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OLD JOSHU LIVES ON

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ABSTRACT

Joshu was a Chan master back in Tang Dynasty China. Some of his dialogues became koans that are still widely used by contemporary Zen aspirants. Indian Buddhists originally employed the word 'doubt' in a way that developed new shades of meaning, both as Joshu played with the word, and as this term evolved further in the koan traditions of Sino-Japanese Buddhism. Joshu lived for 120 years. This extraordinary lifespan is far beyond that of today's so-called 'SuperAgers'. Recent research based on the brain imaging data and the telomere length from many long-term meditators suggests the possibility that some of old Joshu's longevity reflected his *one hundred years* of prior meditative practice.

A monk asks, 'What about when I seek to become Buddha?'

Joshu replies, 'What a tremendous waste of energy!'

The monk then asks, 'What about when I'm not wasting energy?'

Joshu replies, 'In that case, you *are* Buddha.'¹

Introduction

I received my first koan in Kyoto in 1974. Its wording arose from the question that another monk had once posed to Chan master Joshu (778–897), back in the Tang Dynasty.^{2, 3} When I heard the monk's question, Nanrei Kobori-Roshi had phrased it this way: 'When all things return to the One, *where* is the One returned to?' (Austin 1998, 107–110).

Other translations of the entire dialogue have since become available. For example, in Green's *The Recorded Sayings of Zen Master Joshu*, we discover that the monk had asked his question this way: 'The ten thousand dharmas return to the One. Where does the One return to?' (Green 1998, saying 222, 82) And there, unexpectedly, we also find Joshu's response: 'When I was in the district of Ching-Chou, I made a robe of hemp that weighed seven pounds'.

This monk's question utterly baffled me. Still, I went on faithfully to incubate the monk's words as a koan and to use its capping phrase, 'One', off and on, for

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several years before they finally dropped away (Austin 1998, 111–119). What was my problem? I had associated too many concepts with ‘One’. This intellectual ‘robe’ proved much too heavy. No fledgling insight could take off and fly with so weighty a fabrication.⁴ I hadn’t yet realised that years of letting go of my Self during incremental meditative practices were essential to approach the subtle layers of such a koan. Nor did I understand why only the lightening strike of *selfless* insight-wisdom could deeply *realize* a koan, not mere logic.

About Joshu the man

Why are contemporary Buddhists still paying attention to a Chinese teacher who was born 12 centuries ago? This short article explores two short answers. The first is that after Joshu’s initial great awakening (he was then only 18), his insight-wisdom ripened into that of an authentic sage. Starting with Bodhidharma, Joshu was in the 10th-generation of exceptional Chan patriarchs. His prominent predecessors included the sixth-generation patriarch Hui-neng and the eighth-generation master Matsu. Their lineage then diverged through master Nansen into what would emerge in the 11th generation as the Soto (Caodong) school. Joshu himself had 13 dharma heirs, although this line would later die out (Ferguson 2000, 136–142). Joshu’s teaching style was relatively mild compared with the vigorous way master Rinzi taught in the 11th generation. Still, they were regarded as the two great Chan masters north of the Yellow River during the Tang Dynasty (618–907) (Green 1998, xxii–xxiv).

When questioned, Joshu gave concise, pithy responses. Contemporaries found that his replies seemed to issue from lips that ‘emitted light’. He is the master cited most frequently in the *Gateless Gate* collection of 48 koans. Here, his vocal influence is clearly evident in six koans that involve him. Moreover, the seventh recounts how he behaved wordlessly – placing his sandals on his head, while walking away from his teacher, Nansen (Yamada 2015, case 14, 70–73). Twelve of Joshu’s sayings are also included in the 100 anecdotes selected for the *Blue Cliff Record*. Joshu’s illuminating utterances also gave rise to two large collections of recorded sayings – 458 sayings by Hoffmann (1978) and 555 by Green (1998). These responses and their commentaries provide further evidence that his words have had a significant influence on Zen practice down through the ages.

After his master Nansen died, Joshu travelled widely on pilgrimage to visit various Chan masters and their monasteries during the next 20 years. At the age of 80, he finally settled down at the site of an old Kuan-yin temple that had seen better days. His Chinese name, Chao-Chou, is derived from the name of its local district. Did he just retire here, drop out of sight? No. His social interactions multiplied as this refurbished site developed into a working monastery. His teachings now attracted a wide following, of both monks and laity, during the next *forty* years until he died at the age of 120.

This extended lifespan is the second reason for our current interest in Joshu. Later pages discuss new explanations for the exceptional longevity and preserved functions of his aging body and brain.

