
The Role and the Present Significance of *Koans*

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What Is a *Koan*?

In the *Rinzai* school of Japanese Zen Buddhism, the term “koan (公案)” refers to a question or succinct paradoxical statement posed to a student to help him or her seek the truth. A Zen master gives koans to his or her disciples, and they are expected to dedicate themselves to concentrating on these ideas and finding answers. The koans are drawn from collections of ancient masters and have long been considered a fundamental part of training in a *Rinzai* Buddhist monastery. Generally speaking, Soto Zen Buddhism, the other major school of Japanese Zen Buddhism, emphasizes koan practice less so than *Rinzai Zen* and emphasizes more on *zazen* (zen mediation) in training.

The History of *Koans*

Zen Buddhism originated in India and was thereafter transmitted to China by Bodhidharma (菩提達磨; Bodai Daruma in Japanese; Also see Dumoulin 2005a for the detailed history of Chinese Zen Buddhism). The practice of Zen already existed, however, before the arrival of Bodhidharma. In the early sixth century, Bodhidharma traveled to China and practiced seated meditation facing a wall for nine years. He later settled in the Shaolin Monastery. A hundred years passed, and a Chinese Zen master, Hongren (601–674; 弘忍; Gunin in Japanese), the fifth Patriarch of Chinese Zen Buddhism, appeared in the late seventh century.

The collective monasticism of Buddhists practicing asceticism began under Hongren. Then, Zen Buddhism became divided into a northern sect, *Hokushu-Zen*, and a southern sect, *Nanshu-Zen*, when the sixth Patriarch, Huineng (慧能; Eno in Japanese; 638–713), appeared.

Zen began to change dramatically when Zen master Mazu Doyi (709–788; 馬祖道一; Baso Doitsu in Japanese) emerged in the eighth century. He emphasized the importance of daily work and life at the monastery (Poceski 2015).

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Another Zen master, Baizhang Huaihai (百丈懷海; Hyakujo Ekai in Japanese; 720–814), emerged soon thereafter. He wrote the basic rules of monastic discipline, known as the Pure Rules of Baizhang (百丈清規; *Hyakujo Shingi* in Japanese). Baizhang is also known for the famous quote, “A man who does not work for a day shall not eat for a day.” Most certainly, this period gave rise to increasing numbers of Zen masters. Baizhang was followed by many unique disciples during the Tang dynasty, including Huangbo Xiyun (–850; 黃檗希運; Obaku Kiun in Japanese) of the *Hung cho* sect and Linjin Yixuan (–866; 臨濟義玄, Rinzai Gigen in Japanese) of *Linji* sect.

As the ideology and culture of Zen Buddhism began to spread widely, its influence spread to poets and artists like Li Bai and Bai Juyi. The conversations of masters, such as Zhaozhou (778–897; 趙州; Joshu in Japanese), Linji, and Dongshan (807–869; 洞山; Tozan in Japanese) of the *Dongshan* sect, have been transmitted as *Zengoroku*—the analects of Zen—from generation to generation.

During the Northern Song dynasty in the eleventh century, the *Linji* sect, the *Yunmen* sect, and the *Fayan* sect gathered strength. Buddhist laymen interested in the memoirs of Zen masters also played an important role in expanding Zen Buddhism. Chinese scholar-bureaucrats in particular acted as receptors and communicators to disseminate Zen culture.

During the Song Dynasty in the twelfth century, Zen Buddhism continued to divide into additional sects, called the Five Houses and Seven Schools of Zen (五家七宗), culminating in the creation of 5 sects and 7 schools derived from the original Zen Buddhism, including the Yang-chi (楊岐; Yogi in Japanese) and *Huang-lung* (黃龍; Oryo in Japanese) schools. By that time, the lifestyle of Zen monks at monasteries had been fully established. It varied depending on the religious school or denomination; however, certain aspects remained stable. For example, a Zen master typically divided his students into two groups, such as east and west, in order to assign tasks and organize a schedule for annual functions and Buddhist ceremonies. As

the system developed, the structure for admission to a Zen monastery and training also began to take shape. In the case of a typical Buddhist temple, a person seeking admission to the priesthood was first assigned miscellaneous duties. Later, he would proceed to ordainment by receiving the commandments of Buddhism in order to officially become a monk.

