

SPECIAL ISSUE

Kong-an Practice in America

What Is A Koan?

by Zenson Gifford, Sensei

What is a koan? This question itself is a koan, for a koan can't be answered or understood by the intellect. Mumonkan's comment, "You describe it in vain, you picture it but to no avail" is applicable to the koan. People persist, however, to ask, "What is a koan?" Is it a direct expression of our true mind and therefore a means to awaken? Alternatively, is it, as some have said, a dualistic form of practice, or a Zen game? Let us look at some of the essential aspects of the koan and respond to some of the criticisms made of this practice.

A koan is literally a precedent setting public record, or as one Zen master said, "it is the place where truth is." Generally speaking, koans are taken from live exchanges between Zen masters and advanced students, or between advanced practitioners, or from sutras or ancient sayings. Most often koans are of a paradoxical nature and cannot be grasped by the intellect. Therefore a koan can only be understood through direct experience of the true mind out of which it originated.

The sayings and exchanges that became koans were compiled into various texts such as the Mumonkan and the Blue Cliff Record. These were, and still are, used as manuals for Zen training. Koans can basically be divided into two categories: the primary, or "breakthrough" koan, and the "subsequent" koans. Examples of breakthrough koans would be: "Mu", "Who am I?", "What is mind?", and "What is the sound of one hand?" The role of the breakthrough koan is to smack or break through the dualistic, conceptual thought consciousness based on a false sense of

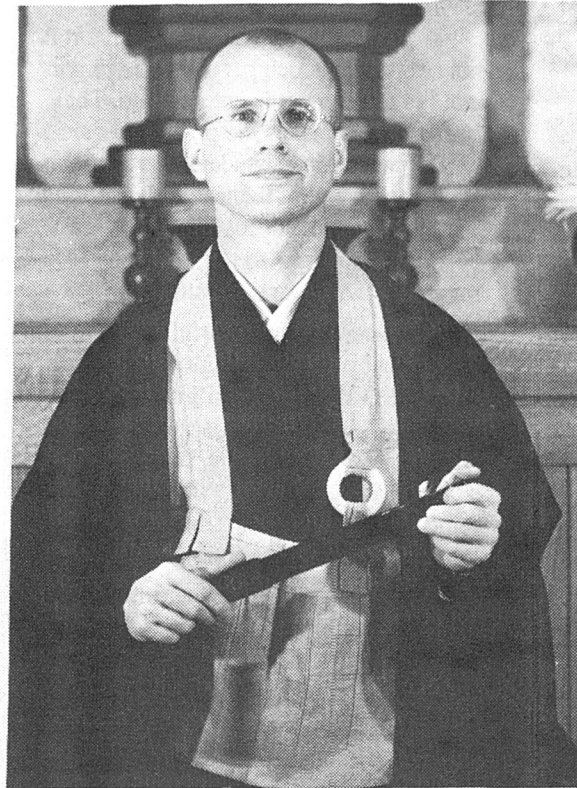
From an early age we all question. As children grow, their questions are often answered, explained, and rationalized until their natural curiosity begins to be submerged. Yet sensitive persons, at one time or another, find themselves again asking those same questions: "Where did I come from? What is the meaning of life? What happens when I die? Why is there so much hatred and violence? Who am I?"

This questioning mind is seen in the life of all spiritually sensitive people and certainly in the lives of great masters in all traditions. However, as we painfully see in our own life and in the lives of loved ones, people often ignore, suppress or run away from these questions. They cover them over with all sorts of games and pleasures, and respond to them out of fear and ignorance. For some, however, these questions and the deep need to know keep coming back. For these persons there is no escape and no rest. The great matter must be resolved. This urgency and questioning is often triggered by a personal life crisis. Sometimes this leads one to a "natural koan" such as "who am I?", or "what is the meaning of existence?" For the Zen practitioner, it may lead to adoption of one of the formal koans. Regardless of how one comes to a koan, once arrived at, it becomes an effective way to focus natural questioning on a spiritual level. All of one's deep questioning and longing for liberation is focused in the koan.

Critics have suggested that using a formal koan involves substituting someone else's question/problem for

tioning and corresponding doubt. It becomes a means to see through the false mind of duality that creates and perpetuates a life of pain, suffering and anxiety. Without the focus of the koan one can often feel torn, scattered, and alone.

