

THE NATURE OF THE RINZAI (LINJI) KOAN PRACTICE

Victor Sogen Hori

D.T. SUZUKI's early works (notably his *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Second Series*, 1953) and Miura and Sasaki's *Zen Dust* (1966) were for a very long time the only major resources available in non-Asian languages for research into the Zen koan. In recent years, however, a rich bounty of material has appeared. At the level of basic texts, in addition to a steady stream of translations of the traditional "recorded sayings" of the Zen masters from which koan cases were originally derived, numerous koan collections, some of them newly created in the West, have also been published in translation. At the scholarly level, major philosophical and historical studies on the nature and development of the koan have appeared. Despite all these efforts, there is still no philosophical agreement on the nature of the koan, and indeed little factual information on the actual conduct of koan practice. Before we attempt to describe the capping-phrase practice, we need a clear picture of the Rinzai koan practice in general.

A RELIGIOUS PRACTICE

To begin with, like all Buddhist practices, Rinzai koan practice is religious in nature. This point seems to be forgotten in current accounts. Popular descriptions of the koan as "riddles" or "paradoxes" make it seem as if the Zen practitioner is interested in little more than the solving of intellectual puzzles. Those interested in enhancing the spontaneity of athletic or artistic performance tend to focus on Zen as a training technique for attaining a state of consciousness in which "the dancer is one with the dance" (Gallwey 1974, Sudnow 1978). Scholars who study

Zen as a language game give the impression that the practitioner is basically learning a new set of rules for language (Sellman 1979, Wright 1992). Others insist that the notion of religious experience (Proudfoot 1985), or Zen experience (Sharf 1995A, 1995B), is a concept manufactured and manipulated for ideological reasons, depicting the practitioner as primarily engaged in some form or other of cultural politics. Critics who suggest that the koan is a form of “scriptural exegesis” (Sharf 1995A, 108) give the impression that the Zen koan practice differs little from scholarship in general. These kinds of interpretations of Zen practice are misleading at best. The koan practice is first and foremost a religious practice, undertaken primarily not in order to solve a riddle, not to perfect the spontaneous performance of some skill, not to learn a new form of linguistic expression, not to play cultural politics, and not to carry on scholarship. Such ingredients may certainly be involved, but they are always subservient to the traditional Buddhist goals of awakened wisdom and selfless compassion.

In saying this, I am making a normative statement, not a description of fact. The fact is, in most Rinzai monasteries today, many of the monks engage in meditation and koan practice for a mere two or three years in order to qualify for the status of *jushoku* (resident priest), which will allow them to assume the role of a temple priest. For many of them, engagement with the koan may indeed consist in a little more than the practice of solving riddles and learning a ritualized language, a fraction of the full practice. In the full practice the Zen practitioner must bring to the engagement the three necessities of the Great Root of Faith, the Great Ball of Doubt, and the Great Overpowering Will (*daishinkon, daigidan, daifunshi*). The koan is an artificial problem given by a teacher to a student with the aim of precipitating a genuine religious crisis that involves all the human faculties—intellect, emotion, and will.

At first, one’s efforts and attention are focused on the koan. When it cannot be solved (one soon learns that there is no simple “right answer”), doubt sets in. Ordinary doubt is directed at some external object such as the koan itself or the teacher, but when it has been directed back to oneself, it is transformed into Great Doubt. To carry on relentlessly this act of self-doubt, one needs the Great Root of Faith. Ordinarily, faith and doubt are related to one another in inverse proportion: where faith is

strong, doubt is weak; and vice versa. But in Zen practice, the greater the doubt, the greater the faith. Great Faith and Great Doubt are two aspects of the same mind of awakening (*bodaishin*). The Great Overpowering Will is needed to surmount all obstacles along the way. Since doubt is focused on oneself, no matter how strong, wily, and resourceful one is in facing the opponent, that opponent (oneself) is always just as strong, wily, and resourceful in resisting. When self-doubt has grown to the point that one is totally consumed by it, the usual operations of mind cease. The mind of total self-doubt no longer classifies intellectually, no longer arises in anger or sorrow, no longer exerts itself as will and ego. This is the state that Hakuin described as akin to being frozen in a great crystal:

Suddenly a great doubt manifested itself before me. It was as though I were frozen solid in the midst of an ice sheet extending tens of thousands of miles. A purity filled my breast and I could neither go forward nor retreat. To all intents and purposes I was out of my mind and the *Mu* alone remained. Although I sat in the Lecture Hall and listened to the Master's lecture, it was as though I were hearing from a distance outside the hall. At times, I felt as though I were floating through the air. (*Orategama III*, Yampolsky 1971, 118)

In this state, Hakuin happened one day to hear the temple bell ring. At that moment the ice shattered and he was thrust back into the world. In this experience, called the Great Death (*daishi ichiban*), the self-doubt is finally extinguished and the Great Doubt is transformed into Great Awakening. As Ta-hui says, "Beneath the Great Doubt, always there is a great awakening."

Kensho, the experience of awakening, is more than merely the state of concentrated *samadhi*. When the Great Doubt has totally taken over the self, there is no more distinction between self and other, subject and object. There is no more differentiation, no more attachment. This is merely *samadhi* and not *kensho*. *Kensho* is not the self's withdrawal from the conventional world, but rather the selfless self breaking back into the

conventional world. It is only when this *samadhi* has been shattered that a new self arises. This self returns and again sees the things of the world as objects, now as empty objects; it again thinks in differentiated categories and feels attachment, but now with insight into their emptiness.

Again, I am speaking in normative terms. The particular aspects of Zen koan practice on which scholars have concentrated their attentions—its nondual epistemology, its ritual and performance, its language, its politics—are aspects. They are facets of a practice whose fundamental core is a religious practice.

KOAN: INSTRUMENT OR REALIZATION?

Most commentators take the approach that the koan is an *upaya*, an instrument, that deliberately poses a problem unsolvable by the rational mind in order to drive the mind beyond the limits of rationality and intellectual cognition. This approach views the koan as a psychological technique cunningly designed to cause the rational and intellectual functions of mind to self-destruct, thus liberating the mind to the vast realm of the nonrational and the intuitive. Powerful personal accounts of spiritual quest make it seem that the koan is not a text to be studied for its meaning as one would study an essay or a poem, but rather an existential explosive device with language merely serving as the fuse.

Part of the problem with many such instrumentalist approaches is that it deprives the koan itself of meaning. The koan, it is said, cannot be understood intellectually; it gives the appearance of being meaningful only to seduce the meaning-seeking mind to engage with it (Rosemont 1970). This interpretation ignores the mass of evidence contradicting the idea that the koan is no more than a meaningless, blunt psychological instrument. It is hard to think that the shelves of heavy volumes of koan commentary produced through the centuries and the lectures in which Zen teachers expound at length on the koan are all occupied with a technique that is in itself nonsense. It is much more sensible to begin from the assumption that koan disclose their own meaning (though not necessarily an intellectual one), once they have been properly understood.

