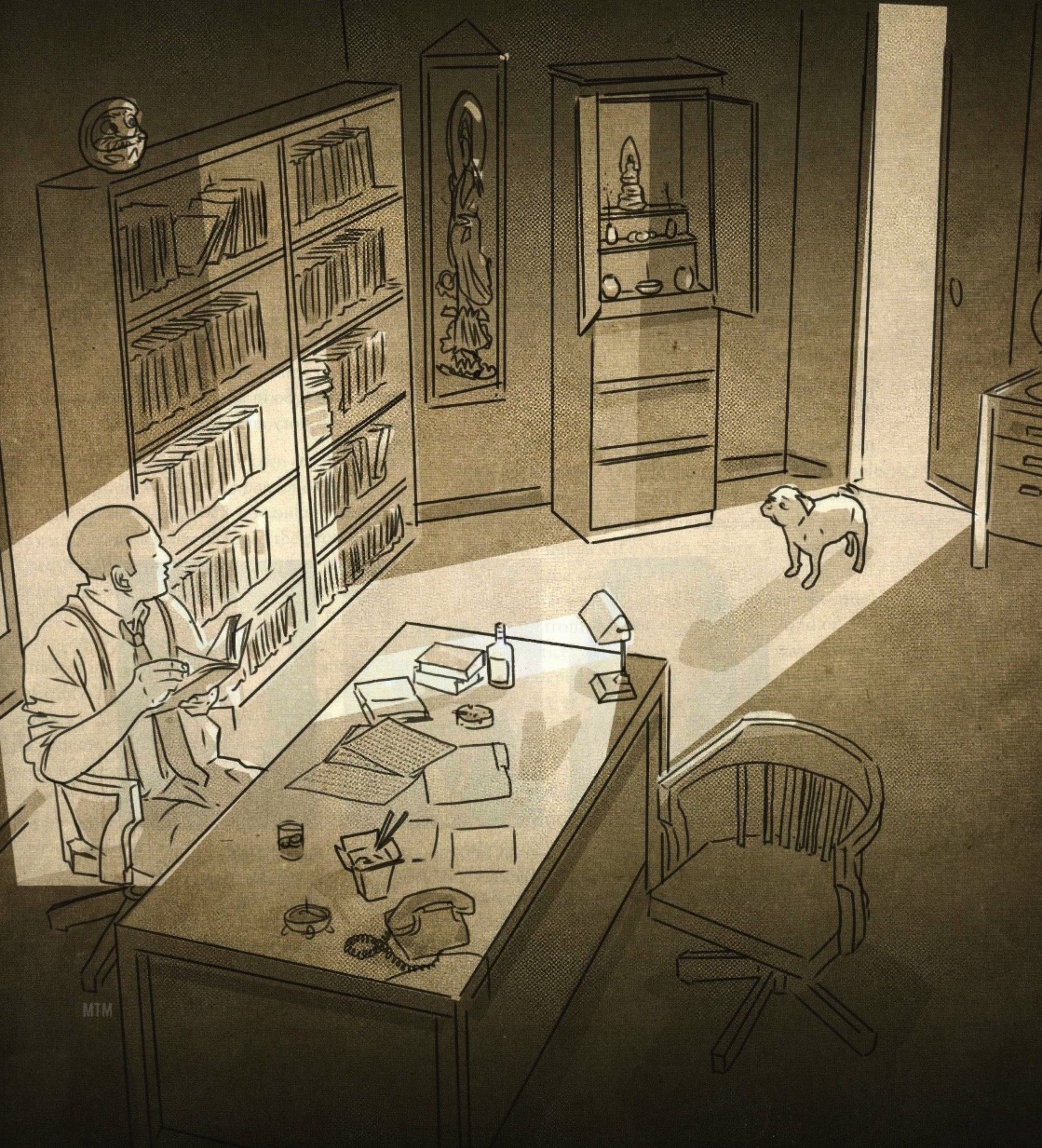
Beyond the koans that arise spontaneously from our traumatic experiences, we can find or create koans from within the weave of our lives. My father, while not a Zen practitioner in the formal sense, exemplified grace under pressure, that ability to deal lightly and freely with what is painful and difficult. When he was in his eighties, he was knocked down by a delivery van. In the hospital they put him in "treatment" prior to admitting him as a patient. Although no one could find time to get him a bottle to piss in, during the three hours he waited there, four staff members came round with their clipboards to ask him his age. He generously gave each of them a fresh response: "twenty-one," "ninety-eight," "forty-seven," and, finally, "two hundred!" This story, treated as a koan, is rich in possibilities concerning time and the mystery of words.

