

*Acequias*

*Miscellaneous  
Writings on Koans*

*Joan Sutherland*

## Koan Meditation

To meditate with a koan, start with what you usually do to become stable and relatively quiet. You don't need deep samadhi, just the steady spaciousness to welcome the koan in. Keep your eyes lowered but open, with a soft focus on the ground about three feet in front of you. (We sit *in* and *with* the world.) Following the advice of our ancestor Hakuin, who recommended that the lower half of the body be warm and the upper half cool, we customarily sit with a shawl or blanket across our lap and covering our legs. Our hands are held about three finger-widths below the navel, at the place thought to be the root of both the breath and awakening.

When you're ready, say the koan or the *hua* (the salient part of the koan; see the Fourth Acequia) a few times to yourself. In our lineage, which crossed to the West from Japan, we learned to repeat the koan in time with our breath, usually on the exhale, which is a powerful concentration practice. Chinese schools recommend against that on the grounds that it can distort your breathing; instead, you repeat the koan without reference to the breath, which carries on normally in the background. I encourage you to try it both ways and see which is more helpful to you.

If you're already engaged with a koan, you can let the words fall away once you've repeated them a few times, sinking into the wordless field into which the koan invites you. If the koan is still a closed box, keep repeating it and

see if anything opens up. At the very least it can function as a kind of mantram, concentrating and stilling your mind.

In either case, you're not choosing stillness over thoughts and feelings; koan meditation works with the dynamic quality of the heart-mind and is interested in how your particular heart-mind interpermeates with the koan. So notice what happens : what thoughts, feelings, images, memories, and physical sensations arise? Particularly if something surprises you, feels as though it comes from outside your habitual OK Corral, inquire into it. *What is this?* Don't land anywhere prematurely; keep asking *What is this?* every time something arises, and chances are you'll find something behind or underneath it, and then underneath that. Keep going as long as the inquiry is alive and uncertain, or heading toward something that's falling open. You're not really trying to find an answer to the question *What is this?* as much as letting the question encourage an attitude of warmth and curiosity toward whatever happens, that state being more intimate with the endless rising and falling of things than any particular answer. *Listen, Shariputra, listen*

If your meditation takes a turn that seems problematic, consider Jung's advice to let your symptoms heal you, rather than the other way around. For example, if you find yourself foggy and sleepy, think of this not as a problem you have to fix but as trying to tell you something important. Feel your way back to when you began to

experience sleepiness and see if you're avoiding something. If you can't find anything and the sleepiness persists, then wholeheartedly do sleepy meditation. There are many rooms in the mansion of meditation, and sometimes important things can only happen in rooms of dreaminess or exhaustion. Don't try to impose your ideas of 'good

*A student asked Zhaozhou,  
"What is meditation?"  
"It's not meditation."  
"Why isn't it meditation?"  
"It's alive, it's alive."*

meditation', which are just opinions after all, but be interested in what's actually happening. It'll become apparent if there's something you need to do, but let that rise from the meditation itself.

If you have a strong reaction to a koan, see if you can step back in the same way into the moment just as the reactive thought or feeling arose. Are you bouncing off of something that, once you're aware of it, you might be able to settle into, or at least approach? Then see if you can take a step further back, into the moment before the reaction arose. What's your relationship with the koan there?

Remember that at any time you can let everything fall away and return to your stability practice, beginning again from there.

## Off the Cushion

When it's time to get up off the cushion, take the koan with you. Carry it around in your pocket. Take it for a run or into the bath or to sleep. *Where is that temple bell? Can I hear it now, standing on this street corner?* If you absolutely have to get all discursive and intellectual about a koan, try to do it walking around instead of sitting, so that you avoid training yourself to go there in your meditation. Exhaust thinking *about* the koan, which is quite natural especially in the beginning, and see if you can start thinking, and running, and showering, *with* it.

This is as important as sitting in meditation with a koan. "If you put a little spirit into it," the Japanese teacher Keizan said, "you'll do fine and not succumb to a life of peace and tranquility." The idea is that we live in this giant field of things constantly rising and falling, this complicated, noisy, movement-filled, emotion-filled, thought-filled world. Even our relatively unclamorous moments are like that : as Annie Dillard describes it, "I come down to the water to cool my eyes. But everywhere I look I see fire; that which isn't flint is tinder, and the whole world sparks and flames." What we're hoping for is to be increasingly at ease with the world as it is; we're looking for the through-line underneath sound and silence, motion and stillness. Keeping company with a koan sitting and standing and walking around and lying down, as the ancients phrased it, is a way to connect with that through-line, and over time

we no longer need the special circumstances of quiet and stillness to be in touch with it.

*Why can't clear-eyed people  
cut the blood-red thread?*

As you bring the koan fully into your life, bring your life fully to the koan. A woman who knew she was gradually going to go blind asked for a koan to keep her company as this happened. She was willing to ask the koan to help carry her burden, and also to let the koan change how she experienced the burden. So your response to a koan couldn't possibly be just what you'll express during work in the room or at a koan salon : it's everything that happens while you live with the koan. Notice what's arising or changing or being revealed in your life, what's suddenly demanding attention or becoming crystal clear or irrevocably falling away, even if it seems unrelated to the koan; the connection might just be unexpected or initially strange. One of the characteristics of our school is the understanding that, to paraphrase Anna Akhmatova, a wave rises in our lives to meet the oncoming wave of the koan.

This is part of the deep work, whose purpose isn't to make us more self-obsessed than when we started, but to make us more permeable to, more fetchable by, the world which is our unconstricted self. That happens in meditation, it happens off the cushion, and it most readily happens when we live connected with the through-line that runs underneath all the different states of our days.

Flowering  
Vines &  
Healing  
Herbs

This image is from a Yunmen koan, in which he responds to a question about the nature of ‘the pure everlasting body of reality’ by saying, ‘a fence of flowering vines and healing herbs’. It’s important that the koans send their fragrant runners through our *whole* lives : the fence of flowers and herbs surrounded the latrine at Yunmen’s place. It’s beautiful to find a koan rising spontaneously as a kind of capping phrase to a particular moment, beautiful when we notice the identity of koan and moment : Oh, *that’s* what that means! (And are we speaking of the koan or the moment?)

*So ... in your life, notice instances of :*




Lewis Carroll’s “Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.”





Not knowing is most intimate





Every day is a good day


 Someone asked, “What about when it’s a disaster?”  
Zhaozhou said, “That’s it!”


 Welcome the Noble Guest

 Suzuki Shunryu used to ask, “What is your inmost  
request?”

 The clear-sighted person falls into a well

 Call and response

 See how vast and wide the world is. Why do you put on  
your clothes at the sound of the bell?

 The greatest way isn’t difficult if you just don’t  
pick and choose





“This isn’t so hard,” as the innkeeper said about the practice Hakuin gave her



Neither for nor against



The difference between “Why is this?”  
and “What is this?”



... hand in the dark  
plucking at the knot that  
the same hand tied  
in the light.

Robert Pinsky



Abiding nowhere, and deeply



Nothing to assert, nothing to defend



Nothing will do. What do you do?



Traveling alone, walking alone,  
the awakened ones follow the way of freedom,  
singing an old, clear song.

*from Yongjia Xuanjue's Song of Realizing the Way*

*Sing a line or two of that song*

*Please add your own here*