A second difficulty is that in trying to demonstrate how the koan overcomes the dualisms and false dichotomies created by the conventional

mind, the instrumental approach introduces dualism and dichotomy back into the picture again. The awakened mind, it is said, has transcended the dualistic dichotomizing of conventional mind and resides in a state of nonduality. The awakened person is thus freer than the average person in being able to choose to act either in the conventional dualistic way or in the awakened nondual way. But the dichotomy between duality and nonduality, conventional thinking and awakened mind, is itself a duality. Rather than being free from dualistic thinking, the awakened mind ends up more tightly locked into dualistic thinking, incessantly forced to choose between being conventional or being awakened.

A much better way of approaching the koan is by way of the “realizational” model, a term I have borrowed from Hee-jin Kim (1985). The practitioner does not solve the koan by grasping intellectually the meaning of “the sound of one hand” or “original face before father and mother were born.” Rather, in the crisis of self-doubt referred to above, one experiences the koan not as an object standing before the mind that investigates it, but as the seeking mind itself. As long as consciousness and koan oppose each other as subject and object, there are still two hands clapping, mother and father have already been born. But when the koan has overwhelmed the mind so that it is no longer the object but the seeking subject itself, subject and object are no longer two. This is “one hand clapping”, the point “before father and mother have been born.” This entails a “realization” in the two senses of the term. By making real, i.e., by actually *becoming* an example of the nonduality of subject and object, the practitioner also realizes, i.e., *cognitively understands*, the koan. The realization of understanding depends on the realization of making actual.

This realizational account of the koan solves several problems. On the one hand, it helps explain how the solution to a koan requires the personal experience of “the sound of one hand” or of “one’s original face.” On the other, it allows us to see the koan as not merely a blunt or meaningless instrument, useful only as means to some further end, but as possessed of a meaningful content of its own which can be apprehended intellectually.

“ZEN EXPERIENCE”

If an instrumentalist approach deemphasizes the meaning of the koan and overemphasizes the experiential aspect, there are scholars on the other end of the spectrum with the opposite approach. Robert Sharf, for example, writes:

The koan genre, far from serving as a means to obviate reason, is a highly sophisticated form of scriptural exegesis: the manipulation or “solution” of a particular koan traditionally demanded an extensive knowledge of canonical Buddhist doctrine and classical Zen verse. (Sharf 1995A, 108)

In claiming that the solving of a koan is an exercise in scriptural exegesis, Sharf also argues against the traditional claim that one must necessarily have a *kensho* experience before one can understand Zen. His position is that the idea of *kensho* experience has been manufactured and manipulated for ideological purposes by Buddhist modernists (Sharf 1995A, 1995B, 1995C). While it is not possible in this essay to deal with all the details of his position, I feel it necessary to comment on the principal question at stake here.

What does it mean to say that Zen can only be known by experience? The term “experience” needs examination. The ordinary question, “Have you had any experience of living in a foreign country?” usually means nothing more than “Have you ever lived in a foreign country?” “Having experience of” is a loose idiom for describing things one has done or undergone. In a more academic context, however, “experience” has at least two specialized meanings, that are often confused with one another. We may distinguish them as Experience 1: learning or knowing firsthand; and Experience 2: having pure consciousness.

Experience 1 does not entail any epistemological claims about the nature of experience. It simply denies that what is known has been known secondhand, relying on someone else’s account. This idea is at work, for instance, in the question, “How do you know it is hot in Indonesia? Have you experienced it for yourself or have you just heard about it from another?” Experience 2, in contrast, does make epistemological claims

about the nature of experience. It presupposes a distinction between the rational and the intuitive, the intellectual and nonintellectual, the cognitive and the noncognitive. Its adjective form, “experiential,” connotes all these—intuitive, non-intellectual, noncognitive. To experience something in this sense means to have a direct apprehension without any intellectual or conceptual activity. The experience is “pure” precisely to the extent that there is no intellection or conceptualization going on. This idea is at work in the claim, for example, that “mystical experience is not something you attain by thinking. You have to experience it.” Although both thinking and experiencing are firsthand, only the latter can be said to be pure.

If “not founded on words and letters” means that Zen must be experienced, we have to ask: Experienced how—as Experience 1 or as Experience 2? If Experience 1, then the claim that Zen must be experienced is true but trivial. If Experience 2, then the claim is important but false.

If the claim that Zen must be experienced amounts to the statement that one must learn or come to know Zen firsthand, then hearing about it or reading a description of it written by someone else does not count as experience. In this sense, the idea that Zen is “not founded on words and letters” really amounts to saying that it is “not founded on the words and letters of another.” But there is nothing uniquely Zen about this. Vast areas of human life cannot be experienced vicariously but can only be learned or known or accomplished firsthand. In fact, Zen teachers often point out parallel examples from everyday life. I recall a lecture in which the Zen master spoke of five things that people have to do by themselves and for which no one can substitute: eat, sleep, urinate, defecate, and attain *satori*. Although the Zen tradition puts great emphasis on the fact that Zen is “not founded on words and letters” and must be experienced, this claim does not require the concept of a “pure experience.”

At the same time, there are many who interpret the dictum that Zen is “not founded on words and letters” to mean that “Zen experience” is Experience 2, pure in the sense of being totally without intellectual or conceptual activity. Elsewhere I have argued that the very notion of a “pure experience” is shot through with conceptual problems, and that the reason for its popularity is that it is used ideologically to promote a kind of individualism: in the same way that there is supposed to be a

state of nature in which individuals lived in freedom before society arose to compromise it, so also there is supposed to be a pure consciousness before conceptual thinking and social conditioning arose to defile it (Hori 2000).

But even if the notion of “pure experience” were intelligible, the realization of a Zen koan would not be experience in this sense. Within the experience of the nonduality of subject and object, there is still intellectual cognition. Ordinary perception presupposes conceptual activity in order to remain clear and intact. One sees the world through concepts like “here,” “there,” “tree,” “table,” “red,” “loud,” “bowl,” “book,” etc. Without these concepts to inform our perception, we would not be able to recognize these flesh-colored things as “hands,” to interpret those lines on the wall as a “door,” to hear that shrilling sound as a “telephone.” All seeing that has meaning is “seeing-as,” seeing according to concepts. Without the investment of conceptual activity in perception, the phenomenal world would become a blur of amorphous patches of color, sounds that we would not recognize as speech, sensations without meaning. Zen awakening does not cause perception to lose its crisp, clear form and dissolve into such shapeless forms and cacophonous sounds. The mind of a Zen master is not booming, buzzing confusion. The fact that the world continues to be clearly perceived and that one’s surroundings can still be described in ordinary language indicates that the experience associated with Zen awakening cannot be a “pure experience.”