Verses, stories, dialogues between teacher and student, lines from the Bible, dreams, folk stories, and stories of our lives in love and work all furnish us with rich resources for the beginnings of a Western koan tradition. The koan literature we have inherited comes to us almost entirely out of patriarchal monastic traditions, so understandably there are lacunae, especially regarding relationships, family, love and sex, childbirth and child rearing. As Zen teachers and students, we have an opportunity as well as a responsibility to develop koans that reflect these aspects of our lives.

Suggesting that we can discover or create koans in Western contexts does not mean we should abandon the noble koan traditions that come down to us. Such a legacy is a matter of wonder and is tremendously efficacious. We shouldn't abandon tradition; rather, we should feel free to extend it.

In the following panel discussion, a rare meeting of teachers from different koan traditions, we are invited to glimpse the world of koans—how they work, and how their practice is taking shape in the West.

CASE 1:
JOSHU'S DOG



BUDDHADHARMA: The word "koan" has crept into popular culture, usually to mean a riddle or unsolvable question. So perhaps we should start with the most basic question: what is a koan?

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: The word "koan," or *gongan* in the original Chinese, means a public case or precedent. We look back to the precedent, to the understanding of the masters, as a starting point. Teachers may add their understanding when working on koans with students, but those early guideposts are the basic frame of reference.

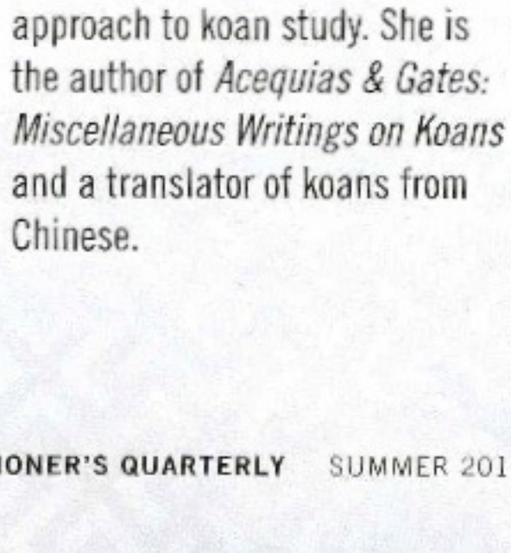
JUDY ROITMAN: One of the striking things about working with koans is that you're using language to cut through language. The phrase "before speech, before thinking" refers to an aspect of mind that is much more fundamental than what we're used to paying attention to. Through koans, you begin to develop the ability to cut through ordinary preconceptions and ways of thinking, to respond not from the intellect or emotions but from that more fundamental place.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: A new form of Buddhism was developing in China about 1,300 years ago, and it needed a new kind of practice in order to flourish. That practice was koans. Initially, koans were simply stories about things that had happened—a record of a conversation, usually between teacher and student, though sometimes between two students or other people. Over time, additional elements such as poetry and references to popular culture were folded into the developing body of koan texts.

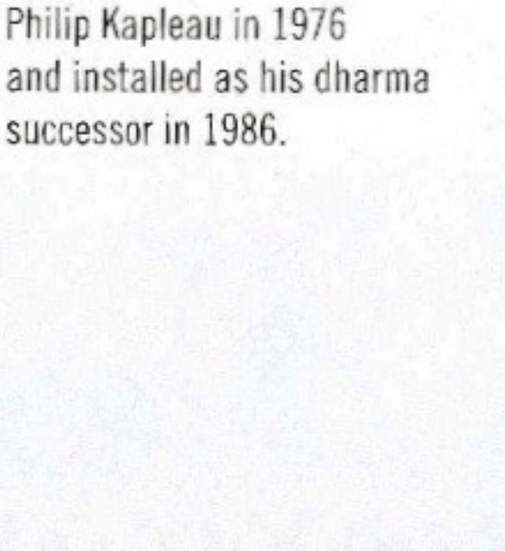
The understanding of a koan includes individual experience, but it's also held in the collective. That's the public nature of the "public case." In working with koans, we strive to find our own expression of that collective understanding that has come down to us through the centuries. When we experience the gap before vast empires of thought and feeling arise in reaction to a moment, that too is the field of the koan, which includes but isn't limited to our individual selves.

