

Warmth & Curiosity : An Introduction to Koans
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Let me give you a little background to the koan tradition, a lot about what they are not and a little bit about what they are, and how to work with them.

The koan tradition began in China about 1200 years ago, after Buddhism had moved from India to China and changed in profound ways. In a way Chinese Buddhism was Buddhism 2.0. One of the big shifts was that teaching had primarily been done with one person talking to a group of people. That was the Indian model and that was the early Chinese model as well, but there were a couple of great teachers in China who began teaching in a different way, which was more in conversation and in dialogue. This points to one of the fundamental aspects of the koan tradition, which is the certainty that awakening happens in relationship — either a relationship with another person, or an inanimate object, or another kind of being. But there's some interaction, and awakening occurs when there's a true meeting between one person and another person, or being, or another something.

These dialogues with one teacher in particular were so powerful that people would often wake up right in the midst of the conversation, and stories about that started being collected and used by other people. Another important thing about koans is that they're not parables or teaching stories in the way we usually think of : there's no moral at the end of the story. Each koan is a moment of awakening, and when we take it into meditation, it's possible to experience the same thing that the person in the story experienced. We're not reading about someone's *aha* moment, we're actually experiencing the same *aha* moment for ourselves. Why this should be so is still mysterious to me, but it's been working for 1200 years.

Over time the body of koans grew to include poems, bits of songs, and things from popular culture as well, so it's an organic body; it continues to grow. Koans drop away — they don't quite have the same resonance anymore — and new koans are added. Koans that persist share something about having been passed down over many generations, and it seems important that many people have contributed to them. By the time a koan comes to us, it's been worked with, frustrated over, and loved by generations of people.

All of that is somehow in the field of the koan itself. The koan is not, despite appearances, words on a page; a koan is a field, and it comes to us with the field of everyone who's already worked on it. We then have the koan in the center of the room, and it changes again to include everything that happens in our responses; it's everything that happens inside us in response to the koan. It's the call, which are the words themselves, and it's the response, which is how we relate to them.

I do want to say a few things about what koans aren't. There's a misconception that they're riddles, or paradoxes, or just meant to baffle you. Another fundamental thing is that koans are meant to be helpful; that's what they want. They're meant to speak to an intuitive part of yourself that often doesn't get into the conversation, because our cognitive minds are so forceful in taking over. They call forth our intuition, calling us to bring it forward and marry it with our cognition, emotion, and sensory experience, so that we respond to a koan with all parts of ourselves, rather than just one or the other.

I'll give you an example of what I mean when I say that they're not riddles. One of the most famous koans is called "The Sound of One Hand," which has been mistranslated as "The Sound of One Hand Clapping." I read Chinese and Japanese, and I promise you that there's no 'clapping' in that koan. *What is the sound of one hand clapping?* is a riddle, and not very interesting. *What is the sound of one hand?* is a profound, amazing, mysterious question, and that's what a koan is. One of the things you'll discover as you go along is that, far from being baffling, koans begin to seem more and more like an accurate description of the way things are from a certain perspective, and the koans are an invitation to see things from that perspective.

Another thing they're not is life questions. They're messengers from the dark rather than from the territory of what you know. People sometimes say something like, *My koan now is, What work should I be doing in this next phase of my life?* or *My koan is how I open myself to more intimacy in my life.* Those aren't koans but life questions, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with them. To make them koans we have to tweak them a little bit, because so far they're ego projects. They're a matter of *What am I going to do?* and *How am I going to get it?* Rather than asking about what this next phase of my life work should be, the koan question is more like, *Who's asking the question? Who wants to know?*, which takes it to a deeper level.

You might get an explicit and particular answer to the question, something like, *I ought to move back to Ohio and go to graduate school*. But it will come in a completely different way, because you'll be asking, *Who wants to know? What's the who?*

If you're asking something like, *How can I open to more intimacy?*, the *I* is pretty strong in that. The koan tweak is to ask, *What is most intimate here?* So it's not the *I* trying to get something for the *I*, it's *What is most intimate in this situation in which I am a part, but not the sole actor?* Can you feel that shift? What is most intimate here that includes me but isn't limited to me?