There is no need to arouse an artificial sense of doubt, or "doubt mass" when working on a koan. Just look! It's right there. As Dogen Zenji observed, "impermanence and suffering are right before your eyes." And if you look and don't question, doesn't that make you question? Who doesn't feel that wrenching pain in the guts at the sight of the cold and homeless, the abused children, the lives wasted by drugs, and the people killing themselves in senseless wars? Isn't this what



Zenson Gifford, Sensei, an ordained Zen Buddhist priest, began zazen practice under Phillip Kapleau Roshi in 1970 at the age of 21. After completing his formal training in 1979, he continued full-time at the Rochester Zen Center until leaving for an extended pilgrimage in 1981. During his pilgrimage, he lived in Japan for a year and a half, training under Harada Tangen Roshi. In 1981 he was named Dharma Heir to Roshi Kapleau. Zenson Gifford Sensei is currently Abbot of the Northern Zen Sangha, with centers in Toronto, Canada and Warsaw, Poland.

brings people to Zen practice- not as an escape or a means to cope- but in order to be able to bring insight and strength to truly help?

Some scholars contend that in early times many people chose koan practice as a way to grapple with the suffering they experienced. The koan gives one the chance to strongly practice, not only while sitting in zazen but in the midst of life's turmoil. It provides the concrete means to break through the bonds of suffering in times of strife and uncertainty.

With intense effort the breakthrough koan takes one's natural questioning beyond thought and perception, beyond the relative and the absolute, to awaken to that which has always been there but has been obscured by clouds of delusion. This breaking through is like recalling something always known yet somehow forgotten. It's comparable to turning a light on in a dark room. The room has always been the same. It's only that people have been groping in darkness, unable to really live in that room.

If you try to study Buddhism it's not true Buddhism. Likewise, koan practice is not a form of study in the conventional sense of the word. Koan practice is firmly grounded in zazen, for it is only through entering into the One Mind from which the koans arise from that one can truly

fathom them. The koan cannot be understood by the intellect through study and speculation. This is why it is said, "The Buddha has no theories." One must directly experience the truth out of which these koans arise- not just dwell in theories and ideas.

People ask how to use a koan. There is no one way to work on a koan. As an old verse goes, "One way to awakening, a thousand masters can't point it out." Yet because koan work is an intense form of practice, it is best to work with a teacher. It is helpful to have the assistance of one who has worked through the koans himself/herself. A good teacher continually tests a student, always putting the work back on him/her to resolve the great matter. Without a teacher it is very easy to become confused, go astray, or to work oneself into negative mind states or fool oneself that one has attained something. Although a teacher is important, he or she cannot resolve the koan or do the work for the student.

Another criticism of koan practice has been that it is goal oriented and thus revolves on the karmic level of gain and loss. However, one can also become goal oriented in any practice- even making a goal out of sitting with a clear mind and having no goals. In koan practice there is really nothing to get or achieve. The best way to just work on the koan is to let it work on you, because ultimately that is all there is to do.

In getting through a first koan, and with subsequent koan work, there can be the false sense of attaining something. This can lead to spiritual pride and become a real hindrance to practice. Teachers must be constantly showing the students' grasping mind to them. This can be effectively done with the koans themselves, many of which show us that even

though we think we are getting something there is really nothing to get. Teachers must also make subsequent koans relevant to modern times, eventually bringing students to the ongoing life/practice beyond the formal koans.

One important aspect of koan training is that a student must constantly go before his or her teacher in dokusan (interview, a process which in itself is good training). In the breakthrough koan practice students must demonstrate the truth of the koan and can't merely present theories or ideas. They see their false notions in the mirror the teacher holds before them or have the legs of deluded notions cut out from under them. In subsequent koan practice there is a constant refining for there is always more to "not-do", yet not to leave undone.

If anything, the koan practice involves a losing of false notions rather than a gaining experience. The need to continue is always revealed. Harada Diun Roshi described it as, "Walking a road to infinity."

Some say that pure zazen is just sitting with nothing in the mind and that koan practice involves artificially putting something in the mind. What is this thing that people say is put in the mind with

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"A koan is a means to directly focus our natural, questioning mind to penetrate through the barriers of delusion and to awaken to our true nature."

an ego-I self. Thus, one's mind is opened to the beginningless, endless fundamental truth of the universe--in essence, there is an awakening to one's sovereign nature. Subsequent koans are used to perfect one's spiritual understanding, to free one from the lingering bonds of delusion, and to integrate awakening into one's daily life.