The experience of realization in a koan is indescribable, but only in the very ordinary sense in which *all* immediate experience is basically indescribable. The resistance of the koan to words is no stronger than the resistance of the aroma of a cup of coffee to verbal expression. The traditional Zen expression of this fact is *reidan jichi*, “Know for yourself hot and cold.” To know the sensation of hot and cold is one thing; to explain it to one who does not know it is another. The experience of the realization in koan is not intrinsically indescribable, but only indescribable relative to the repertoire of experiences of the people conversing. When I speak of the aroma of a cup of coffee and the sensation of hot and cold, other people know what I am talking about because they, too, have smelled coffee and felt the sting of hot and cold. But if I should speak of the taste of durian fruit, the Southeast Asian fruit with the nauseating

smell and the wonderful taste, few Western readers will understand what I am talking about.

If one attempts to describe the realization of a koan to one who has not had the experience, communication naturally fails, and one reverts to saying that it is “not founded on words and letters.” But just as any two people who share an experience can talk about it, so there can be discussion about the experience of insight into the Zen koan. (There is, however, a social prohibition against talking about Zen, which may discourage such discussions from actually taking place.)

So it is quite true that Zen can only be known by experience (in a quite ordinary sense of experience), but this does not imply that Zen is some “pure experience” completely devoid of intellectual activity. A corollary to this conclusion is this: there can be meaningful language about Zen but only between people who have shared its experience. Two aspects of meaning are conjoined in meaningful discourse: *reference*, the object, event, or experience that a word or statement denotes; and *sense*, the significance of a linguistic expression. (The classic example of the distinction is that of “the morning star” and “the evening star,” which have different senses but the same reference, namely the planet Venus.) One who is not a connoisseur of wine does not know what “oakiness” *refers* to in wine tasting and therefore does not understand the *sense* of a statement such as, “This wine is too oaky.” The same could be said of the entire vocabulary of aesthetic and technical appreciation: words like “highlights,” “nose,” “fruitiness” in wine tasting; “lushness” and “restraint” in the sound of the strings in music appreciation; “gracefulness” in hockey; “intelligence” in boxing; and so forth. When one does not know the *reference* of these terms in experience, one cannot understand the sense of any statement using them.

Many expressions, “splitting migraine,” “the pain and pleasure of childbirth,” “prolonged melancholia,” “the shame of being old,” refer to special or particular experiences that many people have never had, and perhaps never will. But few will claim that these experiences are some special class of experience “not founded on words and letters.” Because all of us had some general experiences of “headache,” “pleasure,” “melancholy,” and “shame,” we can understand the general sense of these special expressions without having a particular reference for “splitting

migraine" or "pain of childbirth" in our repertoire of experiences. The experience of the Zen unity of self and other, however, is so unusual that it does not fall under any more general class. In this case, without one's own experience, one has no point of *reference* for the "sound of one hand" or "original face," and therefore one cannot understand the *sense* of the expressions in which such locutions are used: "Divide the sound of one hand into two"; "How old is the sound of one hand?"; "Make the sound of one hand stand upside down." That does not mean that the language of Zen is meaningless. It is *senseless* only to those who have not had the experience to which it *refers*.

IDEOLOGICAL USE OF EXPERIENCE

Sharf and other scholars have argued that the notion of "religious experience" is an epistemological category created as a useful tool in cultural politics. Sharf writes:

Nishida, Suzuki, Hisamatsu, and their followers, like Schleiermacher, Otto, and James before them, were reacting to the onslaught of Enlightenment values. They sought to reframe our conceptions of the religious such that a core of spiritual and moral values would survive the headlong clash with secular philosophy, science, and technical progress. They were thus led to posit an "essential core" of religion, conceived of as a private, veridical, ineffable experience inaccessible to empirical scientific analysis. (Sharf 1995A, 135)

That is, those who have described the core of religion as the ineffable experience of the numinous, or of the sacred, or of *satori*, implicitly draw a self-serving line between, on the one hand, those people who have had religious experience (like themselves, practitioners of a religion) and are therefore empowered to be judges of truth and falsehood in matters of religion, and, on the other hand, those people who have not (like the secular and scientific critics of religion) and are therefore incapable of distinguishing truth from falsehood in matters of religion. I do not mean to deny that the notion of "religious experience" has been used in the ideological way

described here, to anoint certain persons with the authority to speak on religious matters and disenfranchise others. But “religious experience” is not the only fabled beast lurking in the ideological woods. “Empirical scientific analysis,” also known as “academic objectivity,” is another such epistemological concept. Proponents not only claim it exists but also use it to draw a self-serving line between those who have it (like themselves, academic scholars) and are therefore empowered to be the judge of true and false, and those who do not have it (like practitioners of religion) and are therefore incapable of distinguishing the true and the false. In this conflict over who has authority to speak on matters religious, both sides posit epistemological entities, “religious experience” and “scientific objectivity,” and both sides claim possession of it to grant themselves authority and to disenfranchise the other. In this conflict, it sounds like two hands clapping, but underneath it is really only one.

It is not necessary to get entangled in this debate to make a more important point: simply because a concept has been used in a political or ideological context does not mean that it has no epistemological value. Sharf’s criticism leaves one with the impression that because he has shown that the notion of Zen experience has been used politically, this implies that there is no such thing as genuine Zen experience as traditionally described. What are the grounds for such a stark either/or assumption? There are any number of concepts like gender, color of skin, and religious creed, that have been used as political and ideological tools, but that does not mean that they are empty concepts without real content. Even though the notion of religious experience may be used for ideological purposes, that does not of itself imply that there is no genuine religious experience.

INTELLECTUAL INTERPRETATION OF THE KOAN

As generation upon generation of Zen teachers have stated, it is a mistake to think that one can solve a koan merely by analyzing it intellectually. Nevertheless Zen has an intellectually comprehensive vocabulary for discussing the many aspects of Zen awakening. Part of this intellectual vocabulary is technical and philosophical, most of it is symbolic and metaphorical. Some of the technical vocabulary is described in a later

chapter: the initial awakening, *honbun* (the Fundamental), dynamic action, verbal expression, Five Ranks, the Ten Precepts, the arousing of compassion for all sentient beings, the straight and the crooked, and so on. The vast majority of the verses and phrases of the capping phrase collections, however, uses symbol and metaphor.

Sometimes the connection between technical vocabulary and symbolic expression is explicitly drawn. For instance, in the headnotes of several verses, the editor of the Zenrin Kushu (ZRKS) uses the technical term *honbun*, “the Fundamental,” to explain the graphic symbolism of the verses. In the examples below, the words inside parentheses are translations from the headnotes.

Jurai kokoro tetsu ni nitari

Originally his heart resembles iron.