What's so astonishing and beautiful about koans is that they aren't intended to describe something to us or even teach us something but to invite us to take them into our lives so that we can experience the same state of consciousness as the characters in the story.

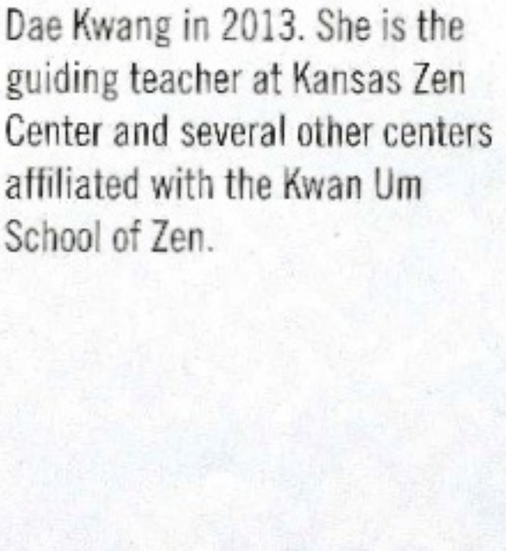
BUDDHADHARMA: So in a sense, the student is stepping into the story and trying on someone else's realization.



JOAN SUTHERLAND is one of the founders of the Pacific Zen School, which takes an innovative and contemporary approach to koan study. She is the author of *Acequias & Gates: Miscellaneous Writings on Koans* and a translator of koans from Chinese.



BODHIN KJOLHEDE is abbot of Rochester Zen Center in Rochester, New York. He was ordained by Roshi Philip Kapleau in 1976 and installed as his dharma successor in 1986.



JUDY ROITMAN received authorization to teach from Zen Master Seung Sahn in 1998 and transmission from Zen Master Dae Kwang in 2013. She is the guiding teacher at Kansas Zen Center and several other centers affiliated with the Kwan Um School of Zen.

JUDY ROITMAN: Part of the tremendous power of koans is that the student's personal story is completely irrelevant. One of my teachers, Zen Master Su Bong, once said to me that to work with koans, you have to be a great actor. What he meant was not that you pretend, but that you completely become the koan. So if someone is hanging from a tree branch by her teeth, it's *you* hanging from that branch, and you are hanging there completely. If you are given one of the famous cases involving an encounter between two monks, you become one of those monks, or perhaps a witness on the scene. Although obviously you bring your life to the koan, you become the situation, not limited to your own life at all. When people give wrong answers to koans, their karma appears. They can see their karma very clearly and recognize that it's not relevant to the situation. Being able to recognize and look past your karma is a critical aspect of this work.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: Every koan, in its own way, points to this original nature of ours. By inhabiting the various roles in a koan, we are called upon to investigate our true nature through the specifics of that koan.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: Early in my own study, I worked on the question *Why can't a person of great strength lift up his leg?* When I couldn't find a way into it, my teacher changed the pronoun, so it became *Why can't a person of great strength lift up* her *leg?* Such a simple change, but it made me realize *Oh! This is about me.* The first realization, *This is about me*, is hugely important—but also not sufficient in itself. I saw that it was about me, but I also saw that it was about every other being that appears in the koans: the cypress tree in the garden, the donkey, the old man—all of them are me. So the koan is a way of getting us out of our constricted sense of self, not by denying or cutting off that self but by expanding it so infinitely that it ceases to have the limited meaning it once had.

BUDDHADHARMA: How does one enter into formal koan practice with a teacher?

JUDY ROITMAN: In our school, you walk in, have an interview, and that's it. You don't have to formally become a student; you don't even have to have practiced before. Koan practice is open to anyone. That's very different from other schools.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: I follow my teacher's example, which involves having students first stabilize the mind through breath practice, which could be for weeks, months, or even years. Every once in a while I might nudge someone who seems particularly ripe for koan study toward the practice, but I almost always leave it up to the student to raise the subject.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: In our community, we don't have one relationship with the koan, but rather what you might call a koan culture. There are a number of different ways in which someone might encounter a koan: through hearing one discussed in a talk; through koan salons, groups we formed to study koans together; or perhaps by asking me for a koan to help deal with a particular difficulty, such as their mother dying, which I'll give to suit that situation. I sometimes suggest to students that they might be ready to begin koan practice, but usually I wait for requests for formal study. We've found that having different kinds of relationships to the koans can support and enrich one's understanding and practice.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: Are your koan salons composed of people who have had a breakthrough with their first koan or can anyone participate?