The flavour of Joshu's original dialogues (before some would later evolve into koans)

• 'Joshu's Mu'

This encounter dialogue serves a time-honoured role as the first koan in *The Gateless Gate* collection. For centuries, 'Mu' has also been *the* classical introductory koan most often assigned to beginners. Here we find a monk asking Joshu, in all earnestness: 'Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?' Joshu replies 'No!' (In Chinese, the word is 'Wu'; in Japanese, the word is 'Mu'.) The standard interpretation is that this answer means 'No, a dog does *not* have Buddha nature.' (Yamada 2015, 11–16)

If you've ever bonded with a pet dog, you know this is not so. How could such a warm remembrance be reconciled with Joshu's cool, dismissive reply? Yamada-Roshi reminds us of an important point. In general, it helps to view koans *from the ultimate existential perspective* (Yamada 2015, 28, 29). This perspective is the same as that of the *pure, non-dual, eternal nature of the entire Universe*. Therefore, at least from this cosmic vantage point, he emphasises that the real meaning in Joshu's reply will be 'far removed from the usual world of dualistic concepts' (Yamada 2015, 16).

In fact, Joshu's overarching perspective appears more evident *not* in this standard koan version, but in his two other dialogues about a dog. In each instance, the author-translators refrain from further commentary, allowing Joshu's short reply to speak for itself. Are we listening? For example, consider how Joshu responds to a variation of this familiar question: 'Does even a dog have Buddha nature?' Now we hear him answering (in a way often overlooked), 'From the gates of every house the road leads to the capital' (Hoffmann 1978, saying 319, 114). Similarly, when a monk asks, 'Does a dog have Buddha nature, or not?' Joshu again gives this inclusive, egalitarian answer: 'The door of every house leads to the capital' (Green 1998, saying 363, 116).

In a different dialogue, Joshu's layers of metaphors inform us that the 'road' means the Way, that the great Way (the Tao) leads on towards awakening. Moreover, the word 'capital' also refers to such an enlightened 'spiritual' destination, not simply to the ancient northern capital city of Chang-an (Green 1998, saying 335, 108).

However, anyone whose intellect clings to this *next* version of the canine dialogue will become entangled in a thicket of wordy concepts. That's not where Zen is coming from (Austin 2009, 150–152). In this next instance, a bold monk pursues his initial question (Green 1998, saying 132, 53, 54). Indeed, he argues

persuasively: 'Why is it that the dog does not have Buddha nature? All Buddhas above, and all crawling bugs below *do* have Buddha nature. So, why doesn't the dog have Buddha nature?' We're now asked to believe that old Joshu himself [and not some later follower] would have replied: 'Because *his* nature is occupied by karmic delusions'.

Why do we remain sceptical? We hesitate because when Green ventures to interpret this atypical response he uses intellectual steps that appeal to our own sense of reason. In our first too-logical step, we need to assume that a dog's consciousness suffers forever from its usual subjective (whineable) longings and (growable) loathings. From this, it would follow that we must exclude the dog. Why? Because we think that no dog can freely manifest his *original* pure nature until he lets go of all these over-emotionalised vocalisations that show why he's suffering.

Introspective, dog-friendly readers can identify readily with this intellectual interpretation of the canine predicament. We too must dissolve *our* old pejorative *I-Me-Mine* Self and awaken into the liberating state of *kensho-satori* before we can realise such a koan at deep levels of insight-wisdom.

However, genuine masters will have directly experienced such a 'great death' of their personal Self. In its extraordinary *emptiness*, they will have deeply realised how this state completely transforms the foundations of their perceptions, concepts, attitudes and behaviours. Thereafter, they can also understand why we need to invoke an alternative translation of the word *wu* or *mu*. This option will clearly identify the non-dual meaning of *Mu* in Joshu's era with the abrupt awakening of *kensho-satori* (Austin 2006, 361). It will also leave room for the affirmative qualities of *suchness* to be included in such an emptiness.^{5, 6}

We notice how Yamada-Roshi's distillate of this state hints at its paradoxical blend of these existential, core phenomena: 'Everything is perfect and complete as it is. True Buddhism, or the satori of Zen is as simple and natural as that!' (Yamada 2015, 168). Therefore, it is from this extraordinary simplified, wordless, selfless dimension that he is inviting us to view the essence of many of old Joshu's insightful sayings.

Meanwhile, can it help to use just the *sound* of a capping word like *Mu*? Yes it can, especially when deep interior resonances had developed after multiple earlier repetitions (Aitken (1993) 2005, 40–50). But to attach superficial logical and conceptual interpretations to 'Mu'? This can leave us 'barking up the wrong tree'. Such an approach does not seem in character with the optional examples cited above. They show that Joshu chose to respond to the dog question in inclusive 'capital' ways. Next we observe that his simple, direct, natural ways of relating to actual single trees are also not in accord with a complex intellectual approach.

• *Joshu's references to trees*

Trees played a prominent role in early Buddhist history. (Austin 2014, 33–48) Recent research indicates that when human subjects walk through forested woodland scenes they undergo beneficial responses to stress. These benefits include decreases in their heart rates, salivary cortisone and urinary catecholamine excretion (Austin 2014, 186–189). A grove of tall trees also elicits responses of awe and stimulates pro-social helping behaviours. (Austin, 2016, 214, 215).

Chan evolved in a cultural soil that was already fertilised by the indigenous Taoist appreciation of Nature. Frequently, Chan monks questioned Joshu about the meaning of Life's deepest, most intimate issues – about what is often referred to today as the '*Big Picture*'. Thus, in one instance, a monk asks him: 'What is the essence of the teaching that Bodhidharma brought from India?' Joshu's cogent answer: 'Oak tree in the front garden' (Green 1998, 16) (Yamada 2015, Case 37, 177–180).

