

Introduction to Working with Koans  
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Good evening, bodhisattvas. Welcome to campfire dharma talks! Tonight I would like to say a few words about koans. There seems to be an infinite number of words to say about them, so this is just a moment's dip into the stream. We'll look at some ways to fundamentally line up to a koan, how to have a relationship with it, and a little bit about how to work with it. I'd also like to take a look at a few koans and see if we have anything to say about them as a group.

Even though some of us are not doing koans or even interested in koans, they really are the foundation of our school. There's so much of our practice and philosophy and how we understand what the Dharma is that comes out of this thirteen-hundred-year-long, mad experiment in the getting of consciousness that is the koans. Even if it doesn't seem to relate directly to what you're doing in your practice, it actually does, because it informs so much of everything we do.

I want to start with a quote from D.T Suzuki, who was a great Japanese Rinzai scholar but who also had quite a significant opening as a young man. While he was brilliant as an academic and taught at Columbia, he had as his foundation this profound experience of the true nature of things, and he spent a lot of his time and energy trying to bring koans across, trying to make them explicable to a Western audience. Sometimes he had a strange and lyrical turn of thought about koans, and this is one such moment. He starts out by saying something that's true : The *ko* of *koan* literally means public, and the *an* of *koan* is a document. So a koan is a public document. "The Zen document is the one each of us brings along into this world at our birth and tries to decipher before we pass away." That's great, is it not?

"There is, however, no secrecy to this, as it is all open or public to us, to every one of us." Suzuki was pushing against the idea that koans are a paradox or riddle, or they're something secret or hidden like a special handshake you have to know in order to decipher them. He said that there's no secrecy. It's all open to every one of us. "If there is any hidden

meaning in it at all, it is on our side, and not in the document.” It is something in us that is hidden that the koan will help us reveal, not something that is hidden in the koan. “When the koan is brought out of the unconscious to the field of consciousness, it is said to have been understood by us.”

A contemporary of Suzuki’s, Shibayama Zenkei, who was a great koan teacher whose work we use in our own study, said it succinctly, koan style. He said, “Etymologically, the term *koan* means the place where the truth is.” So again, nothing secret or hidden or tricky there. The koan is where the truth is, and in coming into relationship with it, it will reveal to us a truth hitherto not yet conscious. It will help us make it conscious and make it part of our lives.

It’s normal, especially at the beginning of koan study, to try to figure a koan out, to hold it in your hands and shake it until it divulges its secret. That’s the opposite move. That’s the assumption that there’s something rattling around inside the koan, and if we just shake it hard enough it will fall out and we’ll be able to use it. This is you trying to solve the koan as though it were some intimidating public document you’ve received. Here’s your new koan — like getting a registered letter from Homeland Security. *I don’t know what to do about this!*

If it’s not mildly threatening or pulse-quickenning in that way, maybe it’s just puzzling or opaque. I think of a wonderful experience with Seraphina, John Tarrant’s daughter, who when she was about thirteen or fourteen, developed a love for Joan Baez. I immediately went to my cupboard and pulled out all my old LPs and I said, “Look, I have all these old Joan Baez records.” She took a record in her hand and she turned it around and upside down, and asked, “How do you open this?” So sometimes a koan can be like that. How do we open this?

If it’s not that, if it’s not a Rubik’s cube that we’re going to shake the truth out of, what *is* the nature of this public document that is a koan? I want to offer an alternative. This is a verse by Xuedou on the twenty-fourth koan in the *Blue Cliff Record*. It’s a koan in which a nun named Iron Grinder Liu comes to the hut of Guishan, one of the ancient koan teachers, and they have a conversation. Xuedou comments on the moment when she arrives at his hut : “She rides an iron horse into the fortress, and is met with a proclamation that all the land is at peace.” She comes in blazing, in her Iron Grinder glory, and is met with a proclamation that all the land is at peace. That’s Guishan’s response to her : “All is well, you’re welcome. Come

on in, flop down on the floor with me.” Yuanwu, commenting on this poem, says, “A dog carries the amnesty in its mouth.”