JOAN SUTHERLAND: They're made up mostly of people who are seriously committed to the practice, who haven't necessarily had a first breakthrough but are becoming immersed in koan culture. But we also include in the mix people who are new to koans, because that's really valuable. Most often the interest comes from people who have some kind of creative practice, who are artists in some way. So we have the depth that comes with people immersed in the practice and also the freshness of those who are attracted to koans because it speaks to them in their creative lives.

BUDDHADHARMA: Is there such a thing as informal koan practice? Thinking of our readers, most of whom will never have the privilege of working with a teacher who is trained in this way, how do Buddhist practitioners interested in koan practice explore the spirit of this kind of inquiry for themselves?

JUDY ROITMAN: I don't know that they can. I don't like saying that; I wish it were different, but looking at my own practice, both as a student and

CASE 20:
SHOGEN'S STRONG MAN

You're not looking for an "answer." You're using the question to attain your true nature, to cut through conceptual thoughts just like a hot knife through butter. —Judy Roitman

as a teacher, I don't see how it's possible. We do Skype interviews and email dharma combat, but it's always with people we know personally. Since koans require you to cut through your own thinking, how can you do that without guidance at hand?

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: You need someone to guide you who's not part of your own loop, just as in psychotherapy you don't decide to psychoanalyze yourself; you have to have someone who brings both experience and a measure of detachment to the situation. The very nature of this practice requires working with a mentor of some kind.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: This is a very vexed question because with so few koan teachers, there are very few opportunities for people to stumble across that kind of relationship. I do agree that a teacher brings a perspective that is incredibly valuable; it's not something you can reproduce in any other way. But there are some ways to bring the richness of the koan tradition to people who can't have a one-on-one relationship with a teacher, such as having good translations of the koans. As a translator, I can see that some of what seems mysterious about koans is not actually a feature of the koans themselves but of the translations. And good commentaries can give people a more direct and immediate relationship with the koan tradition.

BUDDHADHARMA: Once you've given a student a koan, what are your instructions in terms of how to work with it?

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: The most common first koan we use is *Mu*. I tell my students that mu is another word for our true nature, just as desk and lamp and stick are all words for our true nature. But in the case of mu, you want to have your awareness merge with it as much as possible—not just while sitting but also in activity. In a perfect practice, a student would be absorbed in mu all the time, but that's very difficult to do when the discursive mind is engaged in conversation, reading, or discussion. So I suggest that students go to mu during simple activities that don't require the use of the discriminating mind. One of the most effective ways of entering mu is framing it as a question. When you're asking *What is mu?* you're really asking what your true nature is. But focusing on that question *What is my true nature?* can elicit discursive thoughts. The value of the word "mu" as a koan is that it has no meaning in English, which helps shut down the discriminating mind so we can access what lies beyond.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: That's an interesting difference between our approaches. We actually translate mu to "no," because for a Japanese person, mu does have meaning, and we're trying to get closer to the spirit of that experience. To constantly say no, to bring it into your meditation and into the rest of your life, is a very strange, subversive thing to do that often brings up a lot of resistance. Why would I want to say no all the time? The destabilizing quality of that is a fruitful, powerful part of the practice.

Another means of working with the koan is to drop away the concentrated repetition and bring in a question like *What is this "no," I wonder?* Repeat it a few times, let it fall away, and notice what happens. The koans are interested in the dynamic quality of the mind, but if aliveness around the question disappears, or if the discursive mind is taking over, you can come back to "no" as a concentration practice. You can also ask *What is "no" in this moment?* or *What is "no" here?*, inviting it to reveal something in every situation. You're always keeping company with your koan, even in sleeping and dreaming states. People fall asleep to no. They dream no. They spend all night with it. You're looking for the throughline underneath sitting, walking around, waking, sleeping—all of those temporary

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states—not dependent upon your particular state at a particular moment.