On another occasion, a different monk asks, 'What is my self?' Joshu replies, 'Well, do you see that oak tree in the front garden?'⁷ (Green 1998, 26).

A similar question receives a slightly different answer. A monk asks him: 'What is the essential meaning of the Buddhadharma?' Joshu replies, 'The cypress tree at the front of the courtyard.'⁸ (Ferguson 2000, 140) Are these responses non sequiturs? Or could something more subtle again underlie Joshu's spontaneity? Perhaps this is his way of *not* stimulating his monks and lay practitioners to fabricate more wordy, abstract concepts. Instead, where is he directing them? To *just this* one simple truth. To this one living example – in Nature – right in front of their noses (Austin 2014, 3–11, 51–52). This tree is the *thing in Itself*, the '*ding an sich*' of Immanuel Kant, our own subjective Self no longer in the picture (Austin 2006, 361–369). When this particular style of *explicit pointing* was voiced gently by a sage, it served notice that: (a) such a refined, Big Picture, global perspective not only prevails, but that: (b) its vast web of coherent networks also includes myriads of individual sharp focal details. (Austin 1998, 119–125, 499, 2006, 336–342, 2016, 54–68).

Joshu's temperament did not need to impose rigorous 'boot-camp' techniques to reinforce his direct, immediate, style of earthy teaching. However, during the next four centuries, some Chan masters took many of the earlier patriarchs' *mondo* dialogues, changed their phrases and developed a koan curriculum for a variety of institutionalised teaching purposes. By then, the following comments of Chan master Wu-men (1183–1260) are representative of the vigorous, dynamic approach that prevailed within the Rinzai (Linchi) school (Yamada 2015, 14–16). Notice how master Wu-men was advising his trainees to engulf this first koan about the dog in his *Gateless Gate* collection:

Concentrate your whole self into this Mu ... it must be like a red-hot iron ball which you have gulped down ... you must extinguish all delusive thoughts and beliefs which you have cherished up to the present ... exhaust every ounce of energy you have in doing it ... After a certain period of such efforts Mu will come to fruition ... inside and out will become one naturally. You will enjoy the great freedom ...

After Yamada-Roshi comments on Wu-men's words about this great freedom's liberating aspect, he closes by issuing his own trainees this formidable challenge: 'Now, just show me: Dog-Buddha nature!' Please be aware that Yamada's phrase, 'show me' illustrates this teacher's key operational principle. 'Show me' means *present me instantly* with genuine, enlightened Zen *behavior*! No frothy eloquence! (Austin 2009, 217, 218).

Did Master Joshu use Koans for formal teaching purposes?

Joshu had travelled widely on visits to other accomplished Chan masters. He knew that Hui-neng was his illustrious predecessor. However, no hard evidence indicates that Joshu himself had ever made a koan using the specific question – 'What was your Original Face?' – that would later be part of the most important koan attributed to this Sixth Patriarch (638–713) (Yamada 2015, Case 23, 111–117). Nor does the historical evidence prove that Joshu taught with any other koans. In 1981, the present author's next teacher, Myokyo-ni, fortunately did assign him Hui-neng's question. By then – after seven prior years of practice – this 'Original Face' koan happened to be one that would be accessible to an insightful realisation (Austin 1998, 540–542, 2016, 188). Examined in detail elsewhere are other aspects of how *mondo* develop into koans, and then become condensed into the capping phrases termed *huatou* or *jakugo* (Austin 1998, 110–119, 2006, 61–69; Lorie 2006, 78–90).

Meanwhile, one of Joshu's next dialogues touches on two thorny questions. These questions are not new. They have simmered ever since the strict, 13th-generation Rinzai master Nan-yuan (860–930) is credited as the first to assign a koan to his disciples (Dumoulin 2006, 17). The first question is: What can incorporating a koan accomplish, ideally, in the setting of a *contemporary* Buddhist practice, East or West? The second question is: under which circumstances is it most appropriate, and effective, for an authentic teacher to assign a particular koan to a particular trainee as part of their ongoing dyadic relationship? This next dialogue also illustrates that when Joshu uttered a particular Chinese word, it could have different meanings. As the following historical narrative unfolds, it shows how masters in later centuries would use the same word to mean different things in *their* monastic context.

• Joshu plays with words

Multiple semantic problems linger when old words that have several meanings in Chinese are later translated into English. Joshu's saying number 317 is illustrative (Green 1998, 103, 104):

A monk asks, 'What about when I have a doubt?'

[doubt is pronounced 'yi', in spoken Chinese]

Joshu replies with his own question:

'Is it "great yi," or "small yi?"' [Still pronounced as 'yi', in *spoken* Chinese]

Although these two ‘*yi*’ words *sound* the same, they mean very different things (homonyms). Because the monk has already diagnosed his own personal problems, he replies by specifying exactly what *he* means:

‘Great doubt!’