What is the special power of this unique form of spiritual practice that has attracted so many people over the centuries? Actually, it's nothing special, secret or magical. Nor does it involve a technique to develop strength of concentration or psychic powers. A koan is a means to directly focus our natural, questioning mind to penetrate through the barriers of delusion and to awaken to our true nature.

one's own question/problem. However, don't all beings share the same fundamental questions of existence? Despite the obvious differences in times and cultures, aren't we all concerned with the same basic problems our ancestors were concerned with? If you don't just look at the branches, aren't people's hopes, fears, joys and sorrows arising from the same root, the same karmic wheel of cause and effect so eloquently described by Shakyamuni at Deer Park? Similarly, doesn't Carl Jung's proclamation, that he didn't have a patient over forty whose real concern wasn't death, have meaning for us all? Don't we, and haven't we always, shared in the same search?

If the great matter of birth and death is the fundamental human question then what do we do? In Zen training the koan can become a means to focus one's ques-

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koan practice? It is only when one is involved in analyzing that one steps back and sees things. If you look at the koan Mu as a thing then it is outside of you. Mu is not a thing or concept because it defies definition. What happens when you become the koan with no separation- in essence when you die to the koan? At that moment there is Mu, mind, all things/no things. At the moment one truly enters the koan, what is put where? At that timeless moment, what is there?

I have tried to address some of the criticisms leveled against Zen koan practice. In considering such criticisms, an analogy comes to mind. I once met a student who was having a great deal of conflict with her university professor, an authority on Chinese culture. The student had grown up in Taiwan and knew a great deal about the Chinese people. On the other hand, the professor, the so-called authority, had never been to China.

No matter how many books one reads, if you've never been to a place you can't really know it. It's only by being there that one gets a real taste through all the sights, sounds, smells, etc. But if one only visits for a short time the experience tends to be colored by comparisons with one's own native land and culture. It is only after a person has lived in a place for some years that one begins to know it.

It is the same with koan practice. It cannot be understood conceptually because it's whole function is to take you beyond the conceptual mind. Likewise, if it's only practiced a short time or in a superficial manner then one will have all sorts of comparisons and criticisms. One is not yet able, as Mumonkan says, "to

emancipate oneself from one's previous learning." But when one really enters into the koans for years of training then it is obviously a different matter.

Zen is considered a very direct and practical way. Because something works, it is used. This is why so many have taken up koan practice over the years. Ever since Joshu first uttered "Mu", this and similar koans have brought countless people in various times and cultures to awakening.

What is essential to realize is that it is not only the practice per se that is important but also how it is entered into. That is, the person makes the practice. Basically it depends on the student's aspiration, and to some extent the teacher's pointing. The koan must be brought alive- it must be allowed to come to life, to be the focus for one's own natural questioning.

The world is a wonderfully vast fabric of spiritual paths and religious traditions. Just as Zen Buddhism isn't the way for everyone, koan practice isn't the only way for Zen practitioners. Indeed, as one student joked, this is probably a good thing or there would be some awfully long dokusan waiting lines.

It has been my somewhat limited experience in seventeen years of working on and with koans that while they can have short-comings if not used properly, their potential is vast. People spend much of their lives living in shadows, sometimes looking at the shape, size and intensity while not looking at the root cause- not seeing what really blocks the light. Working on a koan can open one's eyes to the moon of truth. Although the light is sometimes obscured by clouds of delusion the moon is always shining.

What is a koan? Only you can answer this for yourself.

Old Koans, New Koans, One Koan

by Jan Chozen Bays, Sensei

Yes, I use koans in working with students of Zen. I use koans constantly in my own Zen work. Koans are not old stories in dusty books about monks who lived a thousand years ago, irrelevant to life today. "Old" koans are fresh and relevant, and there are "new" koans everywhere. The key to working with a koan is to plunge into it, become wholly immersed in it. A koan can't be figured out logically. The answer has to be experienced with the whole of body & mind. Breathe the words of the koan as you sit, bring the words of the koan up during the day, at work, in the car. If you are working on an "old koan", and you seem to be standing on the outside, change the words a little if you need to, to make it as urgent as it was to the people involved originally.

Mumonkan Case 16: Ummon said, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?" Perhaps this koan seems foreign because the Mumon was talking to male monks in Chiga about putting on their kesa (kasa) and you are an American housewife. So change it to make it yours. Carry it with you all day long to make it constantly fresh. "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your bathrobe at the sound of the stupid alarm clock?" Or, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you pull the cookies out of the oven when the timer goes off?" Or, "The world is vast and wide. Why then do you feed the same mouths and wash the same dirty dishes over and over and over?"

This koan talks directly to us all, no matter what age, sex or condition, because it is talking about the fundamental matter of who we are, how vast and wide we truly are, and how vast and wide is clearly revealed by the smallest, even unconscious, action.