Now anybody who’s kept company with a dog has an immediate feel for that, the dog bringing the amnesty in its mouth. At the end of a long and bruising day, you come to your door and here is this being who is so happy to see you, everything is well, all is forgiven, and life is good. I think that’s the amnesty that the dog offers. Yuanwu is deliberately invoking this homey image of rest at the end of the day, and everything being good, everything being forgiven, and saying that this is what a koan is. Not a registered letter from Homeland Security, but a dog with amnesty in its mouth. If we can receive the koan in that spirit of the dog wagging its tail at the door, we’re likely to find that, actually, more than us solving the koan, the koan is in some way solving us. In this I offer my gratitude to Jung, who said we don’t cure our symptoms; our symptoms cure us. I think that in the same way, we don’t solve the koans; the koans solve us.

They’re like the dog at the door, reminding us of something more expansive already in ourselves. When we come home tired and defeated and longing for a bath and bed at the end of a hard day, the dog isn’t giving us something we don’t have. The dog is reminding us of something that is already true about us, reminding us of something that is more expansive than that exhaustion and constriction we’re feeling at the moment. And that’s what koans do.

It turns out that what is difficult in the meeting with the koan often isn’t what the koan is bringing to the meeting, it’s what *we’re* bringing. It’s like coming home at the end of the day and bringing the residue of the day with you. Those of us who’ve worked with dreams together have talked about how dreams in the early part of the night, in the Mahayana tradition, are thought of as carrying karmic residue with them. They’re the dreams that, when we remember them, we’re trying to work out what they say about us and our lives, and what kind of meaning they have for us on a day-to-day basis. They’re called karmic residue dreams. In a way, it’s a larger version of that karmic residue that we bring to the koan. We bring the karmic residue of our whole lives, of our tendencies and our biases and our opinions and our habitual ways of doing things. That’s what makes things tricky in the relationship. That’s what makes things sometimes obscure.

To follow Suzuki : what is hidden and as yet unknown is in *uu*, not in the koan. What the koan will do is help us reveal that to ourselves. The important thing is that the resolution

of the koan already exists inside of us. It's that expansive state we forget from moment to moment, being made manifest by the koan. That's why there can be no true recipe for enlightenment. If enlightenment were a matter of adding something, there might be a recipe. We can make a chocolate cake by following the recipe, and it's pretty clear how you do that, but in the matter of awakening, it is never about adding something. It's about revealing something that's already true in each of us.

The work of that revelation has to do with the transforming of the obscurations, the things that get in the way, and that's going to be particular to each of us. We might share obscurations. I might be able to name a few and everybody would laugh because you recognize them, but no two of us have exactly the same thickets of brambles between us and awakening. For each of us it's our own particular hell, and for each of us it's a matter of transforming those thickets of brambles into gardens, which will be different for each of us. It's about each of us revealing what we already have; we just have to clear the ground a little bit so that it becomes clear.

In this process, people can sometimes think of the koan as a public document in the sense of being something that's not personal, and it can even feel foreign. The koans feel weird and strange and hard to understand. They speak in an idiom of a thousand years ago from another continent, and from another kind of life—a monastic kind of life. People bridle at the foreignness of the koans and put them aside because of that.

There's something in that. There are a lot of things that are important in our lives that don't get addressed directly in the koans: the whole realm of the intimate love that happens in family life is glancingly looked at, but certainly not explored in depth. So our curriculum is evolving in response to that; we've added new koans that seem to bring those things in.

But what's also true is that the very weirdness of the koans is important. We're becoming so habituated to receiving information hand-tailored for us—on the internet and through social media. You don't have to get anything you don't want (except for spam, but that's a different subject). You can subscribe to Rush Limbaugh's newsletter. You can subscribe to the Huffington Post. And that's all you see all day. So the very weirdness of the koans can push against the grain in a helpful way. They're not reinforcing our habitual ways of the heart-mind. They're tilting them, pushing them over a bit, asking for something different. They come from a territory outside that which we already know or suspect about

life, and they invite us to enlarge our understanding of what life is by stepping into that territory with them. They're interested in how we respond to the new and unexpected, not how we nod our heads and say, *Yep, I always knew that about the world*. They're interested in what we do when something comes in from left field and pulls the rug out from under us for a moment so that we're in freefall.