[‘*da yi*’], in spoken Chinese.

Notice, however, that Joshu intends this *yi* in *his* initial question to be a pun. Indeed, when Joshu is using *yi*, it can have (at least) two other levels of allusive meanings. These are not evident at first. As explained below, we only become aware of such semantic options after Joshu then responds playfully when this monk replies ‘Great doubt!’:

Level 1: The lofty option

When Green translates this saying, *yi* is interpreted to mean *concordance*. In dictionary English, concordance means the *agreement that resonates harmoniously* among many elements. Concordance is the *opposite* of discordance. Therefore, this interpretation of *yi* would have Joshu reply as follows:

‘Great concordance is [over in] the north-east corner.

Small concordance is behind the monks’ hall!’

Is this another non-sequitur from Master Joshu? Not so fast. We’ve already seen how Joshu’s original *wu* could mean either a no, or *emptiness*, depending on the translation and context. Here, Joshu is voicing explicit directions. These invoke subtle *feng-shui* Taoist associations. These associations relate to the ancient Chinese arts of divination. They refer to the way that old ‘building codes’ would have oriented the architecture of the doors and walls of a local temple to be properly aligned. These alignments need to be in harmony not only with the coordinates of the local environment. They must also be in full accord with those coordinates representing that auspicious realm extended throughout the whole natural Universe.

So, whereas this naive monk’s self-diagnosis was based on his own intuned *egocentric* frame of Self-reference, where is Joshu now gently redirecting him? Far *outward*. Following this interpretation, Joshu would be encouraging the monk towards the *allocentric*, *other* frame of reference (Greek: *allo* = other) (Austin 2009, 54–64). What is allocentricity’s ultimate, outward extension? As Yamada-Roshi explained earlier, it would be that same, non-dual coherent existential perspective which pervades the vast concordance of this entire Cosmos (Yamada 2015, 28, 29).

Level 2: The visceral, earthy, humorous corollary

For centuries, Chinese sources have been privy to a lighter, more mundane interpretation⁹. In this instance the two key words [‘*yi*’] are still pronounced the same way, and the monk’s ‘*yi*’ still means *his* doubt. However, Joshu’s ‘*yi*’ is now translated with reference to down-to-earth levels of excretory functions. Now

it simply alludes to an action most *suitable* or *most appropriate* to its setting. Indeed, Joshu's directions simply inform this monk that if he needs to have a bowel movement (a matter of some relatively greater activity), then *this* latrine is located over in the north-east corner of the monastery. In contrast, if it's only a lesser (urinary) issue [*'xiao yi'*], then this can be readily accomplished behind the monks' hall.

So seemingly casual a remark opens up another possibility: Perhaps Joshu's metaphor reflects his more conservative personal approach to teaching. For example, this essay began with his emphasis on *not* wasting energy. Next, we saw him illustrate how excess intellectual baggage could weigh him down. Now, could his latrine directions be alluding (at some barnyard level of discourse) to his preference not to inject too much 'great doubt' into the training process? Either option – subtly refined or practical – was in accord with the wide range of puns available in the Chinese language throughout Joshu's long teaching career.

In a much earlier era, the original Indian Buddhists were well aware that a person's doubts created serious problems. Clearly, they viewed doubts as a *dis-advantage*. In their *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, doubt was on the list of the five hindrances. Lust was the foremost hindrance that blocked aspirants from realising their full spiritual potential (Bhikkhu 2005, 270–272). Next came ill-will, followed by dullness and drowsiness, by restlessness and remorse, and finally by an obsessive doubt. Greater degrees of this pervasive doubt could mislead the person beyond perplexity into a wavering, indecisive quandary known as *vicikiccha* (Skt.). However, when this early Indian Buddhist concept of an unwholesome, counterproductive doubt later passed north into China, Korea and Japan, some teachers and schools started to cultivate another aspect of doubt. Viewed in a more positive role as a potential catalyst, this particular process called 'doubt' does help crack a person's rigid, overconditioned certainties. Yet, some later Chan masters deliberately introduced major stress responses into such an obsessive doubt. Through this wide opening, their trainees' incautious, overzealous efforts of stressful inquiry could become counterproductive.

What the 'Great Doubt' isn't

Does this 'great' doubt mean not knowing? No. In Zen, our 'don't know' mind and our 'not knowing' mind do not mean that we are stupid, ignorant or unenlightened. Indeed, 'I don't know' was the first operational principle of Soto master Shunryu Suzuki (1905–1971) (Austin 2009, 184, 204, 205). What did he mean by the phrase, 'beginner's mind'? He meant that the basic Zen practice is *never to be trapped* into rigid certainty by rules or by the apparent truthiness of words. Robert Aitken further clarified this distinction (Aitken 1984, 122, 123, 189). He pointed out that the classic 'I don't know' reply by Bodhidharma to the emperor of Liang was essentially the same as a recent 'I don't know' statement by Nanrei Kobori-Roshi (1918–1992). Each man's *not knowing* meant that he had deeply

'accepted the fact that mystery was the essence' (Aitken (1993) 2005, 215).¹⁰ Instead, this three-word phrase spoke to the most intimate core of their ultimate unknowables.