(ZRKS 5.209n: Originally, the sturdy man; the Fundamental.)

Kokufu fuite mo irazu

The black wind blows but cannot enter.

(ZRKS 5.313n: A *wato* about the Fundamental.)

Myoju ten'ei o zessu

The bright pearl is beyond all cloudiness.

(ZRKS 5.379: This verse uses the bright pearl to illuminate the Fundamental.)

Other metaphorical expressions for the Fundamental have been repeated so often, they are now Zen clichés: “sound of one hand,” “original face,” “Mu,” “the great matter,” “the point of Bodhidharma’s coming from the West,” etc.

But such examples of technical terminology are uncommon. Most often, the Zen phrase books use metaphorical language without explanation, expecting that the reader will have, or will develop, the eye to see through the metaphor to the underlying meaning. Take, for example, the following three phrases referring to the nonduality of subject and object:

Hinju ittai.

Guest and host are one.

Riji funi.

Principle and fact are not two.

Banbutsu ichinyo.

The ten thousand things are one.

This sort of explicit labeling using philosophical terminology is said to “stink of Zen.” The Zen tradition rather prefers to use colorful symbolic language.

<i>Hi ochite tsuki imada</i>	The sun has set but the moon
<i>noborazu.</i>	has yet to rise.
<i>Ikke no fushi.</i>	Father and son in one house.
<i>Itto ichidan.</i>	One sword [cuts into] one piece.

The image in the final line is particularly interesting. The usual expression is *Itto nidan*, “One sword [cuts into] two pieces,” but here the sword of Zen cuts into a single piece, symbolizing a discrimination that is nondual. The metaphorical language is much more striking than the dry technical language.

Although it is true that one can only grasp a koan by becoming it, that one cannot grasp a koan merely through intellectual understanding, nevertheless there is an intellectual language, both technical and symbolic, for talking about the many aspects of Zen awakening. Intellectual understanding of the koan and the experience of the nonduality of subject and object are not opposed to each other, the one excluding the other. Without realization of the point of the koan, there can be no intellectual understanding of the koan. With realization comes understanding.

Capping-phrase collections are expressions of Zen awakening in language. The awakening of Zen can only be realized personally; it is “not founded upon words and letters.” That is the gold of Zen. But to convey that awakening to others, one must use language. To sell the gold of Zen, one must mix it with sand.

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THE STEPS OF KOAN PRACTICE

Victor Sogen Hori

IN THIS CHAPTER, we will consider the stages involved in koan practice as well as some of the technical terminology that accompanies it. The aim is to present a general picture of the overall training career of full-time practitioners engaged in the koan curriculum.

KOAN AND MEDITATION: ENDS OR MEANS?

Although many beginning monks take “passing” the koan to be the goal of their practice and see meditation as merely the means to that goal, Rin-zai teachers caution against this way of thinking. Monks begin and end their daily activities with a period of *zazen* sitting in the *zendo*. From within a period of *zazen*, monks proceed to the main hall to chant sutras. From within *zazen*, they go to meals, to *samu* work, and to begging. After returning from the day’s activities, they return to the *zendo* for another period of *zazen*. When they go to bed at night, they are still in a period of *zazen* that is not ended until the ringing of the bell the next morning. Ritually speaking, therefore, *zazen* is the one fundamental activity of the monastery, the center from which all else is done.

Zazen is far from being just the means to passing the koan. The ritual structure of monastery life makes it clear that it is rather the other way around: one works on a koan in order to do meditation.

Monasteries vary somewhat in their meditation schedules, but most continue to maintain the traditional schedule of two training terms in summer and winter, each containing three or four major *sesshin* (a week of intensive meditation practice), and a number of minor *sesshin* filling out the rest of the year. Three *sesshin* a month is common. In addition, regardless of the *sesshin* schedule and unless there is some

special reason, the bell for *sanzen* (meeting with the *roshi* or Zen master) is put out each morning so that monks may confront the *roshi* over their koan at least once a day. In stricter monasteries, monks can expect several hours of meditation and at least two *sanzen* every day throughout most of the year.

The initial koan given to monks, known as *shokan* or “the First Barrier,” is usually either Hakuin’s *Sekishu onjo* (the Sound of One Hand) or Joshu’s *Mu* (Mumonkan Case 1). Some temples begin with *Honrai no menmoku* (the Original Face, Mumonkan Case 23). The Chinese glyph *kan* in *shokan* can also mean “gate,” so that *shokan* could also be translated “First Entry.” I prefer to render it “barrier” to emphasize the difficulty involved in passing through it. Monks are expected to get their first insight, or *kensho*, into the Fundamental through meditation on one of these koan. It may take anywhere from half a year to several years to do so. The term *kensho* needs fuller attention than we will be able to give it here. It contains several layers of meaning in Japanese and, to complicate matters still further, has entered the English language, where Western expectations have given it a new and independent career. Suffice it to remark here that no monk can pass his first koan without demonstrating *kensho*. Some academics have surmised that passing a koan is a form of “scriptural exegesis” presupposing considerable prior study of Buddhist texts. From my own experience as a monk in the Daitoku-ji monastery, I can testify that indeed very few of my fellow monks could be described as intellectuals or as learned in Buddhist teachings. In any case, once past the first barrier, the monk needs further training before he can arrive at and articulate his first insight.

Sassho, CHECKING QUESTIONS

A single koan usually breaks down into parts, the initial “main case” (*honsoku*) and numerous “checking questions” (*sassho*). *Sassho* perform two functions. First, by means of these questions the *roshi* can confirm the monk’s original insight into the Fundamental and gauge the depth of that insight. Second, the checking questions push the monk to broaden his insight beyond the Fundamental into particular instances of it. For example, the First Barrier koan “Sound of One Hand” and “Mu”

are typically followed by checking questions such as “What is the Sound of One Hand from in front and from behind?” or “Divide Mu into two.” The number of questions ranges anywhere from twenty to a hundred or more, depending on the teaching lineage of the roshi. Checking questions serve the roshi as a quick way to uncover deception. The required initial responses to koan have become fixed over time, and monks sometimes learn the required responses through hearsay. To confirm that the insight is actually the monk’s own and not something he is repeating second-hand, all the roshi need do is confront him with a few of these checking questions.

Whichever of the two (Sound of One Hand or Mu) the monk receives initially, the novice monk will most likely receive the other of the pair immediately afterwards, so that his entire first year or more is taken up with these two koan and their *sassho*.

THE INZAN AND TAKUJU SCHOOLS

Once past the First Barrier koan, practice in Rinzai monasteries follows one of two patterns, depending on whether the teaching roshi belongs to the Inzan school or the Takuju school. Inzan Ien (1751–1814) and Takuju Kosen (1760–1833) were the direct disciples of Gasan Jito (1727–1797), who himself was a direct disciple of Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1769). All monasteries and roshi presently teaching in Japan associate themselves with one or the other of these schools. The two teach basically the same body of koan and both consider themselves to be transmitting the Zen of Hakuin. But the Inzan school is thought to be sharper and more dynamic in style, while the Takuju school is thought to be more meticulous and low-keyed.