In regard to that old cliché of koans being a form of dharma combat, they can be misused in that way and they often have been, but again their essential desire is to be helpful. Maybe once in a great while these days it would be helpful to be hit upside the head by your teacher, metaphorically speaking, but mostly we've found other ways to accomplish the same thing, the same moment of having the floor pulled out from under you.

Koans won't judge you; they're not a test. They might show you how you judge yourself; they will show you the extent to which you live life by winning and losing, praise and blame, and all that kind of stuff. And if they raise that delusion, they will also show you what it's like when the delusion falls away : delusion vs. absence of delusion. They give you moments of freedom over and over again, so you experience what it's like when you're free and therefore the world is free.

One important shift to make in approaching koans is that we're not interested in answers. It's true that in the traditional way koans were taught, there are answers to koans and you stay with each one until you get the answer. But as we work together, look not for answers but for responses. *How do I respond to this?* rather than, *How do I solve or answer this?* Stay with your response and see what happens. There can't possibly be a wrong response, because any response can be the beginning of an inquiry.

In Chinese there are a number of words for awakening. There's enlightenment, awakening, and realization. The Chinese also spoke of this thing, whatever it is, as 'becoming intimate'. When these old Chinese teachers spoke about intimacy, they talked about the intimacy that is inherent in every moment, and awakening and the task of practice is to liberate the inherent intimacy in any moment. It's already there; we just have to let it be

expressed. Koans give us a way to look for and experience that intimacy inherent in any moment.

There's a call and response : the koan calls and you respond. Another important part of koan practice is allowing ourselves to be fetchable. A big part of what meditation practice ought to be about is creating and maintaining a state of fetchability, so that when the call comes — and it is always coming from the world — we can respond, we can be fetched. Koans give us a lot of practice with that because they are endlessly fetching us, if we are willing.

There are a couple of different ways to work with koans. You can work with them individually, going through them one at a time, finding the traditional responses and answers to them. And then we are reviving the old Chinese tradition of working in groups, which has felt very powerful because you have the wisdom that comes from the group. You have the wisdom that comes from a chorus of voices rather than the single pure note of your own practice or of tradition.

Q1 : So reaction is the opposite of intimacy?

JS : And reaction is the opposite of response. Reaction is all about you.

Q1 : I still don't get fetchability.

JS : It's a kind of openness. That's the simplest way to say it. It's a way that we can cultivate a basic stance toward things of warmth and curiosity — warmth as an activity of the heart, curiosity as an activity of the mind. Both of them are relatively open states that allow something to come and touch us, change us, and move us. It's always doing that, and mostly we're not paying attention. The moments when we do open, we know how glorious that feels.

The fundamental assumption of the koan way is that having a human heart-mind is not a problem to be fixed. It's actually an amazing adventure to be on, an invitation. We're not aiming to fix ourselves, improve ourselves, or any of that kind of stuff. We're actually interested in cultivating an attitude of warmth and curiosity, cultivating the circumstances in which that caring about and interest in the world can flourish most freely. It's important to say that because in a lot of meditation traditions and spiritual practices, there's a fundamental

assumption that having a human heart-mind is a problem, and that meditation or spiritual practice is about fixing that. This is a different ground to stand on; this is about exploring the possibilities and potentials of having a human heart-mind.

Going right along with that is that koan introspection isn't about quieting the mind; it's about working with the mind's inherent dynamic quality. Now, quieting the mind is a good thing. When we work with koans, you have to have a stable practice that lets you get fairly quiet and stable before you bring the koan in. But once you do, you're riding the horse the way it's going. You're working with the dynamic quality of the mind rather than trying to change it. When you're working with the dynamic quality of the mind there has to be a constant discernment about when it's alive and creative and when it becomes habitual and spinning and the same old stuff, and that's a time to return to the silence.