The potential role of 'Great Doubt' during later centuries, in a calibrated process supervised by an authentic Zen Master

After a person's initial 'dark night' with its black cloud of hovering uncertainty, could consciousness suddenly break wide open to reveal its hidden 'silver lining'? The first Asian literary evidence that a monk's earlier 'ball of doubt' did shatter during *kensho-satori* has been traced to an enlightenment poem. It was written by the 14th-generation master Lo-han Kuei-chen (867–928) (Buswell 2006, 84). It was he who also introduced the saying, 'Not knowing is most intimate' (Ferguson 2000, 316).

Two centuries later, Rinzai master Ta-hui (1089–1163) was encouraging his Zen trainees to 'foster all the confusion and perplexity necessary' (Buswell 2006, 84–90). This dynamic sense of an induced urgency went far beyond their feeling baffled by a simple inability to resolve the paradox of their koan. Importantly, Ta-hui also realised that his trainees could feel overcome by all the stressful events and turmoil they encountered in their ordinary daily lives. Of course, all these factors were compounded in the crucible of rigorous, sleep-deprived retreats. This hyper-energised 'pressure cooker' process was considered to generate an 'intense one-pointedness of mind'. Especially in this monastic context would extra frustrations be provoked by a strict authoritarian figure who repeatedly rejected any aspirant's response that was not consistent with an authentic awakening. (Austin 2006, 68, 69)

By this time, some of Ta-hui's trainees' over-zealous efforts would finally have generated an existential *absorption*. This 'Great Doubt' had now rolled their every perplexity into *one* trance-like state, resembling a log-jam. Some 'Great Doubts' might even become states of numbing uncertainty during which all *objects of thought could drop off*. How did Ta-hui view this whole condition of being existentially 'stuck'? He described it as the way a stressed rat feels when it is stuck tight inside a narrow tapered trap. Neuroscientists of a later era discovered how rat brains did react during similar crisis conditions imposed by actual restraint. These rats developed abnormal, discordant surges of such vital neuromessengers as glutamate, acetylcholine, biogenic amines and nitric oxide (Austin 1998, 235–240, 2006, 113–116, 2009, 215–216).

In overstressed human beings, the resulting neurochemical and psychophysiological turmoil might seem to offer a hopeful outcome – the glimmering possibilities that an actual 'silver lining' could develop out of this initial synaptic mayhem – that one's old maladaptive networkings might reconfigure themselves in novel ways. Ideally, the person's major trait changes could later be expressed in the form of much more skilful, adaptive modes of living. The term,

‘posttraumatic growth’, is a rubric now being used to summarise the complex steps involved in such a general process of useful trait transformation (Khanna and Greyson 2015).

Five centuries after Ta-hui, the Soto master Boshan (1575–1630) was still sternly warning his trainees. The ones who could *not* rouse any doubt would face nine ‘diseases’ when trying to practise Chan. Moreover, those who *could* rouse doubt still had to avoid 10 other ‘sicknesses’. These lurked even among trainees who had taken their first steps on the Great Way towards becoming in accord with the essential Reality of the Universe (the *dharmakāya*) (Shore 2016).

Six centuries after Ta-hui, master Hakuin Ekaku (1685–1768) inspired a major dynamic renewal of Rinzai Zen practice in Japan (Dumoulin 1963, 242–268). When Hakuin was 24, he devoted himself day and night to meditating on Joshu’s Mu koan about the dog. He became sleepless, forgot to rest and eat, and entered a sustained state of tension. He said,

I was suddenly overcome by the Great Doubt. I felt as though freezing in an ice field extending thousands of miles. My bosom was filled with an extraordinary purity. I could neither advance nor retire. It was as if I were out of my mind and only the word ‘nothing’ [Mu] remained.¹¹

Hakuin continued in this concentrated state for several days. Suddenly, the deep sound of the temple bell triggered a transformation. The result ‘was like the smashing of a layer of ice or the collapse of a crystal tower’. When he awakened to his senses, exultant and full of pride, all doubts had dissolved. Convinced that he was now enlightened, he sought out Zen master Etan to have him confirm it. This master, unimpressed and unyielding, repeatedly rejected as premature every verbal and written description of Hakuin’s presentations (Dumoulin 1963, 249, 250).

After next reviewing Hakuin’s more authentically awakened experiences of *kensho-satori*, Dumoulin adds this wry comment by Hakuin himself: ‘obviously one must be prepared for some pain in the training’ (259). With further reference to Hakuin, Dumoulin then begins his next section with an appropriate title, ‘Zen Sickness’ (260–264).

In the twentieth century, Zen master Daibi Zenji commented on the phrase, Great Doubt, as the term had been described previously by master Hakuin’s heir, Torei Enji (1721–1792) (Okuda 1989, 16). With regard to the dynamic sequences involved in the Zen training process, master Daibi says that, ‘In order to smash this Great Doubt we have to sum up Passionate Energy to crush our very bones’... ‘Just take up the Mu Koan [Joshu’s dog] and look at it without attempting any intellectual understanding (191, 192). Keep asking ‘What is this?’ Finally, ‘if there is sufficient faith there is also sufficient doubt; when this doubt then develops into the great ball of doubt, great and fierce courage and endeavor are necessary to break it open’ (517, 518).