At a Zen Buddhist temple, once a student received the Buddhist commandments, he became an *Unsui* (雲水), a student who undertakes training by visiting notable Zen masters. Such a pilgrimage is called *Kou Un Ryu Sui* (行雲流水), which metaphorically means “floating with the tide.” The word *Unsui* is derived from this Zen phrase.

Kou Un Ryu Sui led Zen students to record every encounter and conversation with their masters. This process involves meeting with the master and eventually receiving *Inka* (印可), the authoritative acknowledgement as one of his spiritual heirs. Some students transcribed their conversations and refined the *koans* they received from their Zen masters in order to compile them as *Zengoroku* (禪語錄; analects about Zen). As the number of such encounters increased, the records of the conversations also expanded. That enabled students to refer to the past use of the *koans*. Zen masters also began polishing collections of *koans* rather than devising new ones. Thereafter, *Koan-shu* (公案集), a booklet of *koans*, became available.

As time passed, the number of Chinese scholar bureaucrats visiting Zen masters increased. However, the Jingkang Incident in 1126 destroyed the Northern *Song* dynasty, pushing, Chinese traditional culture forcefully into the South. From the end of the twelfth century to the thirteenth century, a movement arose in the southern *Song* dynasty to re-establish aspects of Chinese thought.

Zen Buddhism was no exception as reformation of Chinese culture and traditions began in the South. It, too, saw a return to the classics and basics as it rebuilt denominations in the South. Interacting with the Chinese scholar-bureaucrats who traveled to that part of the country, Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲; Daie Soko in Japanese;

1089–1163) settled in *Zhejiang* province. He attracted a thousand students and helped revive the *Linji* School.

Dahui Zonggao cherished the *Zengoroku* and decided to complete *Koan-zen*, a method to learn the secrets of Zen by providing questions to seekers. This led to the emergence of Zen masters, such as Gotta Funei (兀庵普寧; 1197–1276), Muqi Fachang (牧溪法常; 1210–1269), and Mugaku Sogen (無學祖元; 1226–1286), who eventually became well known among Zen Buddhist temples in Japan. As the Mongolian army marched southward under Khubilai Khan, the Zen Buddhists in China began making their way to Japan, as if propelled by the crest of a great wave.

Slightly earlier, Wumen Huikai (無門慧開; 1183–1260) compiled a text-based collection of *koans* called *Mumonkan* (無門關; The Gateless Gate). The Zen Buddhism introduced to Japan during the *Kamakura* (or *Muromachi*) era is often described as that of 46 biographies. Disciples inherited the Dharma and established 24 schools of Zen Buddhism. To this date, there are two major styles of Zen practice in Japan, *Kanna-zen* (看話禪) and *Mokushou-Zen* (默照禪). *Kanna-zen* is a *koan*-based method of Zen Buddhism that requires a text. By contrast, *Mokushou-zen* utilizes silence without text.

Hakuin Ekaku (白隱慧鶴; 1685–1768) is said to be the founder of what is now the *Rinzai* school of Zen Buddhism in Japan (see Dumoulin 2005b). During the *Edo* era, he referred to a *koan* as a catalyst to lead his disciples to attain enlightenment. Hakuin also produced his own *koans*. *Sekishu Onjo* (隻手音声), the sound of one hand clapping, is perhaps his most famous (see Yampolsky 1971, pp. 163–164).

Gasan Jido (峨山慈棹; 1727–1979) succeeded Hakuin, and he was followed by Inzan Ien (隱山惟琰; 1751–1811) and Takuju Kosen (卓洲胡僊; 1760–1833). The current *Rinzai* Schools of Zen in Japan descended from one or the other of these Zen masters. That explains why Hakuin is regarded as the founder of the *Rinzai* school.