JUDY ROITMAN: The Kwan Um School does koan work very differently in that we don't make koans the object of meditation. In Korean Zen, the *hwadu* [Chinese, *huatou*] tradition involves asking the Great Question, most commonly in the form of *What am I?* or *What is this?* We offer many different kinds of meditation practice, but in classical hwadu practice, you're not looking for an "answer," you're using the question to attain your true nature, to cut through conceptual thoughts like a hot knife through butter.

My teacher Zen Master Seung Sahn would say, "I don't teach Buddhism, I only teach 'don't know.'" One technique he taught was to question on the in-breath *What am I?* and on the out-breath to reply very strongly *Don't know*. So in the context of this "don't know" tradition, when we work with koans, our practice is to let the koan come up naturally, not to hold on to it but to look at it when it arises. Not trying to intellectualize, not trying to analyze, just looking at it from different angles, as if turning an object in the palm of your hand and then letting it go. It's the hwadu, the "don't know," that we tell students to carry into their lives, not so much the individual koan.

BUDDHADHARMA: In this ongoing practice, what is the dynamic between teacher and student? It seems that it could be quite intimate and intense.

JUDY ROITMAN: To me, one of the most revealing dynamics in koan practice is how students want to please the teacher. Teachers are authorities; they have the ability to tell you whether you're right or wrong, and you can't argue back at them. You want them to like you, to think you're smart. You want this person's approval, but you can't truly engage in the process unless you give that up. You might get some right answers, you might get approved by the teacher here and there, you might even have some kind of awakening. But you can't deeply engage in the process unless you've given up that desire for approval and learn how to completely focus on the work.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: In my fifteen years of koan training with Roshi Kapleau, I found that I sometimes got more out of being rung out of dokusan with my answer rejected than I did by getting the koan approved, because it exposed my frustration, self-doubt, and anger. I had plenty of anger toward him sometimes when he would throw me out, which was all great grist for the mill for giving up self-consciousness and attachment to the self.

JUDY ROITMAN: And it's important that this anger and frustration is arising in a situation that has absolutely no consequences. I always tell people that koan practice is a no-consequence situation—not passing a koan is not going to affect your marriage or your children or your job. It doesn't go onto your permanent record. People get angry, hate themselves, go into self-abnegation—all over something that really has no practical consequences. When your answer is not approved, you get to see how your mind creates these feelings; you get to see your karma in a certain way. There's a koan that we use, not one of the classical ones—I can't say it here without ruining it, but almost always, people's first response is a very goody-two-shoes answer, very pious, the solution of a good little boy or girl. How wonderful for somebody to be told *No! No! No!* to the answer they expect to get approved. Koans reveal the karma everyone carries around with them

JOAN SUTHERLAND: Students bring an aspiration into the room, which is their connection to their own

awakening. As teachers, we sometimes hold that connection for them until they can hold it for themselves. One of the most beautiful moments for me is when I see them ready to take that back, to hold that connection completely for themselves.

BUDDHADHARMA: We often hear stories about students working so hard to penetrate through that first koan, which may take months or years. How does koan practice change for the seasoned practitioner who has been working on koans for ten or twenty years?

JUDY ROITMAN: I would expect senior students to have a much stronger don't-know mind, not dealing with all the conceptual hurdles that a beginning student might go through. Once you have pierced through a certain kind of koan, others that are similar will come more quickly to you. But there are many classifications of koans—and you can be a Zen master and run into a koan that you can't crack.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: In my experience, a great breakthrough is rare, but there are varying degrees of openings. Over time, students learn to see through words and concepts, to see the emptiness of them, and also not to take their own reactions so seriously. Frustration, anger, dejection, and self-doubt are recognized as old conditioning, so it becomes easier to avoid those emotional tangles.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: If this practice isn't transformative, what's the point? The hope is that eventually, among any number of breakthrough moments, there will be one that is fundamentally transformative, revealing what it's like to not be obscured by our habits and opinions. From there, the work is to integrate that experience into the everyday moments of our lives. Longtime students tend to have a less constricted, self-concerned view and a more generous and open participation in the world.

BUDDHADHARMA: Can you expand on what the teacher's role is in terms of guidance through the koan, catalyzing that experience for the student?