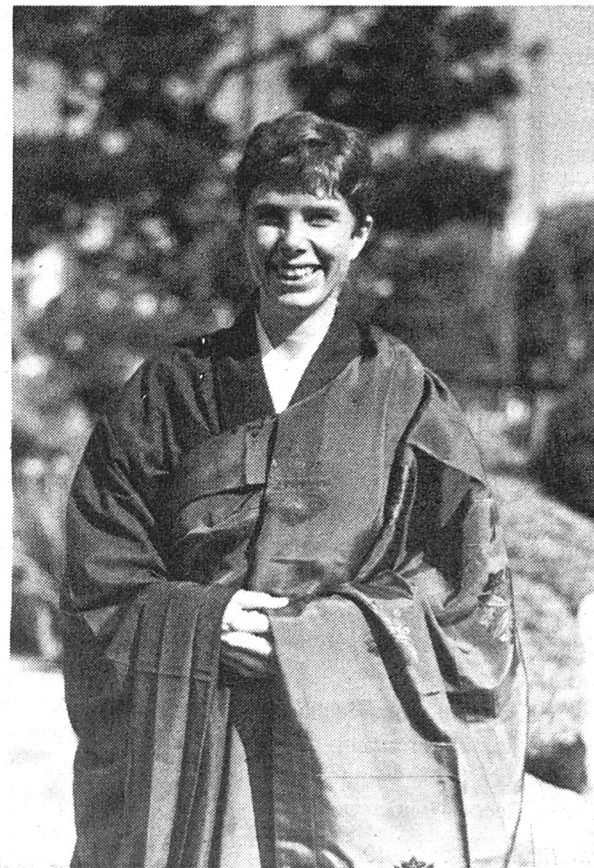
"New" koans are everywhere. The best ones are those which leap out and grab you. One of my students was talking about addiction and addictive behavior the other day. The worst addiction we have is the addiction to the notion of who we think we are and how we think things should be. We are pitiful in our addiction. How do we know when we touch that addiction? When we become angry....or afraid, which is the emotional level just under and usually disguised by, anger.

Anytime we become upset or angry, right there we have been caught by a "new" koan. Someone has just challenged our idea of who we think we are. We have been given a clue as to where we are stuck. Explore that anger/fear and see what notion it leads to.

For example, I used to work with someone I did not like. To be in a meeting with him drove me crazy. As soon as he spoke I began to squirm and eventually to seethe. No matter that a lot of people

agreed with me that this guy was a "jerk", I knew that my reaction was out of proportion, and I had to work on it to see what it said about ME. I sat with it for several days, trying to narrow my distress down to a single characteristic that bothered me. I eventually realized that what really got my goat was that (I felt that) he was lazy. And even worse, he got away with it. No one challenged him or made him do his fair share.

Once I had gotten to the crux of what characteristic irritated me, I had to turn it back on myself. How was I in the laziness



Jan Chozen Bays, Sensei began Zen practice in 1973, doing zazen in a corner of the bedroom while her 2 year old took naps. She started study with Maezumi Roshi in 1974, received jukai in 1975, tokudo in 1979, and became a sanctioned teacher and Dharma heir of Maezumi Roshi in 1983. She moved to Portland, Oregon in 1984 and is teacher in residence at the Zen Community of Oregon. She is a pediatrician and medical director of the child abuse programs at Emanuel Hospital in Portland. Her husband is a therapist for sex offenders at the Oregon State Penitentiary. They have three children, two cats and a big garden.

department? The opposite. Miss Compulsive Worker. Stay up all night to finish a project. Do it myself rather than delegate to someone else. Haven't allowed myself to take a non-working vacation in 15 years. Suddenly I realized that I was actually jealous of this man. He was "lazy" and I never let myself even relax. I'd stumbled onto an idea of who I was and how I had to be...busy, productive, compulsive. As soon as I realized this, my excess emotion at him dissolved, and I was able to leave "him" and go back to work on "me".

Anger is a very good koan, enabling us to step back a little from our self-notion and see where we are attached. Do we have to do anything about what we discover? I don't know. Depends. Often just stepping back to see something is enough. Often just becoming aware of something, like a little piece of our notion of self, means the beginning of the end of that something. Many koans show evidence that Zen teachers used anger skillfully to poke at their students' addictions, unbalance them and help them step "off the top of a hundred foot pole".

Contributors Wanted
For Next Issue

Our October Issue will contain a feature entitled "Right Livelihood: Buddhist practice and the American Workplace." We need contributors to write on how their everyday occupation reconciles with their practice and vice-versa. How does the one contribute to and support the other? What kind of conflicts arise? If you're interested, Write or call Bruce Sturgeon (Editor), 5 Devonshire Place, Asheville, NC 28803, (704)254-8140.

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