If Hakuin's teaching can be put in one phrase, it would be what he wrote in *Zazen Wasan* (坐禪

和讚; Sutra of *Zazen*): “This self is immediately the Buddha nature.” The thought relates to Zen master Rinzai's teaching involving realization of the Buddha nature of one's self. In that sense, it also is in line with the Buddha's teachings, such as *Shobou Genzo* (正法眼藏) and *Nehan Myoshin* (涅槃妙心). *Shobou Genzo* means treasured Buddhism, which is understood through the eyes of the wisdom that see into the truth. *Nehan Myoshin* reveals a calm state of mind by which one emancipates himself from desire and delusion. This is the kind of mind that has attained Buddhist enlightenment. The purpose of the *Rinzai* school of Zen Buddhism is to reach ultimate realization through practicing meditation, *koans*, and engaging in physical activities, such as moving meditation.

The Classic *Koans*

Rinzairoku (The Record of *Linji*; see Sasaki 2009), *Hekiganroku* (Blue Cliff Record; see Cleary 2002), and *Mumonkan* (The Gateless Gate or Gateless Barrier; see Shibayama 2000) are said to be the three classic *koan collections*. The Gateless Gate consists of 48 *koans*, each accompanied by a commentary and verse. The introduction states, “Those who boldly challenge the 48 *koans* might just as well be able to conquest a demon with three faces and eight arms.”

The first *koan* in The Gateless Gate is the most famous, “Joshu's *Mu*” (see Shibayama 2000, pp. 19–31). In this *koan*, a student asks his Zen master, Joshu, “Does a dog have *Bussho* (the Buddha nature)?” Joshu replies, “*Mu*” (Nothing). That's it. Despite the brevity, this is thought to be one of the most difficult of all *koans*. Wumen Huikai named it *Mumonkan* (the gateless gate) of Zen Buddhism, meaning that this first *koan* acts as the entryway to Zen Buddhism. What, then, does “Joshu's *Mu*” imply?

The basic understanding of this *koan* involves a student applying the most significant and intrinsic aspect or quality of Buddhism, *Bussho* (仏性), to a dog by asking his Zen master whether the two are associated. However, this kind of

understanding is completely wrong. Rather, it should be interpreted as the student asking: If a dog has *Bussho*, might a person like me one day come to his senses and achieve enlightenment? However, Joshu simply says, “Nothing.”

This reply makes the *koan* even more intense, and a spiral of speculation begins. Does it mean a dog has no *Bussho*? Or does the meaning of *Mu* imply that there is nothing between Joshu and the student? Why does Joshu say, “Nothing?” Or is the question too ridiculous to warrant an answer? Which is it? Even if any of these thoughts leads to an answer, what does it have to do with a dog? The more one thinks, the less one understands.

Nevertheless, that pondering process is an integral part of Zen. It is important to have no idea of how to cope with the problem and therefore set logic aside. Zen challenges us to eradicate discrimination, and this generalizes to important aspects of our lives in obvious ways. If one makes a distinction against others based upon his or her ego, how can one be unified with the others?

In Joshu’s *Mu*, *Wumen* first leads us to stumble, focusing on the one word, “*Mu*” (nothing), thinking of it all day long, and persevering with it. *Wumen* also says *Mu* should be associated with neither the presence nor the absence of nothingness. Rather, it can be thought of as a hot iron ball. It is as if one cannot swallow it or remove it completely even if she or he tries to do so. Eventually, the hot iron ball would eradicate logic and dualism as it ultimately explodes and disappears into the whole.

This is rather a dangerous *koan*; it helps renounce the distinction that separates subjectivity and objectivity. In that space, one breaks out of his shell, surrenders logic and experience, and even breaks free of confining circumstances eventually, as Joshu’s *Mu* opens the first gate. This is not nihilism. It is not telling one to be selfless or to empty the mind. Rather, it points to something that unites what is within and without, causing everything to explode. In order to apprehend it, one must roar and repeat “*Mu*” over and over for a year or two.