In the Takuju school, Takuju monks work systematically through the *Mumonkan*, beginning with Case 1, advancing to Case 2, Case 3, and so on. On completion of this text, they work on a number of cases from the *Katto-shu*, and then move on to the *Hekigan-roku*, whose cases they also take up in order, Case 1, Case 2, and so on. In contrast, monks in the Inzan lineage receive koan from a variety of collections—*Mumonkan*, *Hekigan-roku*, *Katto-shu*, *Chin’u-shu*—in what appears to be random order. In fact, however, the order is fixed, so much so that

a monk transferring from one Inzan school roshi to another need merely tell the new roshi his last koan in order for the new roshi to know where to continue without leaving any gap or requiring any repetition of work already done.

It is commonly said that, compared to Inzan monks, Takuju monks receive many more *sassho* or checking questions after passing the main case and are asked to provide more *jakugo* (capping phrases). To accommodate the large number of *sassho* and *jakugo* assignments, the *sesshin* schedule in a Takuju monastery often includes more *sanzen* sessions with the roshi, as many as seven a day. Over the years, the two schools have developed slightly different bodies of Zen verses and phrases from which to draw *jakugo*. The verses and phrases that make up [the volume from which this chapter was drawn] have been taken from two modern collections, Tsuchiya Etsudo's *Zengoshu* and Shibayama Zenkei's *Zenrin kushu*, in order to encompass the practice of both schools.

The two schools are not so divided as to prohibit the occasional crossover of traditions. A monastery's style of koan practice will depend on the roshi teaching there at any given time, and although most monasteries have become associated in the course of generations with a particular school, occasionally a *honzan* headquarters of one of the schools will ask a roshi from the other to take over one of its monasteries. From time to time, a particularly gifted roshi will make it a point to train under several teachers, learning the style of both schools in order to be able to give instruction in either of them. In addition, many roshi seem to know that particular koan are treated differently in the other school, and this knowledge is passed along in their own teachings of those koan.

Koan Taikei, THE KOAN SYSTEM

Both the Inzan and Takuju schools teach the koan system attributed to Hakuin, although it should be noted that there are some grounds for doubting that he was the creator of the present koan system. Since we are more concerned with the present use of the system, there is no need to go into these historical questions here.

When people speak of Hakuin's koan system, they usually are referring to a five-fold division of koan:

<i>Hosshin</i>	<i>Dharmakaya</i> or Dharma-body
<i>Kikan</i>	Dynamic Action
<i>Gonsen</i>	Explication of Words
<i>Hachi nanto</i>	Eight Difficult-to-Pass
<i>Goi jujukin</i>	Five Ranks and the Ten Grave Precepts

This five-fold division seems to have evolved from earlier classification systems. It is known that the Japanese Zen monk Shoichi Kokushi (Ben'en Enni, 1202–1280) had systematized koan into categories, but there is some disagreement as to whether he used three or four. The Zen monk and scholar Akizuki Ryomin describes three categories: *Richi* (Attaining the Principle), *Kikan* (Dynamic Action) and *Kojo* (Directed Upwards) (Akizuki 1987, 77). Others add a fourth category: *Koge* (Directed Downwards) (Ito 1970, 36). Nanpo Jomyo (1235–1309), the monk who brought the Yogi branch of Rinzai Zen to Japan from China, also divided koan into three categories: *Richi*, *Kikan*, and *Kojo* (Akizuki 1987, 77–78; Asahina 1941, 49–50).

Akizuki notes, however, that in Hakuin's system the original fifth category was not *Goi jujukin* (Five Ranks and the Ten Grave Precepts) but *Kojo*. He faults the Zen roshi Asahina Sogen for first substituting *Goi jujukin* as the fifth category, lamenting the fact that both Zen roshi and lay writers have blindly followed his lead (Akizuki 1987, 82). The lack of agreement on precisely what the five categories are has carried over into English-language accounts of Hakuin's system. Miura and Sasaki present Hakuin's system with *Goi jujukin* as the fifth category (ZD, 62–76), while Shimano gives *Kojo* (Directed Upwards) as the fifth category and *Goi jujukin* as a sixth category (Shimano 1988, 79–80). No systematic survey has been conducted to determine what system the majority of Rinzai teaching-roshi in Japan now follow, but my general impression is that *Goi jujukin*, and not *Kojo*, is usually considered the fifth category.

A complete list of all the categories of koan in use would have to include not only *Kojo* but two others as well. At very advanced stages of koan practice, a monk might receive:

Kojo (Directed Upwards)
Matsugo no rokan (Last Barrier)
Saigo no ikketsu (Final Confirmation).

I will discuss each of these in greater detail below. Since descriptions of Hakuin's five stages are readily available in English, I will restrict myself to an abbreviated account of his system here.

Hosshin (Dharmakaya) Koan

The *Hosshin* koan reveal the *dharmakaya*, the Dharma-body, or the Fundamental. Asahina Sogen Roshi explains:

The simple explanation of Dharma-body, given by the ancients, is that one takes the dharma and makes oneself one with it, but this is just what we mean by true reality (*shinnyo*), by Dharma-nature, by Buddha-nature, by awakening (*bodai*), by nirvana, by the original body of the universe. For the Zen practitioner, it means one's own mind nature. In more concrete terms, it is the subject (*shujinko*) of our seeing and hearing, of all our consciousness...

The Zen practitioner by illuminating Dharma-body seeks to illuminate himself, to emancipate himself from life-and-death, and to attain unhindered freedom. The *Richi* koan, the *Kikan* koan, the *Kojo* koan and all other koan attempt nothing more than to illuminate Dharma-body and radiate freedom through becoming one with the realm of Dharma-body. (Asahina 1941, 56)

The Dharma-body koan are the koan on which a monk experiences an initial awakening, *kensho* or *satori*. The First Barrier koan, the Sound of One Hand, and Joshu's Mu fall within this first group. As we see in the formula "If you awaken to *hosshin*, then there is not one single thing" (*Hosshin kakuryo sureba ichi motsu mo nashi*), the realm of *hosshin* is the realm of the undifferentiated and unconditioned. It is useful, at least provisionally, to think of *Hosshin* koan as those that

introduce the undifferentiated and the unconditional. (Like many other Zen terms, *hosshin* has also a second sense in which the undifferentiated is identical with the differentiated and the unconditioned with the conditioned.)

