

“What Are Zen Koans Exactly?”

When I tried to find out what koans are, it became clear that koan is a Japanese word that has entered the English language without bringing a clear sense of its meaning. It is usually taken to refer to a riddle or odd question. A koan actually has its origin in sayings or records of conversations between people interested in the secret of life.

Koans originated when Chinese culture flowered about thirteen hundred years ago, at the period of the Arthurian legends in England. In China it was the time of willow pattern ceramics, wood block printing, great poets and painters, and, just as in Europe, civil war. It was also a time when people grew seriously interested in the technology of the mind. Certain spiritual teachers became known for a deep and free understanding of life, and people came to learn, hoping to gain the insight that the teacher had. Some left farms, homes, and jobs in the bureaucracy to form monastic communities; some traveled by foot. These students worked, studied, meditated, and asked questions. Others maintained their work and family life and dropped in for periods of study. The teachers weren't trying to achieve something; they just responded to the needs of their students, and it turned out that some of their improvised decisions kept the process interesting.

First of all, the trusted doubt and rewarded questions. This is rare in religion and an example of the Zen way of treating what is usually thought of as a problem — in this case, doubt — as a strength.

The teachers also treated all questions as if they were relevant, no matter what their content. “Why did I lose my love?” would have the same spiritual value as “What happens when I die?” A question is a place of embarkation, and any question was treated as being about enlightenment, whether the student was aware of it or not. There was a truth in whatever forces had brought the student to the point of asking.

Finally, instead of giving kind advice, or step-by-step instructions, the teachers responded to the students as if they were capable of coming to a complete understanding in that moment. A teacher's words often made no rational sense, yet possessed a strangely compelling quality. For example, someone had this interchange with a great teacher:

“I am Quingshui, alone and destitute. Please help me.”

Caoshan said, “Mr. Shui!”

“Yes!”

Caoshan said, “You have already drunk three cups of the finest wine, and yet you say that you haven't even wet your lips.”

Of all the answers the student might have been hoping for, he probably wasn't expecting to be involved in a call and response and to be told that he was rich. Yet, when you think you are desolate, it can be an intriguing and hopeful thing to be told that you are not. After such exchanges, a student who had been stuck and unhappy might be suddenly full of joy. More often, the words would work away in the mind, gradually drawing the student out of a limiting view he or she held.

Some exchanges became famous and were written down. They can be known as koans — the word means “public case” — and there was a mania for collecting them. A well-known teacher forbade his students to write down what he said because he thought people were recording his comments as a substitute for the more necessary and dangerous task of letting them work on the mind. One man adapted by wearing paper clothing to lectures, and the notes he jotted down secretly on his sleeves were passed around. These koans in turn became the core of one of the great koan collections, The Blue Cliff Record.

Soldiers, housewives, farmers, and merchants used koans to find freedom within the often difficult conditions of their times. The method was to immerse yourself in the saying and see how it changed you. This meant letting the koan teach you by interacting with your life and your mind; the

activity wasn't confined to periods of formal meditation, People farmed the land, ran bureaucracies, and raised children, all the while keeping moment-by-moment company with their koan.

In one instance, when Genghis Khan's troops swept through China in the twelfth century, provincial governors went to the Khan and became senior ministers. They lived out in the steppes with him, hoping to persuade him to rule the cities rather than burning them and converting them into horse pastures. It would be hard not to feel unprepared for, and perhaps terrified of, such a task, and one of the ministers asked his teacher for advice. The most helpful thing the teacher could think of was to make a connection of koans and poems that he called *The Book Of Serenity*. When this book arrived in the steppes, the story goes, the ministers sat up together all night in the yurt, reading the koans aloud. They had an impossible situation, so they all saturated themselves in a method that prepared them to take advantage of whatever tiniest possibility might indeed appear.

Today is not so different from the way it was in China. People are called on to survive terror attacks and random mayhem. An even the most domestic life has its quota of desperation and insoluble problems and its requirements for unusual kindness. Today people can find koans as helpful as they did long ago. [pp. 16-19]

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