Next, I will discuss the 14th *koan*, “Nansen Zanmyo” (see Shibayama 2000, pp. 107–113),

which at first glance may appear to be extremely cruel. The *koan* begins with a fight over a cat between eastern and western groups of Buddhist students. Nansen picks up the cat and says, “If you can speak up, this cat will be saved. If you can’t, I will kill it.” Neither group has any idea what to say. Nansen then completes his threat.

The *koan* may sound brutal, but it begs the important question of why the students are fighting over the cat; what purpose did that quarrel have? Surely, it is not something so mundane as to who will keep the cat, or where. Whatever the reason, the problem remains. One must first realize that for Nansen, the cat is not the primary issue. If so, you may think that Nansen need not actually kill the cat. However, this idea arises from taking his words literally. Moreover, Nansen does not have to kill the cat if the students had not been sparring over the cat. Perhaps the point is that the students were so influenced by the thought that the cat might be killed that they did not make time to accomplish what was presumably more important. The cat, therefore, was sacrificed in the end.

Stories like this may leave the impression that Zen is rather cruel and unreasonable. Yes, Zen is unreasonable and is intentionally so. Returning to the example of Joshu *Mu*, even if the students are arguing whether a cat has *Bussho*, Joshu would only reply “*Mu*,” “nothing.”

Be it a cat, dog, or bamboo stick, this *koan* implies that Zen challenges one to depart from the matter, to come back to it all at once, and to quickly become selfless at that moment. In Zen Buddhism, this is called *Koji Kyumei* (己事究明), meaning the process of examining the self. In this moment, one must let go of unnecessary concerns; otherwise, they stand in the way and block him in surpassing the superficial. He will continue to keep company with worthless things, ideas, or desires. “Stop it,” Nansen threatens, or else “the cat will be killed.”

What Nansen means by this is that he would eliminate the problematic self that the students hold on to as they sit on the cushion doing *zazen*. If not, they may never succeed in the process of examining themselves. Nansen uses a cat as a metaphor to refer to the self that students hold

onto and as an approach to purposefully confront them. Wumen thinks that something meaningful may arise once practicing this *koan* has erased everything.

The story is not over, though. Joshu comes back at night. As Nansen relates what happened, Joshu puts his sandals on his head and departs. Nansen mumbles, “If Joshu had been there, the cat would still be alive.”

This is how The Gateless Gate is presented. *Unsui* will not necessarily encounter *koans* in the sequence listed in the *Zengoroku*. Each Zen master decides which *koan* to offer, based upon the student’s level. This is called *Taiki-seppo*, the most suitable expression of the teaching for the particular student.

Koans for Zen Training at the Monastery

Working with *koans* is the most important part of Zen training at a *Rinzai* monastery. The training would not be complete without *it*. In order to gain permission to enter a monastery, one must endure three days with his or her forehead lowered to the floor of the entrance. The applicant then proceeds to spend another four days meditating in a dark room with no sunlight at all. This room is called *Tangaryo* (旦過寮). The purpose of this process is to test the applicant’s determination. Once his or her intent has been confirmed, the applicant may be permitted to enter the Zendo as a trainee monk, *Unsui*, and meet the Zen master. That same day, he may be allowed to take a lesson in the master’s room.

Once the new student enters that room, she or he receives a *koan*. A bell signals to enter. The bell is called *Kansho* (喚鐘) and is usually rung in the hallway. When the bell is sounded, *unsui* run to queue up. One by one, they ring the bell twice before entering the master’s room. The proper manners for entering begin with *Gassho Reihai* (合掌礼拝), meaning joining hands in prayer and bowing. The *tatami* mat near the entrance door shines black, a somewhat intimidating residue of the finger marks and sweat of all those who have sought entry.

The rule at a monastery is that students must engage in *koan* practice twice a day, morning and evening. The term for this practice is *Chosan-boshin* (朝參暮請). The master allows only one student at a time to enter. The *unsui* (student) offers his or her answer to the *koan* and asks for the master’s judgment. The room is sometimes described as a battlefield with no one else around. Whether the *unsui* is a novice or a veteran, he or she receives the same type of extreme challenge. Those who persevere through this training are often described as metal that has been thrown into a fireplace, had its impurities removed to become 100% pure iron, and then forged by hammering. In this way, the pure human nature of the student is said to be revealed.