In that last century, Yasutani-Roshi (1895–1973) summarised the three essential aspects of Zen practice (Kapleau 1965, 58–60). The first was *strong* faith

(*dai-shinkon*). The second indispensable quality was the feeling of *strong* doubt (*dai-gidan*). Why was *this* 'doubt-mass', even when rooted in one's deep trust in the whole process, such a wrenching, ambivalent turmoil? Because fundamental facts were in stark conflict: we and our world were subjected to endless suffering. In contrast, our 'deepest faith tells us that exactly the opposite is true'. Kapleau added that 'in Zen, this "doubt" implies not skepticism but a state of perplexity, of probing inquiry, of intense self-questioning'. Of course, young Siddhartha remains the classic example of such conflicts. His deep, lingering existential doubts began when he first saw a sick man, an old man, a dead man and then a holy man.

Out of such feelings of doubt would then *naturally* arise the third essential factor: *strong* determination (*dai-funshi*). Siddhartha set out on his own strongly motivated quest when he was 29. This rigorous commitment culminated six years later, only after he relaxed its austerities and finally came to supreme enlightenment under the Bodhi tree.

It is instructive to note that Yasutani found that his contemporary aspirants' innate degrees of faith, doubt and determination predicted which of the two different styles of personal Zen practice they would subsequently tend to engage in. For example, suppose that they did possess *all* three of the above essentials. Then, in this first (so-called *daijo*) style of resulting Zen practice, why would a stronger doubt be regarded as 'the main prod' to a greater satori? Because its intensity allowed the practitioner 'no rest'.

In contrast, 'faith is strongest' in the second group of practitioners. This (so-called *saijojo*) style of Zen is expressed in its purest form by 'those who are sitting with the understanding that we are all inherently Buddhas'. When faith predominates, one's 'ripening takes place naturally, culminating in enlightenment'. However, Yasutani concluded that this *natural* ripening was the most difficult form of practice because it demanded 'resolute and dedicated sitting'.¹²

In this new century, master Sheng-Yen (1930–2009) discusses in authentic detail both the assets and liabilities of the more 'gentle' (silent illumination) and more 'forceful' approaches to Chan practice (Austin 2011, 82–84; Sheng-Yen 2001, 127–162). Other subtleties of koan practice at deep levels are considered elsewhere (Austin 2011, 150–155, 2016, 164, 165).

For many practitioners, the 'Middle Way' could seem to offer a third option that seems more in keeping with old Joshu's sage approach. It offers the favourable risk/benefit ratio of a complementary (*saidaijo*) prescription. This simplified approach infuses the optimal degrees of each individual's energised inquiry into a programme of dedicated sitting plus a firm commitment to mindful daily life practice (J. *shugyo*) (Austin 2009, 215–219).

The contemporary implications of Joshu's longevity

Joshu survived to the ripe old age of 120. On the spiritual Path, in any era, Joshu stands out like a Methuselah (Foster and Shoemaker 1996, 96–102). Even today,

only the rare person reaches, let alone teaches, beyond the age of 105. It was an extraordinary feat for someone in north China to live for 120 years under the conditions prevailing during the Tang Dynasty.

Multiple mechanisms determine how rapidly every aging body and brain undergoes degenerative changes (Riera 2016). Several different magnetic resonance imaging techniques have now been combined to measure how the rate of this 'normal' aging process changes the brains of otherwise healthy, non-meditating subjects. Recently, the brains from 140 of these clinically normal subjects were examined (Cherubini et al. 2016). Their ages ranged from 20 to 74 years. Three different sets of MRI data were combined. Each had measured the rates of aging of their grey matter, or white matter or subcortical nuclei, respectively. An ascending, straight-line relationship was found to exist between these normal subjects' *actual* chronological age in years and the 'brain age' that was predictable from their MRI data. Clearly, in general, the older one's calendar age, the older one's brain age tends to be.

However, some seniors are outliers. In the United States, recent research at Northwestern University focuses on a special group of senior citizens, *all* over the age of 80. These so-called 'SuperAgers' are an exceptionally well-preserved cohort (Gefen et al. 2015). Like Joshu, they are community-dwelling subjects who stay socially active. High-resolution MRI scans have measured the brain structure of these 31 extraordinary senior citizens. In all subjects, the *right rostral anterior cingulate region* is thicker than in comparable controls. Moreover, five of these seniors (aged 81–95) have come to autopsy. All five show a greater density of large, spindle-shaped von Economo nerve cells in this same anterior cingulate region. Few of their other neurons in this region show the regressive neurofibrillary tangles that are the usual sign of aging. To preserve the normal functions of one's nerve cells in the face of aging is both a personal advantage *and* a mutual advantage to other persons in a closely knit social group (Austin 2006, 399–401). Joshu chose to take on an active interpersonal teaching role in such an interconnected group during his last four decades.