Kikan (Dynamic Action) Koan

The *Kikan* or Dynamic Action koan open up the realm of the differentiated and the dynamic in Zen. The character *ki* in *kikan* is difficult to translate. Originally it denoted a weaver's loom, and in both Chinese and Japanese it is used today in compounds to signify machinery or anything mechanical. In Buddhism it has its own technical meanings, which differ from one branch to the next. Within Zen it has come to be used as a synonym for *hataraki* (working or functioning), and in its wider connotations carries the sense of spirit, dynamism, action, or flair. In general, it implies action rather than stillness and involvement rather than detachment, as, for instance, in the term *zenki*, which refers to the dynamic activity of the awakened person in the concrete situations of daily life.

Taken together, *Hosshin* koan and *Kikan* koan reflect the traditional Chinese contrast between substance (*tai*) and function (*yu*). The *Hosshin* or "Body of the Buddha" koan take one to the realm of the ultimate and unconditioned. But it is all too easy to get stuck there, in a condition that Zen calls *deiri no kyuin*, "a worm in the mud" (mud being a metaphor for *satori*). *Kikan* koan pry the monk out of the suffocating *satori* of the undifferentiated and the unconditioned, returning him to the everyday phenomenal world of self and things, of conventionality and discrimination. *Kikan* koan show that the Fundamental is not merely still and tranquil but also active and dynamic, not only empty and undifferentiated but also full of distinctions and differentiation. To learn this is said to be more difficult than the attainment of the original *satori*, as we see in the following verse.

*Nehan no kokoro wa akirameyasuku,
Sabetsu no chi wa irigatashi.*

To clarify the mind of nirvana is easy,
But to enter the wisdom of discrimination is hard.

Gonsen (Explication of Words) Koan

Gonsen koan bring to light the fact that while the Fundamental is “not founded on words and letters,” it is nevertheless expressed through words and letters. *Gonsen* koan can be quite long, so that even memorizing them in order to recite them in the presence of the roshi can be a major task in itself. Despite the fact that a special category exists for verbal expression, in my opinion the *Gonsen* koan do not present any problem with words and language that is not common to all koan. In every koan, the Zen practitioner faces the problem of breaking through the surface of words and letters—which may appear to be speaking of something else entirely—to the Fundamental beneath. In this sense the problem of how to express in words and letters what is purportedly not founded on words and letters arises in every koan and is part of the very nature of koan practice (see Hori 2000 for a fuller discussion).

Hachi Nanto (Eight Difficult-To-Pass) Koan

Hakuin selected eight particularly dreadful koan that he said would give the Zen practitioner chest pains and stomachaches. He urged his monks to risk their lives in order to pass these locked barriers and attain Zen awakening (Akizuki 1987, 89). These *Hachi nanto* koan, as they are known, are considered a major test for Zen monks, though there seems to be some disagreement about what these koan are supposed to teach and what their importance is in the overall koan curriculum. Miura states that one who has completed the *Nanto* koan understands “*jiji mege hokkai*, the Dharma world where each thing interpenetrates and harmonizes perfectly with every other thing without any hindrance whatsoever, the realm of complete effortlessness” (ZD, 61). This description makes it seem as if the point of the *Nanto* koan is to attain the fourth Hua-yen *dharma-dhatu*. Akizuki, in contrast, argues that the teachers of antiquity created the *Nanto* koan to show practitioners that after *satori* there was also the realm of discrimination and differentiation (which is the function of *Kikan* koan), and then after that, the work of saving sentient beings (Akizuki 1987, 88). I might add that I myself have heard a roshi remark quite bluntly that the *Nanto* have no significance beyond the fact that Hakuin found them difficult to pass.

Despite this range of opinion about the function of the *Nanto* koan, most Zen teachers accept a more or less standard explanation, according to which the initial stages of the koan curriculum are designed to bring the monk to awakening and then to deepen it, while the more advanced stages are meant to cut the monk's attachment to his own awakening and arouse compassion for others. This latter function is attributed to *Nanto* koan in the version of the curriculum where the fourth and fifth categories are *Nanto* and *Kojo*. I cite Asahina Sogen Roshi's account of the *Nanto* koan:

Once a person feels he has attained some degree of *satori*, he becomes satisfied with the Dharma joy of this new world and thus it is hard for him to make any further advance. In the history of Zen, there are many who at this stage have sat down in self-satisfaction and stopped here. Such people think themselves fine as they are and therefore have no ability to help other people. Indeed on closer reflection, [we see that] they have not even saved themselves. The *Nanto* are a painful stick to the one who undertakes them. They make one know what it means to say, "Atop the mountain, another mountain." ... That precious *satori*, which one got by going here, going there, doing this and doing that—[these *Nanto* koan] take that *satori* and crush it like tree leaves into dust. Zen people call this "the house destroyed and the family scattered." "Holding onto nothing" has been replaced by "absolutely nothing to lose." (Asahina 1941, 61–62)

The *Nanto* koan, then, are meant to throw the Zen practitioner back into crisis, releasing another Great Doubt, one that is directed not against the conventional self, but against the self that got created with *satori*.

The cycle of attaining awakening and then cutting it off is described in numerous Zen verses, such as the following:

Bompū moshi shiraba, sunawachi kore seijin,
Seijin moshi shiraba, sunawachi kore bompū.
An ordinary person knows it and becomes a sage;
A sage understands it and becomes an ordinary person.

Tsuchi o nigitte kin to nasu koto wa nao yasukarubeshi,
Kin o henjite tsuchi to nasu koto wa kaette mata katashi.
To take earth and turn it into gold may be easy,
But to take gold and turn it into earth, that is difficult indeed.

There is uncertainty now about which eight koan are included in Hakuin's list. Miura and Sasaki in *Zen Dust* (1966, 57–61) mention the following five koan:

Nansen's Flower (*Hekigan-roku* Case 40)
A Buffalo Passes the Window (*Mumonkan* Case 38)
Sozan's Memorial Tower (*Katto-shu* Case 140)
Suigan's Eyebrows (*Hekigan-roku* Case 8)
Enkan's Rhinoceros Fan (*Hekigan-roku* Case 91)

Shimano (1988, 78–79) gives as an example:
The Old Woman Burns the Hut (*Katto-shu* Case 162).

Asahina Sogen (1941, 62–63) gives as additional examples:
Goso Hoen's "Hakuun Said 'Not Yet'" (*Katto-shu* Case 269)
Shuzan's Main Cable (*Katto-shu* Case 280).

Akizuki (1987, 90–91) adds:
Nansen Has Died (*Katto-shu* Case 282)
Kenpo's Three Illnesses (*Katto-shu* Case 17).

Together these give us ten koan for Hakuin's list of Eight Difficult-to-Pass koan.