Koans are the means for coming in contact with the doctrines of Zen Buddhism as well as understanding that the Buddha represents a purified human being. They are a ladder to climb in order to reach the rooftop of enlightenment. Once one has reached the destination, he or she must come down. The training at the monastery seeks supreme enlightenment and helps achieve self-realization; this realization, however, is not for the purpose of self-satisfaction. The truth attained by risking one’s own life at the monastery will only become meaningful once it is used to bring salvation to mankind.

Koans transcend common sense. For example, one *koan* asks, “Listen to the sound of one hand clapping.” As a matter of physics, clapping with one hand to create a sound is impossible. However, an old saying posits that it is possible to listen to the sound of one hand clapping, which is described as the voice of a student whose heart has been purified. When such an enlightened voice is heard, she or he has realized and accomplished the *koan* of “one hand clapping.” But then, another *koan* will follow.

The Role and Purpose of Koans

A *koan* is often described as a finger pointing at the moon. If the full moon could represent enlightenment, the finger pointing at the full

moon is said to be the *koan*. Looking at the finger itself does not help see the moon. What counts is the direction of the finger. This approach may be similar to treatment goals in behavioral health care in that often the knowledge of a diagnosis or a particular treatment is not the mechanism of change for people who are suffering. Alternatively, it is the process by which the treatment unfolds, the journey that unfolds in the direction of the full moon, that results in meaningful change.

There are pros and cons for both *Kanna-zen*, the type of meditation that utilizes *koans*, and *Mokusho-zen*, another type that does not. A *koan* merely turns into knowledge instead of experience if a student is swayed too much by the *koan* itself. Describing the taste of tea, for example, requires expressions such as bitter, mild, and hot. However, no expression can help another person understand the taste unless the person tries it herself or himself. The same goes for Zen.

Even if one has extensive knowledge of tea, discussing it is rather dangerous without having actually tried it. A painter in Japan once set out to draw a picture of a tiger. However, he had never seen one. Relying solely on what he had heard from the experiences of others, he ended up producing a picture of a cat. If *koans* become nothing more than concrete and impersonal knowledge, they may lead to results that are equally misguided. On the other hand, the *koan*-less practice of *Mokusho-zen* also has its downsides. If one becomes too caught up in the meditation itself, he or she may become isolated from the world in which enlightenment exists. A person who tells about the taste of the tea without trying it is actually causing harm due to lack of actual experience and firsthand knowledge.

The 30th *koan* in *The Gateless Gate* is called *Sokushin Sokubutsu*, meaning “The self is immediately the Buddha nature” (see Shibayama 2000, pp. 214–222). Nanyue Huairang asked his student, Basho, “What is the purpose of your daily meditation?” Basho answered, “I meditate in order to become Buddha.” Nanyue Huairang picked up a tile from the ground, placed it on a rock and began polishing it. Basho asked him,

“Master, what are you doing?” Nanyue Huairang replied, “I am trying to make it into a mirror.” Basho replies him, “That is impossible. Polishing a tile will not help to make it turn into a mirror.” Nanyue Huairang says, “Having known that, why are you trying to become Buddha through meditation? Meditation will not help you become Buddha.”

Basho asked, “Then what can I do?” Nanyue Huairang countered with another question, “When a cart does not move, is it right to hit the cart or the cow?” Basho could not come up with an answer, so Nanyue Huairang continued, “Your approach to daily meditation is basically to learn about Buddha conceptually. But if Buddha could be conceptually learned, Buddha would have no truth. You are not meant to become Buddha. You are Buddha yourself, and the self is immediately the Buddha nature. Do not think that mediation and Buddha are two separate things. Meditation means to forget about Buddha and to forget about your own self. You must realize that you have to renounce such duality.”

