

Koans as Art  
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I grew up in Southern California and moved north when I was thirty. A few years after I got here, there was an exhibit of the painter Richard Diebenkorn's work in San Francisco. One hall was filled entirely with his Ocean Park Series, large abstract canvases he'd painted when he lived in Southern California, in a studio literally around the corner from my home when I was in college. The first thing you notice, if you know that landscape, is how right he got the colors : the pastel stucco houses, the impossibly blue Mediterranean sky, the hot reds and oranges of bougainvillea against white walls. Then you see that what's really going on is that he's got the light right; a light I bathed in for thirty years and suddenly realized I had never experienced again in Northern California.

These paintings gave me the light of my childhood, which I knew in my cells but wasn't aware of. So I had the world, and my own life, in a way I didn't before, because I became conscious of something, and could articulate something, which had until then been immensely important but unconscious. And this is how koans can work : They illuminate the essential nature we already are but lose touch with. They too can give us the world, and our own lives, in ways we didn't have them before.

There are layers to our consciousness, and layers in the journey we make with a koan. There's the layer of story : *when I was a child we used to do this and that*; we all have our tales to tell. This is the self against the backdrop of the landscape, where time and place are the field through which the individual consciousness moves with its own momentums and inevitabilities.

Then there's the layer of sense memory : the hot sand under feet calloused from years of walking on the beach; the exhilaration of knowing, even as a small child, that I could dive under any wave, no matter how big, and find that calm place just above the sand; the smell of the turpentine we used to clean the tar off our feet at the end of the day. This is the self in the landscape, where consciousness is diffuse and effortlessly takes in the other.

Below that there's just the light, the light as I experienced it in Diebenkorn's paintings. Here there's no distinction at all between self and landscape, where everything — pink stucco houses and that impossibly blue Mediterranean sky and the small girl standing at the end of

the pier — are brilliant with the same light, which comes from everywhere and nowhere at once, inside and outside, and is the stuff of which it is all made.

We travel through all these realms when we work with koans. We hear Qingshui's cry, "I am Qingshui, solitary and destitute. Please give me alms." And we ask, when have I been in this state? What is my loneliness and my poverty? What is my longing? In this way we explore our own story.

In another old koan, someone asks about the relationship between form and emptiness, and someone else answers, "It's like a donkey sees a well," and there I am, sitting in the gallery, looking at the paintings, just like a donkey seeing the well. But then the first someone flips it over and says, "It's like a well sees a donkey," and suddenly the paintings are gazing back, there's an interpenetration of consciousnesses, and the ground we stand on, the air we breathe, becomes sentient and alive to us.

Then there are the moments when everything drops away, when the koan isn't about the dog, or buddha nature, or even the pilgrim with her question; it isn't about anything at all, but is the light itself, coming from everywhere and nowhere at once.

How do we move through these layers? Here's a poem by Li Qingzhao that shows us. She was writing at the time the great Chinese koan collections were being made, and she evokes that encounter with koan or art or the truth of our own lives.

Often I recall that day,  
the river pavilion  
in the setting sun, and  
we too drunk to know  
the way home. As  
our high spirits  
fled, we started  
to return late  
in our boat,  
but were confused,  
entered,  
    deeply,  
a place where  
the flowering lotus  
was in full bloom.  
And struggling to go through,  
struggling  
    to go through,  
we startled

a whole sandbank of herons  
into flight.

There are those golden moments, the high points, the river pavilion in the setting sun, and then we crash back into boring jobs and laundry and people who are furious with us, our high spirits fled, and we've lost the way home. We're caught up in the struggle, just trying to get through, don't even notice the flowering lotus in full bloom all around us; but suddenly something happens, there's a great whoosh and blur of movement, and everything — the golden day, the struggle to get home — drops away and the whole universe is heron. The day will return, we still have to get home and sober up, but it has been changed by our experience of the herons, the messengers of eternity, who have reminded us that we, too — golden moments and dispirited ones, too — are eternity itself.

Like this poem, koans don't work by giving us information about something; they present the thing itself. They don't teach us something we didn't know about the natural habits of herons or the ability of paint to capture light, but illumine a state of consciousness we can enter. When we encounter a koan like "Here is the stone, drenched with rain, that points the way," we know we're in the presence of the numinous, and that we're receiving an invitation. In a wonderful essay on beauty, the art critic Peter Schjeldahl, said that beauty stops us in our tracks. Thoughts and feelings that have been flowing in one direction pause, and when they resume, they're traveling in a different trajectory. Beauty is, he says, a mental solvent that dissolves something else, melting it into radiance.

Such an encounter with beauty or a koan has the quality more of a seduction than a wrestling match. We respond by agreeing to experience what the koan offers, and then making it deeply our own. We answer a koan by articulating something from inside that experience. "Here is the stone," we say, in a way that makes it visible to all, and the world is altered just a little by the coming into being, once again, of that rain-slick stone.

But if we approach koans as tests of our mastery, it's like going into a discussion with someone with the intention of winning the argument. You might succeed, but you've missed the opportunity to be changed by that subtle interpenetration with the other. So what is a good way to approach them? The artist Marcel Duchamp spoke about forgetting the hand when he worked, which meant leaving aside what his hand already knew about art, his hands

habitual gestures, his opinions about what was good art and what was bad, and turning things over to chance, to something new that could come from somewhere other than his intention. This is getting out of our customary minds, our habitual patterns, our own small story about ourselves and the way the world works.

Once the hand of habit and mastery is forgotten, we become susceptible to the eros of the koan, the vitality and play of joining with what we don't yet know but can taste the promise of. So if we can come to koans in this way, if we can set aside even the intention of answering them and just sit in the room with the paintings, listening with our eyes and seeing with our ears, as the koans say, something wonderful can happen. In such a state, even the frustration of nothing seeming to happen is wonderful, because it's a moment that has never existed before, a moment fertile with possibility, a moment that can lead to any other moment.