Goi (Five Ranks) Koan

The fifth category, *Goi jujukin*, contains two subcategories, koan of the Five Ranks and koan dealing with the Ten Grave Precepts. The term "Five Ranks" is an abbreviation of "Tozan's Five Ranks." Tozan Ryokai (Tung-shan Liang-chieh, 807–869) was the teacher of Sozan Honjaku (Ts'ao-shan Pen-chi, 840–901). The two were cofounders of the Soto

School of Zen, the name “Soto” representing a combination of the first characters of each of their names. For the Japanese Rinzai school, however, Tozan’s Five Ranks are presented in a work authored by Hakuin called *Tojo goi hensho kuketsu*, “The Five Ranks of the Crooked and the Straight: The Oral Teachings of the [Monk] who Lived on Mount To.” This work is included in the handbook called *Zudokko (The Poison-Painted Drum)*, which is one of the standard possessions of practicing monks.

The *Goi* koan do not introduce the monk to anything new. Rather, they require the monk to systematize all the koan that he has passed, using the classification system of Tozan’s Five Ranks. The ranks are:

<i>Shochuhen</i>	The Crooked within the Straight
<i>Henchusho</i>	The Straight within the Crooked
<i>Shochurai</i>	The Coming from within the Straight
<i>Kenchushi</i>	The Arrival at Mutual Integration
<i>Kenchuto</i>	Unity Attained.

In Asahina’s explanation (1941, 64), *sho* “is emptiness, is truth, is black, is darkness, is principle, is *yin*,” while *hen* “is form, is vulgar, is white, is brightness, is fact, is *yang*.” Miura and Sasaki have translated *sho’i* and *hen’i* as “Real” and “Apparent,” but I prefer to render them as “Straight” and “Crooked” in order to avoid the implication that “Real” is more real than “Apparent.” The practicing monk has met the pair *sho’i* and *hen’i* in koan practice long before he reaches the Five Ranks. In fact, the distinction between the Fundamental and its particular instantiations, as seen in the First Barrier koan and its particular *sassho* checking questions, is basically the same distinction as that between *sho’i* and *hen’i*. Koan almost always divide into two or more parts that invariably see the koan from the two sides of *sho’i* and *hen’i*. Some commentators claim that the philosophical background of Mahayana Buddhist thought stands behind Zen, and indeed this is one of those places in which that background emerges into clear relief in that the distinction between *sho’i* and *hen’i* can easily be taken as the Zen transformation of the Two Truths.

Although the Five Ranks is associated with Tozan Ryokai, the idea of five ranks or positions must have grown out of the Chinese theory of Five Elements or Five Forces. The article on Tozan’s Five Ranks in the

Mochizuki bukkyo daijiten dictionary of Buddhist terms describes the connections that various commentators have found between the Five Ranks and everything from yin-yang thought to hexagrams of the *I Ching* and Chou Tun-i's diagram of the Supreme Ultimate (Mochizuki 1958, 3864–9). Few useful commentaries on the Five Ranks exist in English. The best starting point is still Chapter Seven of Miura and Sasaki's *Zen Dust*, which contains a slightly abbreviated translation of Hakuin's account of the Five Ranks, *Tojo goi hensho kuketsu*. One can also consult Luk 1961, Powell 1986, Chang 1969, Lai 1983, and Tokiwa 1991.

Of particular interest for many readers will be the relationship between the Five Ranks and the *I Ching*. Since the Five Ranks are constructed from two elements, one positive and one negative (Straight and Crooked, Lord and Vassal, Real and Apparent), it is easy to pair them with hexagrams in the *I Ching*, which themselves are composed of combinations of *yin* and *yang* lines. In fact, Hakuin's own account of the Five Ranks, *Tojo goi hensho kuketsu*, begins with a diagram of Hexagram 30, Fire upon Fire, but for some reason this diagram has been omitted from the English translation in Miura and Sasaki's *Zen Dust*. Some of the final koan connected with the Rinzai Five Ranks also treat the hexagrams of the *I Ching*. In working on these koan, the monk is expected to prepare a set of six woodblocks with *yin* and *yang* faces to be used in the *sanzen* room when he meets the roshi.

Juju Kinkai (The Ten Grave Precepts)

Juju kinkai, the Ten Grave Precepts, are the precepts against taking life, stealing, misusing sex, lying, intoxication, speaking ill of others, praising oneself, covetousness, anger, and reviling the Three Treasures. The Ten Grave Precepts bring Hakuin's koan system to completion, since the final end of Rinzai koan practice is not benefit for oneself but benefit for others. Asahina notes that in these koan the practicing monk must embody the precepts as *Hosshin*, realize their dynamic activity as *Kikan*, express them in words as *Gonsen*, penetrate them completely as *Nanto*, thoroughly understand their theoretic rationale in the *Goi*, and then practice them faithfully in daily life as *Juju kinkai*. At the same time, he regrets that these koan come at the end of a long system of training, since

most monks who begin koan practice leave their training in mid-course without having come to the Ten Grave Precepts (Asahina 1941, 70).

In English there are only a few comments on the Ten Grave Precepts koan, none of which reflect the way they are taught in Japanese Rinzai training. In their chapter on the Ten Grave Precepts, Miura and Sasaki merely list the precepts and cite a passage from monastery *Admonitions* (ZD, 73–76). Shimano observes that the point of these koan is to get past the habit, especially marked in the West, of always seeing things as either good or bad, and to move to the “ultimate standpoint” beyond the dualistic view of killing or not killing. He places strong emphasis on nonduality, on “no killer and no one to be killed,” on “realization of oneness” (Shimano 1988, 80–81). Aitken takes the opposite tack, emphasizing the standpoint of the conventional. His lectures on the Ten Grave Precepts rarely use the language of oneness, replacing it with examples of drunken men in hotel rooms, woman chasers in the sangha, and a cranky mother with a demanding daughter (Aitken 1984, 3–104). In Rinzai koan training, both the *sho’i* and *hen’i* (straight and crooked, nondual and dual) aspects of the Ten Grave Precepts are given equal emphasis, and the precepts as a whole are presented not merely as rules to guard human behavior against the tendency to wrong-doing, but also as positive expressions of the bodhisattva’s practice of “the *samadhi* of freedom in the other,” *tajiyu zammai*.

Kojo (Directed Upwards)

In the curriculum that seems to be most widely adopted today, the fourth and fifth categories are *Nanto* (Difficult to Pass) and *Goi jujukin* (Five Ranks and the Ten Grave Precepts). As we remarked earlier, in what Akizuki claims was the older original koan system, the fifth category was *Kojo* (Directed Upwards). Today this category no longer seems to have a well-defined function. In the older curriculum where the fourth and fifth categories were *Nanto* and *Kojo*, the *Nanto* koan would simply have been eight koan considered extremely difficult to pass, and the *Kojo* koan would have had the special function of ridding the monk of any “stink of Zen” and of attachment to his awakening.