Simply meditating will not enable one to attain realization. Meditation and *koans* are just methods to help bring about realization. If a student becomes too caught up in doing meditation or solving *koans*, he may be unable to move toward enlightenment itself. Similarly, meditating for the purpose of becoming aware of the Buddha nature will not enable one to attain the realization as long as he or she is caught up with the dualism, such as treating meditation and Buddha nature as two separate events.

In *Mokusho-zen*, checking whether the student has achieved realization is difficult, even if he believes he has. *Koan-zen* on the other hand, provides a means for a Zen master to evaluate the progress of his or her student frequently as they work through the *koans* together. This is the major difference between the two approaches.

A *koan* acts as a catalyst to attain realization, helping the master to confirm the student’s progress. A catalyst is a catalyst, nothing more. It should not be the main purpose; it is not the goal. Therefore, since ancient times, students have

been prohibited from sharing information about the *koan* they are working on or their answers for it. This rule reduces the likelihood of *koans* being reduced to nothing more than knowledge.

The Present Significance of *Koans*

The prevalence of western ideas and philosophy in the modern world has not diminished the value of Zen and the role of *koans* in Zen practice. *Koans* help a person to transcend logic and commonsense mental habits (e.g., judgment of right and wrong, worldview, and preconception) and unfold the Buddha nature as it is within the person. This transcendence is the key, and practice without it falls short no matter how authentic and genuine it seems.

In recent years, various meditation and mindfulness practices have attracted attention in western countries, becoming part of the mainstream culture. While some of these practices parallel Zen, many of them do not. Nevertheless, many people often misunderstand these practices with Zen. This is not intended to criticize these practices, as the path that Zen takes is not superior to the path of others. However, what Zen seeks is not what we usually want from a mediation and mindfulness practice. It is simply a choice, and *koans* serve as a guiding light on the path, navigating one to the heart of Zen.

Many mediation and mindfulness practices in the West are often bound to utilitarianism, a commonsense mental habit. Even though some of them advocate the transcendence of utilitarianism, they seem to do so while remaining in this utilitarian mindset. In these practices, mindfulness is the goal to be achieved, or a means to a particular end. In other words, people practice with the expectation of gaining something although it is not stated explicitly. For example, in the field of behavioral health, some pursue mindfulness as the ultimate state of psychological well-being, and others practice it for saving their marriage or alleviating suffering. Note that utilitarian-like desire never runs out, and there is nothing wrong with having such a desire; we

cannot help having utilitarian-like desires which reflect one's clinging to a narrowly defined self (e.g., self as a distinct and essential entity separated from the surrounding) and desire to protect it. However, once we begin to cling to and act on it excessively, efforts to fulfill it become quite detrimental.

Transcending common sense and preconception, Zen does not seek any gain in this utilitarian-like sense. Nor does Zen service as an antidote for logic and common sense. Zen is "doing" without knowing whether it leads to anything. This position is rooted in the original wisdom of Buddhism. Zen is to do whatever one does in a given moment seriously and wholeheartedly, and this doing itself is the gain.

It is difficult for us, modern people, to grasp this "doing Zen" as we are caught up with common sense and preconception of what is valuable. For some of us, "doing" is almost too trivial to devote our time and energy into it. For others, this "doing" of Zen seems very discouraging in the absence of a mystical element. And yet others believe that there are hidden wisdoms behind this "doing" and wish to find them (e.g., "Once I am enlightened, I can find the true meaning of *doing*"). These reactions stem from our shared worldview (i.e., common sense) that there is something absolute and unchanged. For example, many of us are monotheists who believe in the existence of one God. According to this view, God is an absolute who transcends the human reality, and people seek salvation from her. Similarly, many of us assume that there are aspects of ourselves that are absolute and unchanged. For example, many of us believe that there exists a "soul" and "true self" within us that is distinct and perpetual, while things around us are constantly changing. Holding this worldview, we naturally differentiate the self from others and view it as something each of us owns (e.g., "this is my body", "this is my life"). As the sense of ownership becomes excessive, we become satiated with it and are driven to protect it. As such, for many of us, practicing mindfulness and meditation for a utilitarian-like purpose is a result.