Von Economo neurons are a relatively recent evolutionary arrival. Most are found in the normal networks that link our anterior cingulate gyrus with other regions in the fronto-insular cortex. What is their normal role? It is speculated that it is to help humans and other higher socially oriented mammals rapidly transmit introceptive messages within their more evolved association networks that are required to enact complex, socially oriented behaviour (Austin 2009, 138, 139, 237–244, 2011, 102, 215, n. 14).

The brains of long-term meditators

Master Joshu's remarkably long and productive life prompts us to ask: Does *long-term meditation* confer beneficial effects? Could these help defer the adverse effects of aging? Suppose the brains from large numbers of meditators were

compared with the brains of an equally large cohort of carefully matched control brains from *non*-meditators. Could modern neuroimaging techniques detect such differences?

Early in this century, two preliminary MRI reports began to suggest that regular insight or Zen meditation practice was associated with some slowing of the usual *rate* at which ‘age-related thinning’ was evident either in the right pre-frontal cortex or left putamen. These studies are reviewed elsewhere (Austin 2009, 243, 244, 2011, 138). They raised the possibility that long-term meditation might delay some negative effects that aging would otherwise have. If so, this delay might help preserve meditators’ cognitive functions or the brisk accuracy of their actual behavioural responses.

Since then, 50 meditators of very long experience and 50 matched controls have been studied by Luders and colleagues at the University of California at Los Angeles. These meditators averaged 57 years of age. They had already been practising various styles of meditation for an average of 23 years. This is a very long time. The meditators showed a *generalized* increase in the diffusion tensor imaging data obtained from 20 separate *white* matter tracts (Austin 2014, 167, 168). The findings in two major white matter connection pathways were especially noteworthy because these tracts support the interactive cognitive functions of the frontal lobes and temporal lobes (Austin 2011, 147–150).

In the latest report, the UCLA authors measured *grey* matter volumes. They applied the MRI techniques of high-resolution T1 pattern recognition to a similar sample of 50 long-term meditators and 50 control subjects (Luders, Cherbuin, and Gaser 2016a). This latest sample is based on subjects who had meditated for an average of 19.8 years and who ranged in age between 24 and 77 years. Could these findings be relevant to a rare person like Joshu who had been practising meditation *for over a century*, first as a monk and then as a master, in the early Chan traditions?

The UCLA data showed that, at 50 years of age (a half-way marker), these long-term meditators’ general ‘Brain Age index’ was 7.5 years *younger* than their controls. Indeed, for every additional year *over* the age of 50, the structure of these long-term meditators’ brains appeared to be one month and 22 days *younger* than might be expected from their chronological age. In contrast, the controls showed no such sparing from the adverse effects of brain aging during the years sampled. The authors emphasise the need for robust longitudinal (as opposed to cross-sectional) data (Luders and Cherbuin 2016b). Still, if a 52-day sparing from brain ageing for every 365 days of regular practice were to be extrapolated into economic terms, it might seem comparable with a ‘yield of 14%’ on one’s investment.¹³

Longer telomeres in long-term Zen meditators

Telomeres are the normal ‘caps’ on the ends of chromosomes. They shield our vulnerable DNA from various forms of toxic metabolic damage. Longer telomeres

in the white cells of peripheral blood correlate with larger normal volumes of cortical grey matter and white matter (King et al. 2014). Earlier reports suggested that *short-term* meditators could develop longer telomeres on their peripheral white blood cells. These intriguing findings have now been observed in 19 *long-term* Zen meditators (Alda et al. 2016). The Soto practitioners in this study had also been meditating for a very long time – an average of 75 min a day for an average of 15 years.

Their white blood cell telomeres measured some 9% longer ($p = 0.005$) than those of age-matched non-meditating controls. A battery of psychological tests hinted that this longer telomere finding might be correlated with certain adaptive personality attributes that could include their ability to accept emotional distress.

A plausible conclusion is that some of the biological benefits of long-term meditative practices reflect the ways that they reduce the consequences of over-emotional stress responses in general. This overall effect of calming correlates with reductions in the release of stress hormones like adrenal cortisol that are known to adversely shrink the size of the hippocampus. Reduced levels of psychological and related forms of metabolic stress can then be manifested in longer telomere caps on cells elsewhere. These longer caps can protect not only white blood cells, but also the DNA inside various neuronal stem cells, glia, blood vessels and other cells throughout the body (Austin 1998, 235–240). The likely result is a longer useful cellular life span. An obvious testable hypothesis could begin by focusing on the neural question: By which mechanisms does the most optimal approach to a particular person's long-term meditative training influence the preservation of function in Von Economo nerve cells and related cells in adjacent networks?

In closing

Contemporary Buddhist seekers now have multiple practices available to assist them towards whatever level(s) of awakening they might aspire to (Austin 2006, 394–396, 2016, 18–21). The forgoing narrative history serves as a reminder: Joshu's allusive words may still leave us perplexed, yet he himself never seemed to have emphasised the 'pressure-cooker' approach to koan practice as a way to prompt his monastic trainees into an awakening. Today, at least for most lay practitioners who have no regular access to an authentic Zen master, there would seem little advantage in volitionally imposing Hakuin's degrees of over-zealous, stressful 'Zen sickness' on themselves.