I want to give another example of the foreignness of koans. This is from one of our Japanese ancestors, Nakagawa Soen, who was an artistic genius in the twentieth century and our direct relative. He was looking at the koans moving from Japanese into English, from Japan to America. Listen to the view he had, which is so different from, *Oh, this is too weird, I don't want to deal with this*. He wrote a letter to Senzaki Nyogen, his colleague who lived a long time in Los Angeles. This is from 1938, and he wrote it while he was on the Pacific Ocean, crossing from one place to another :

I've been studying your dharma talks on *The Gateless Gate* [which is one of the great koan collections], one after another. I feel emancipated just seeing the teaching conveyed in Roman letters rather than Japanese ideograms. Zen, which is fundamentally about the emancipation of all beings, is unfortunately sealed in some square box called *Zen*. In this enclosure the ancient dog from the koan Zhaozhou's Mu has been suffocating. In English this dog is so joyfully alive.

So that's another way to hold difference and foreignness, and possibly one that is more encouraging and enlivening.

The last thing I want to say about possible difficulty is that sometimes we read a koan and think, *There's no place for me in here. This isn't about me, I can't locate myself in this story or this incident or this description*. I remember the first time I was working in the Miscellaneous Koans and found a koan opaque; the simple substitution of *she* for *he* opened everything up for me. I thought, *Oh, this is about me!* But it doesn't stop there, and this is the important thing. As soon as I could feel I had a place in the koan, as soon as I could feel that this was about me, I instantly got that this was also about Zhaozhou's dog, and the oak tree in the courtyard, and the old Chinese guy, and the donkey ... that all of them were me, too. What the koans do is they mess with your sense of self. Basically what they're saying is that there isn't one — and it's vast.

Perhaps expressing something that you've felt yourself, another Japanese twentieth-century koan teacher said, "Nothing will do. What will you do? This is the fundamental koan, the koan that is the common denominator of the thousands of koans." Nothing will do. What will you do? That's the whole method right there. Nothing you know, none of your usual ways of responding or doing things matters. So now what do you do when nothing you know is going to work?

This is the real difficulty that the koan offers. Once we've owned the stuff that's actually the karmic residue we're bringing to the koan, there is a difficulty left underneath, and that is, *Nothing will do. What will you do?* And that's plenty of difficulty. We don't need to add anything.

How do we respond to this koan without resorting to any of our usual reactions or strategies? When we're faced with that situation, koans can often raise reactions in us like resistance to being put on the spot, desire to please, anxiety to be right, questioning whether you'll actually get it or make a complete fool of yourself, mistrust of the tradition, etc. We can find ourselves stuck with the koan for a long time, unable to come to a resolution ... or frustrated or even angry with it.

But I want to suggest that all of these reactions are actually the difficulties that come not from the koan itself, but from the failure of our usual strategies. It's when we do what we're used to doing and it doesn't work that we feel stuck and frustrated and angry. So from the perspective of the koans, guess what? That's a great thing, because all of our habits of mind are useless; they have to be discarded as tools not fit for the task. And the question becomes, What is possible in the field cleared of all of our habitual ways of dealing with a question or a problem?

The Chinese use an interesting word as a suggestion for what to do in this situation. That word is *exhaust*. Exhaust it, exhaust yourself. When we say exhaust in English, we usually mean, *I've exhausted all my options. There's nothing else I can do. This is hopeless.* There's a sense of defeat, that it's time to walk away from something, because there's nothing left to do. But in Chinese, when they say *exhausted* the word also means *complete*, and the penumbra of meaning around this character is : Please, by all means, exhaust everything you know to do with this koan. Exhaust all of your usual ways of dealing. Exhaust all of your attempts to try to respond or understand it. Because if you really do exhaust all that, if you complete all that,

you end up on the other side of it, standing in the place where none of that works. It's a completely open field.

Then the emphasis is on what becomes possible in that open field once you've exhausted everything you already know. What happens when you walk innocent to meet the koan; walk free of everything you think you know? That sense of exhaust is, *Well, fortunately I don't have to do that anymore.* That's a different attitude toward our habitual mind : *I don't have to do that anymore. Now what?*

The koans are an endless movement into more and more open fields that ask, *Now what? What's possible here? What's next?* That's the great inquiry : what's possible here, in this open field, in this situation? Before you think that sounds like an exhausting way to live, I will say that once we have some practice with that process of exhaustion, we learn to short-circuit the process and we can jump-shift from here to there. We don't have to go through the whole thing.