The variety of different translations of the term *Kojo* merits comment. I have translated it literally as “Directed Upwards” in view of the

fact that Shoichi Kokushi adds the further category *Koge*, “Directed Downwards.” Shimano translates *Kojo* as “Crowning,” but I find this misleading in that it implies a kind of finality or completion. Akizuki (1987, 91), writing in Japanese, uses the English term “nonattachment” to explain the function of *Kojo*. Mohr (1999, 317–18) translates it as “Going beyond,” which I find far better in that it implies an open-endedness. *Kojo* is a reminder that not even the attainment of *satori* or *kensho* is final, that there is “Atop the mountain, another mountain.” After the task of reaching *satori* comes that of ridding oneself of *satori* and working for the salvation of others. This is *Kojo*. The saying “When you reach the top of the mountain, you must keep going” seems to imply just this sort of further ascent. But the second mountain one has to climb after arriving at the *samadhi* summit of freedom for oneself (*jijiyu zammai*) begins with a descent downhill, back into the valley as it were, to cultivate for others the *samadhi* of freedom (*tajiyu zammai*). The final stage of practice is to leave the mountain to work for the benefit of all sentient beings, and of this stage of practice there is no end.

Matsugo no rokan, the Last Barrier; Saigo no ikketsu, the Final Confirmation

Not much has been written about these last koan, and needless to say, Zen priests and monks are reluctant to speak of them in public. The Last Barrier koan is given to the monk as he leaves the monastery. Akizuki gives as examples “Sum up all of the Record of Rinzai in one phrase!” and “Hakuin’s ‘Not yet’” (1987, 96). But since the monk is leaving the monastery, he is not meant to pass this koan immediately, but rather to carry it constantly with him and to try again and again to see through it right to the bottom. Finally, some roshi assign a last koan called *Saigo no ikketsu*. I have not been able to discover much about this koan but suspect that it is an alternate name for *Matsugo no rokan*.

Shotai Choyo, LONG NURTURING OF THE SACRED FETUS

The formal koan training completed in the monastery does nothing more than create a “sacred fetus.” A monk who has completed the koan training is not yet ready to step out into the world and take on a public role. He must first complete another stage called *Shotai choyo* (sometimes pronounced *Seitai choyo*), the “long nurturing of the sacred fetus.” This period of withdrawal after the completion of the koan curriculum is also known as *Gogo no shugyo* or “post-*satori* training.” (There is some ambiguity in the use of the term, since the same term may also refer to all training after initial *satori*.) As explained in the lectures that roshi give to their monks, a monk who has completed the koan curriculum leaves the monastery for several years, hiding his identity as a monk, in order to engage in some activity completely unrelated to monastery practice. The great example is Daito Kokushi, the “beggar under the bridge.” Zen lore has it that after his *satori*, he lived for twenty years with the beggars under the Gojo Bridge in Kyoto, giving his *satori* time to ripen before he went on to found the Daitoku-ji temple. Daito Kokushi’s disciple, Kanzan Egen, it is said, withdrew to the mountains of Ibuka in present-day Gifu Prefecture, where for eight years he tended cattle and tilled the fields (Miura and Sasaki 1966, 325). In his *Mujintoron* (*Discourse on the Inexhaustible Lamp*), Torei Enji cites the long maturation periods of numerous past masters: Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch, went south for fifteen years; Nansen Fugan resided for thirty years in a hermitage (where monks eventually gathered and argued about a cat that Nansen had killed); Daibai Hojo ate pine needles and wore clothes made from lotus stalks for thirty years; Yogi Hoe spent twenty years in a dilapidated hut where snowflakes bejewelled the floor in the winter (Torei 1989, 451–74). During this period of ripening the monk is said to learn to apply the awakening he attained in formal monastery training to the concrete situations of daily life, and he does this by deliberately extinguishing all self-consciousness of *satori*.

The phrase “long nurturing of the sacred fetus” resonates with profound nuances. The term “sacred fetus” itself looks as if it originated in Taoist practices of longevity and immortality, since the point of Taoist inner alchemy practice is to combine breath, vital force, and

spirit to create a sacred fetus which is then nurtured through further discipline into immortality. The practice of withdrawing from society also has clear associations with the broader image of the recluse or hermit in Chinese culture. This individual withdrew from public life not because he was incapable of functioning in the world, but because he found the world too disordered for a person of principle to exercise his talents properly. He chose seclusion in order to nourish himself, all the better to reemerge and assume public responsibility at a later time, when a proper leader had appeared and the time was ripe (Vervoorn 1990). A legendary example of this is Chu-ko Liang in the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. This master scholar and strategist of war lived in deep seclusion until Liu Pei, the last scion of the Han Empire, visited him three times and was able to persuade him to come forth and join him in the attempt to reestablish his empire (Brewitt-Taylor 1959, 385–407). Reclusion thus symbolizes the fact that, while capable of handling power and rank, the hermit is not attached to these things but puts his self-cultivation and the welfare of people first. Similarly, in *Shotai choyo*, the Zen practitioner who has finished his formal training engages in an informal training in which he thoroughly detaches himself from his accomplishments and willingly assumes anonymity for service to others.

PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

I conclude this short account of the so-called koan system with a number of supplementary remarks. In day-to-day monastic life, the several categories of koan make little difference to the practicing monk. Monks themselves do not know to which category the koan they are presently working on belongs. The categories of koan are useful to senior monks, who need to reflect on the koan system as a whole, but monks in the thick of practice seldom speak of *hosshin*, *kikan*, *nanto*, or the like.

Moreover, the formal categories of the koan system give the impression that every koan can be assigned to a single category, but in fact *hosshin*, *kikan*, and *gosen* point to aspects found in all the koan that every practicing monk easily recognizes even without the formal description. In every koan the monk must grasp the koan itself (*hosshin*), experience its dynamic working (*kikan*), and use language to express

what is “not founded on words and letters” (*gonsen*). In the same way, the *jakugo* assignments are actually a *gonsen* exercise, even though the word may never be used.

Japanese Rinzai Zen is often criticized, even by its own monks, for allowing the koan practice to calcify into a rigid formalism. It is not uncommon to hear Rinzai practice faulted for being little more than a ritual recapitulation of koan responses that the mere passage of time has baptized as orthodoxy. There is some truth to this, but in defense of the practice, I would add that in my own case I never felt anything but admiration for the teachers of the past who had devised a system of training that time and again forced me to plunge deep into *zazen* to find an answer from a place in myself I did not know existed. The fixed response to a koan resembles the fixed patterns of movements in the martial arts called *kata*. One practices them again and again until they become movements of power, executed precisely and without deliberation. As for whether there are “correct answers” to the koan, Zen teachers insist that before one engages in the practice a koan may appear to have a fixed meaning, but that after one has completed the practice, that koan has no meaning at all, fixed or otherwise.

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