A guiding principle in sports medicine, also in accord with meditative practices, is for each of us to steer that flexible, individualised course somewhere between 'First, do no harm' and 'No strain/no pain/no gain'. This contemporary Middle Way means the regular training of attention and awareness, both on and off the cushion, during long-term meditation, regular retreats and mindful daily life practice (J. *shugyo*). It also means steering clear of illicit psychotropic

medication, and of other artificial forms of over-intense, *energy-wasting*, stressful, counterproductive stimulation (Austin 2006, 291–302, 2011, 130–139).

Meanwhile, old Joshu, this exemplar of pithy sayings, has left many pearls of wisdom for conservative aspirants to ponder on their long, arduous, great Way towards ‘the capital.’¹⁴ True, numerous allusive dialogues resist decoding. Yet where were most of them originally pointing, however tangentially? Far beyond the discursive concepts entangled in one’s *egocentric* Self. Instead, out in that other, *allo*-direction towards the transforming, concordant perspective of *prajna*’s insight-wisdom.

Finally, as we seek new explanations for his ageless influence and longevity, and when we read that a monk has asked him:

‘Master, how old are you?’

May we will be less surprised to find Joshu replying,

‘You can never finish counting the beads of the *juzu*’.¹⁵

Notes

1. Green 1998, saying 190, 71.
2. For clarity, ease of reference and pronunciation, the present pages use those simplified, familiar versions of each master’s name found in common use today, as have Foster and Shoemaker (1996) and Yamada (2015). For example, Joshu is more user-friendly than Zhaozhou Congshen or Chao-Chou Tsung-shen. For comparison, these longer Pinyin or Wade–Giles Chinese versions are listed with their Japanese romanji equivalents in Ferguson (2000), 473–478 and in Yamada (2015), 269–280.
3. The word Chan refers to the meditation schools of Mahayana Buddhism that arose in China. The word Zen usually refers to these schools as they later evolved in Japan. There, the terms Rinzai and Soto often denoted their two major styles of practice. Kensho and satori referred to extraordinary alternate states of consciousness.
4. A seven-pound robe of hemp also imposes a major, weighty burden on a wearer’s shoulders. I appreciated anew this release from such a burden when I finally read Joshu’s metaphoric reply.
5. Multiple complex issues are involved when the overconditioned Self of one’s psyche and soma dissolves into the varieties of emptiness (*wu* or *mu*) and Oneness. These are discussed in Austin 1998, 110–119, 540–542, 570–572, 2006, 61–64, 273, 333–356, 383–386, 2009, 118–121, 128–130, 150, 155–158, 188, 2011, 91, 150–155, 159, 187, 2014, 178–182.
6. The qualities of suchness that co-emerge with this emptiness are discussed in Austin 1998, 549–553, 2006, 358–371, 383–386, 2009, 219, 2014, 21, 59, 179.
7. The first two oak tree examples (sayings number 12 and number 47) occur relatively early in Green’s collection. Joshu could have been responding to different monks in different temples during different years.
8. Joshu could have been referring to these very different trees in different temples. This old cypress tree response has entered into the title of a recent review of contemporary Buddhism: McDaniel (2015).
9. This Chinese version of saying 317 by Liu Dongliang is found at http://read.goodweb.cn/news/news_view.asp?newsid=72247. I thank Professor Michael Volz for finding this version and translating it.

10. Therefore, for Robert Aitken-Roshi, the ideal approach for a Zen aspirant would *not* be so strenuous as 'to try to master Mu, or to penetrate Mu, but rather to admit Mu ... and to seek intimacy with Mu'. See Aitken (1993) 2005, 25–27, 30, 40, 42, 100.
11. Here, Dumoulin (1963) translates Mu as 'nothingness' (248). This word can be misleading. Joshu's one word response might then be misunderstood to imply not emptiness of Self but some nihilistic equivalent of a consciousness that perceives 'nothing'.
12. Practitioners who do not feel assailed by the internal and external pressures of some 'Great Doubt' will not need to be *driven* to escape its great conflicts. Practitioners are considered to be misinformed if they go so far as to deny the validity of *kensho-satori*, having rationalised that they are already innately 'enlightened'. Any such approach could be regarded as having only followed a third style of safe, self-protecting, inconsequential '*buji* Zen'. (Kapleau 1965, 282).
13. Suppose Joshu's 70 years of practice *after* the age 50 were to have followed the straight line, sloping relationships similar to those illustrated by Cherubini and Luders. If so, then his potential brain age might be speculated to have been 'only a mere 110 or so' when he died.
14. Accompanied by countless other companions, both two-footed, four-footed, and winged.
15. The *juzu* is the *continuous* Buddhist circular string of 108 beads, similar to a rosary. (Green 1998, saying 229, 83) (Hoffmann 1978, saying 204, 83).

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