

Koan training, personal notes, Tenkei

Here are a few reflections on koan training which are meant to help start the discussion. I see this roundtable mostly as an opportunity for us to share how we each deal with koans ourselves and how we work on them with our students.

Koans form an important part of my life. They help me cut through all kinds of habitual patterns of thinking, feeling, talking, and doing things, and they enable me to view myself and others through the eyes of the enlightened masters. Koans stimulate my sense of wonder, and there is always further to go in manifesting them in daily life. I once heard Maezumi Roshi say, quite emphatically, 'I love koans', and that always stayed with me. But I also heard that he found our koan curriculum too long and would have liked to reduce its size. Although I do enjoy and appreciate all our koans, their sheer number – 750 is no joke – can indeed be bewildering and lead to literary adventures that make us lose our focus.

In my experience, koans are best addressed in the context of other elements of training – such as zazen, ritual practice, study, and social interaction – all underpinned by the indispensable element of samadhi. Samadhi seems to be the central concern of a master such as Dahui Zonggao*. He preferred to use a short series of *huatou* ('word head') koans such as 'Mu', 'Mt. Sumeru', 'Peg of dried shit', and 'Who is dragging this corpse in here for you?' Dahui believed that those compact pointers generated the kind of samadhi that is most effective for accommodating the spiritual breakthrough that leads to compassionate action. But he also promoted scriptural study for the verification of one's understanding. Yunqi Zhuhong's *Chan Whip Anthology*, which is based on Dahui's teaching, even includes a series of excerpts from sutras to illustrate this.

Although Dogen Zenji may not have used koans the way that we do in our lineage, at the heart of his *Fukanzazengi* we find 'taking the backward step, and turning your own light inward' (*E-ko-hen-sho*); and this is a device that many masters before and after him have employed, often using pointers like 'what is it that hears?' (As far as I know, the *Surangama Sutra* provides the most detailed description of the process that this entails.) Moreover, in his *Gakudo Yojinshu*, Dogen Zenji addresses – perhaps surprisingly – the koan Mu, and recommends asking ourselves questions such as 'What are body and mind?', 'What is Zen conduct?', 'What are birth and death?', 'What is the Buddha dharma?', 'What are worldly affairs?', 'And what ultimately are mountains, rivers, and earth, or people, animals, and houses?''***

Despite his obvious difference in teaching style, Hakuin seems to have had a similar focus. For example, he promoted the use of the question, 'Who is hosting our seeing and hearing?' In his *Four Cognitions* he writes: 'No matter what you are doing, whether you are walking, standing still, sitting down, or lying down, whether you are active or silent, whether you are in pleasant circumstances or unpleasant situations, plunge your spirit into this question: what is it that sees everything here and now? What is it that hears?''**** Of course, Hakuin did make use of classical koan collections but – according to this text – those were meant to be used more for further clarification and the gradual cultivation of bodhisattva activity.

In my own meditation, I prefer to spend a generous amount of time developing and maintaining samadhi by questioning what it is that hears, or sees, or talks, etc. It helps me to go beyond dualistic notions and open myself up to our inherent unconditioned awareness. That awareness can then get tested and endlessly refined with the case koans and – ultimately – in our daily life. I recommend my students do the same. The way they respond in the dokusan room as well in the other forms of practice often confirm the wisdom and value of koan training.

**The Letters of Chan Master Dahui Pujue, translated by Broughton and Watanabe*

*** The Chan Whip Anthology, A Companion to Zen Practice, translated by Broughton and Watanabe*

****Beyond Sanity and Madness, by Genpo Merzel, p.241*

*****Kensho: The Heart of Zen, by Thomas Cleary, p.79*