I've been noticing lately how often people will come into Work in the Room and say, "Okay, I see this thing that's risen up. There it is again. It's been there since I was seven years old ... Do I really have to go through this again? Do I really have to understand this all the way to the bottom? Do I really have to explore this completely?" At a certain point in your practice, the answer is that no, you don't. You really don't. If you've done that process of exhaustion over and over again, at a certain point you can jump from here to there without having to go the long way. Usually when you start asking the question, *Do I really have to do this again?*, that's when it might be time to think about whether to leave rather than slog. Let's look at the famous koan Zhaozhou's *No* :

A pilgrim of the way asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?"

Zhaozhou replied, "No."

If we look at it in the way we're speaking of, in the beginning most people have to exhaust the questions that come up around human beings and buddha nature and other sentient beings, etc. That's a good thing to do, because you'll probably deepen and refine your understanding about nonhuman sentient beings and buddha nature. At a certain point you will realize that it's still just an opinion. It might be a deepened and refined opinion, and an opinion we like better, but it's still an opinion.

So the koan invites you, once you've exhausted that worthwhile inquiry, to jump-shift over to Zhaozhou's *No*. What the heck is that *No*? If we can jump-shift all the way with it, we can find ourselves on the other side of opinion, judgment, reaction, all our habitual ways of doing things, and find that that *No* is the sound that the universe makes, the sound that the vastness makes, when we have cleared away all of the stuff that's between us and it. When we have exhausted rational inquiry, the universe booms *No*, which doesn't mean "No" at all.

I will finish with a quote about the unfinished. Hakuin, our direct ancestor in the koan line from eighteenth century Japan, said that Zen is the unfinished koan. When Hakuin said *Zen*, what he meant was *life*. Life is the unfinished koan. He's talking about what Suzuki spoke of, the *Zen* document, the one that each of us brings along to this world at our birth and tries to decipher before we pass away. That endless process of trying to decipher—that's the unfinished koan. That is the nature of our lives, moving from question to question to question. We keep clearing the ground, not so that we can stand somewhere with certainty and say, *I got it. This is it. I made the cake, and it's delicious! Here I am!* We keep clearing the ground so that we can discover a new question, and we can follow that new question to the next ground, and on and on and on.

Stephen Batchelor, a wonderful contemporary Buddhist philosopher, said that he thought that *What is it?*, which is the basic koan inquiry, expresses reality much more adequately than such terms as impermanence, emptiness, buddha nature, and so on. He said this great thing : "To the extent that we can express it in words, the mystery of life is best expressed as a question."

That's the koan understanding : the mystery of life is best expressed not as a concept, like dharmakaya or buddha nature or emptiness, but as a question, an endless inquiry, an endless engagement with the world—living life as a question that we're both asking and trying to understand as we go along. The koans explicitly provide us a method, a way, an art to accompany us in this life of asking question after question after question, because that brings us closest to the way things are. The nature of reality is an endlessly unfolding question, not a movement toward a resolution.

I chose three koans to take a look at together. Here's the first beautiful question : Yunmen said, "See how vast and wide the world is. Why do you put on your clothes at the



sound of the bell?” When the bell rings in the morning, why do you jump out of bed, put your clothes on, and hurry down to the mediation hall because you just can’t wait?

Suzuki Shunryu, who was the founder of San Francisco Zen Center and Tassajara and Green Gulch, used to ask his students, “What is your inmost request?” That’s a pretty beautiful question.

Finally the third, from Yongjia Xuanjue’s *Song of Realizing the Way* that you read this afternoon : “Traveling alone, walking alone, the awakened ones follow the way of freedom, singing an old, clear song.” What makes that a koan is adding a request to sing a line or two of that song. There cannot be one right answer to that. There can only be twenty right answers to the koan—the number of people in this room.

Drop in for a moment with these three. Let yourself be quiet with them, and see if there’s anything you feel you want to respond to. Can you stand in the place where the first question—“See how vast and wide the world is. Why do you put your clothes on at the sound of the bell?”—is identical to the second question, “What is your inmost request?” Can you relax into that place? Can you feel that it is only from that place that we can each sing a line or two of our version of that ancient, clear song?