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: I've changed how I work with students. I spent a few months working with a teacher in Japan whose style was very different from that of my main teacher, Roshi Kapleau. He was extremely affirming and encouraging, whereas Roshi Kapleau tended to be the opposite, critical and demanding. That worked for me when I was younger, but after working with this other teacher, Harada Tangen Roshi at Bukkokuji, I gave myself permission to be more encouraging and affirming. Americans tend to be very hard on themselves and have a persistently critical inner voice, so I try to help them put that aside and stay engaged with the process. I find it's a more effective way to work.

JUDY ROITMAN: Yes—you want to help them believe in themselves. Even when telling students the answer they gave is not something you're going to accept, you still want to affirm that you believe in them and that they should believe in themselves. Right or wrong answer doesn't matter.

Someone once asked Suzuki Roshi, "Do you like everybody? It seems that you like everybody." He said, "No, there are a lot of people I don't like. But you can't tell who they are." No matter if you like or dislike somebody outside that interview room, in the room you believe in everybody. Perhaps the most important thing a teacher does in that interview room is to believe in everyone.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: Work in the room reminds me of Vimalakirti's room: a ten-by-ten foot room that managed to fit thirty thousand bodhisattvas who came to visit. You set a field into which each student walks; the variable is who walks through the door and sits down. I see my job as mediating the relationship between the eternal and the particular, working with the person who presents herself while always keeping in mind that eternal aspect of the practice. Each question, each mistake, is a doorway to eternity. Nothing is excluded because awakening happens to all of a person simultaneously, nothing left out.

BUDDHADHARMA: Do you see koan practice evolving in the West?

JOAN SUTHERLAND: Koans by their nature are not

CASE 5: KYOGEN'S TREE

Koans by their nature are not an orthodoxy. They're a living tradition. They meet with the genius of every group of people that takes them up. —Joan Sutherland

an orthodoxy. They're a living tradition; they've always changed as they've moved from one culture to another. They meet with the genius of every group of people that takes them up. I don't see koans simply as words on a page or as a particular story or question but as the interaction between that story and the people who take them up. I am part of a reimagining of what the koan tradition is, which is based on a couple of things: trying to listen to what the koans seem to want and understanding what's actually happening in students' experiences.

About twenty years ago, we noticed that students were responding to the koans in ways that went beyond the traditional answers. The question became, Do we try to stuff the koans back in the traditional box and insist only on the traditional answers, or do we let the koans jump free of the box and see what happens? The last twenty years for me have been a process of paying attention to where the koans themselves seem to want to go and to what's actually happening in people's practice with them. I only started talking about this recently because I didn't want to sound like I was putting forth a competing dogma of what koans are about. But it really is the great adventure of my lifetime to be able to witnesses this tradition I love so much blossoming and flourishing in a new way.

JUDY ROITMAN: Is it changing? My response would be yes and no. I'm a big traditionalist. I like to feel connected to ancestors, which I do when I go to synagogue and when I practice Zen. In the Kwan Um School, because we have so many teachers and because we encourage students to work with different teachers, the teachers communicate with each other about koans and our approaches to them. We try to keep enough of a common understanding that when a student gives a response to Teacher B that has already been approved by Teacher A, Teacher B doesn't say, "Oh, that's stupid." We want to keep a common understanding of the koans to keep students from being confused.

What's interesting to me is that even with this commitment, there's inevitable drift. Even my husband and I, who are both Zen masters in this school, find that we start drifting away from each other in our approaches and understanding. So while I want to keep to precedent, where I feel that an answer a student gives is one that could have been given one hundred, two hundred, or even five hundred years ago, at the same time I recognize that there's this human drift we just can't help. I might have a different answer for a question I received twenty years ago. But I do personally feel a kind of responsibility toward a core tradition that I want to somehow uphold.

BODHIN KJOLHEDE: I have great respect for the public case, for precedent, and I worry about too much emphasis falling to a teacher's personal interpretation. It's wonderful that there are so many different approaches—sometimes I write down what a student has come in with because I think it enhances my understanding—but only as long as the tradition of our predecessors remains foundational to the teaching.

JOAN SUTHERLAND: I don't think there needs to be a choice made between a deep rootedness in the tradition and a willingness to allow things to unfold in different ways. What I see as my task is to try to understand the spirit of what our predecessors were doing, then to look at the ways in which there has been cultural overlay on top of that. Orthodoxies have grown up around expressions of a particular time and place that don't necessarily relate to us now. What is *our* expression? I think our responsibility is to deeply understand the spirit of the ancestors, then to do everything we can to find the expression of that spirit here and now. BD