By contrast, through transcending logic and common sense, Buddhism does not divide the world. It does not posit the absolute existence or absolute rightness of God, self, or even Buddha. Buddha was simply a person who engaged in reflection and attained enlightenment. Anyone with a strong will may be able to do the same. What Buddhists believe is neither a miracle nor salvation from the absolute. Rather, Buddhists believe that Buddha achieved enlightenment, and enlightenment is the path that they choose to take. No one can prove that the Buddha actually was enlightened. For Buddhists, it does have to be proved. Buddhists simply believe that those who reach enlightenment will discover the heart of his realization. The mathematical expression for realization would be an X. X is intangible, and Buddhists believe in intangibility. The Buddha nature does not demand any particular form of existence or any substance to be added to or removed from living.

The same goes for enlightenment. Enlightenment is often viewed as the absolute truth in Zen and meditation as a means to achieve this sense of realization. However, according to Zen, meditation offers no guarantee for it. It is like polishing the tile that cannot turn into a mirror no matter how well it is buffed. Realization is not something one aims to achieve; it is more likely a natural consequence of one's devotion.

Relevant to seeing Zen as intangibility, another major difference I find is that the recent mindfulness movement in the West is perhaps too logical, linear, and reductionistic. The world overflows with absurdity and contradiction, and it is far more complicated than one can imagine. Consider love as an example. Scientists and scholars have studied love for centuries, and yet we cannot grasp it simply by logic. Unfortunately, logic falls short at the most critical moment. Zen is rather unreasonable and illogical, intentionally. Thus, it is necessary to transcend the mental habit of logical reasoning so that one can be versatile, taking the most natural and original actions without being caught up with

preconception. This is often called *Hataraki* in Rinzai tradition.

A flexible mind is more versatile and works better at any time and in any situation. This is Zen. Modern society celebrates logic and scientific theory, but we slow down and closely see the reality of our life, we find it not that linear. For this reason, the Zen approach has much to offer. Confronting problems with logical thinking may not lead us to the answers that truly reflect the reality of our life. Once again, *Koans* help a person to become more versatile, grasping the nature of a problem and leading him or her to enlightenment.

I came across an example of this versatility just the other day in the temple where I serve as a priest. Zen priests often receive requests for calligraphy. One day, a master called his student and told him, "The writing brush is worn out because I have used it quite a bit." The student asked, "Should I go get a new one?" The Zen master then said, "Don't be silly. Untie the writing brush, pick up the long strands, and make a new brush with them." The dialogue between the master and his student captures Zen quite nicely. The commonsense solution in this circumstance would be to purchase a new brush as the student asked, because it is easier and more time-efficient to do so. It was likely that the student had never experienced making a writing brush.

Zen transcends logic and commonsense preconceptions. Logical reasoning has advanced societies over time, resolving barriers to progress. Zen, however, says that the dominance of logical thinking and attachment to preconception often obscures the moment of living fully here-and-now. Through *Koans* and *Koan*-like practice, Zen tests deliberately whether a person is only capable of solving a problem using logic, or whether he or she is flexible enough to willingly take an action under unconventional circumstances. In the example above, the student was told to get involved in a seemingly absurd task. However, he complied with the longer and more complex task and created a writing brush

himself in the end. I will not forget the accomplishment and vitality he expressed. Through this task, the student had gotten in touch with the reality he otherwise missed and expanded a new possibility.

Conclusion

At the dawn of Western Zen, Suzuki (1994, 1996) highlighted the importance of transcending logical thinking and preconceptions pervasive in our cultures (e.g., dualism, essentialism, and reductionism). This transcendent quality is at the heart of Zen, and *koans* have played a crucial role for elucidating it. The application of koans or koan-like practice is not limited to Zen practice because there are logic and preconceptions no matter where humans go. The field of behavioral health is no exception. I believe that Koans practice may shed the light of transcendence in behavioral health professionals and patients, allowing them move more freely in the flux of human conditioning.

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