

BOUNDLESS WAY ZEN

Dharma talks, sermons and teishos

WORKING WITH KOANS

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Today's talk is about working with koans. I'll begin with the text of two koans.

A pilgrim of the way asked Chao-chou: Does a dog have
Buddha nature or not?

Chao-chou said: Mu.

The other koan is

Who is hearing that sound?

Please sit comfortably.

The koan tradition began in China as an organic response to the problems of trying to understand reality. What happened was people would meditate and go about their business during the day and then in the evening sometimes the teacher would give a talk or take questions, or students would question each other or they would read. Questions would arise and answers would be given. Some answers seemed more interesting than others and gradually these became known as public cases just like common law cases would help resolve doubts about, in this case, inner conflicts. One of the very first ones for this to happen with was the koan 'Mu'.

For example, Huang-po (??) the teacher of Lin-chi, who is usually thought of as the founder of the koan tradition. He died in 850 of our era. Here are his instructions on doing the work. I'll just read you a little bit from it. These instructions are quite old--1100 years maybe.

If you have been unable to penetrate through, I guarantee
you that when the last day of your life arrives, you will be
frantic.

Nice to have some things be certain, isn't it?

When you are suddenly facing the end of life, what will you
use to fend off birth and death? Don't wait till you are thirsty
to dig the well. If you neglect to do the work, then when the
end approaches your limbs will not be properly arranged, the
road ahead will be vague and you will whirl about in
confusion bumping into things. How painful.

I urge you all to take advantage of the period when you are
physically strong to seek and find clear insight. This key link
is very easy. It is just that you must mobilize your will to the
utmost to do it.

It's not enough to say over and over again how hard it is.

If you are for real, you will contemplate the public cases (koans).
For example,

A pilgrim asked Chao-chou: Does a dog have buddha nature
or not?

Chao-chou said: Mu.

Contemplate this word Mu twenty-four hours a day. Study it from morning to night. Mobilize your energy and hold onto this word 'Mu' continuously from mind moment to mind moment.

You know what he means about a mind moment. How quick (snaps fingers) one follows the other, doesn't it? Carries us away.

Whether you are walking, standing, sitting, or lying down; whether you are dressing or eating or going to the toilet, after long days and years you will achieve unity. Unexpectedly the mind flower will bloom and you will awaken to the devices of the buddhas and ancestors. After this you will be able to open your big mouth and say things like, 'Bodhidharma's coming from the west' thus creating waves with no wind.

When the world-honored one held up a flower to start the zen tradition, it was a defeat. When you reach this point, not only the Lord of the Dead but even a thousand sages will have no way to deal with you.

So, you can see that very, very early people began working with koans almost as soon as they were made. Huang-po and Chao-chou were pretty close in time, actually. I can't quite remember Chao-chou's dates, but he lived so long, 120 years, he lived through many eras of zen. This must have been just after Chao-chou said this, and Huang-po is using it already as a device to help his students.

When people give accounts of their personal experience, we find something rather like what many of us did before it was easy to find teaching in the west. People would read or hear about something a teacher had said and they would take it up for themselves. One student started out with the koan 'Mu' and after awhile he felt he couldn't get anywhere further with it so he took up the koan of Yun-men.

What is buddha?

Yun-men said: Dried shit stick.

Which is rather like 'Mu' in that it gives you an answer that is not quite expected. Mu literally means, no, and when the student asked Chao-chou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?" in some deep layer of himself he probably expected the answer, yes, because that's what everybody says that the Great Buddha dharma, when you penetrate it, reveals that everything has buddha nature even the stones. But the monk, of course, couldn't see this. So when Yun-men said, "dried shit stick" probably this was not what the monk was expecting. But he wasn't just being crude either. He was confronting the student with something to chew on. Horrible pun.

The great masters always tended to take the question and do something with it so that it was presented back in another form. But it had somehow shifted. Yun-men was famous for doing this and so was Chao-chou. The question is delivered back to you so that you are empowered to work with it yourself.

Here is another teacher. This is a thirteenth century teacher, Hua-yan Zu-kin (???) talking about his own student days.

At first I contemplated the word Mu. When a thought suddenly arose, I would look back on it and the thought would immediately freeze. I became clear all the way through, unmoving and unwavering. A whole day would pass like a snap (snaps finger) of the fingers. I did not hear the sounds of the bell and the drum at all.

When I was nineteen I settled at Ling-yuan (???) Temple. Here I met a secretary who had come from the city of Chu-zo (???)

He said to me: Kin, your meditation work is stagnant and doesn't accomplish anything. To study zen one must arouse the sentiment of doubt. From a small doubt there is small awakening; from a great doubt, great awakening.

So the doubt is all the struggles and struggles that come to us day by day. It's all the confusion and fog; all the suffering and disturbance. This arises, the old teachers felt from the fact that our minds are not yet clear. It could all be called doubt. They advised us to gather all this together and give it to the koan. That's what the koan is. It's the gathering of all the confusion, all the suffering, all the sorrow, everything we cling to is gathered up into the koan and that way everything can be resolved. Everything you keep out of the koan and don't gather into the koan will have to be resolved later by another koan.

After the secretary criticized me I changed my koan and contemplated the saying, 'What is buddha?' 'A dried shit stick.' I went on consistently doubting and doubting up and down and back and forth. When I was assailed by oblivion and scattering,

I think we know what oblivion is. That's that very dull place that we spend so much time in. It can be anything from just tiredness to watching TV, to having somebody talk to you and just drift as they do.

and scattering, when your mind fragments into a thousand pieces. In a short time I could cleanse these conditions away but I could not succeed. Then I moved to Pure Compassion Temple and formed a group with seven of my friends to do sitting meditation. We pledged ourselves not to lie down. There was an advanced student called Tzu (sp ???) who sat every day like an iron rod. When he walked around, he opened his eyes and hung his arms down, but he was still like an iron rod. I wanted to approach him and talk to him, but I could not.

And so he goes on working really hard. Eventually he ran into Tzu again and he managed to ask him after two years, finally he could manage to get a question out. He bumped into him.

Tzu said: What are you doing here?

He said: Walking (working???) on the path.

Tzu said: What do you call the path?

I could not answer and felt confused and depressed. I was about to return to the hall and sit in meditation when I met the head student.

He told me: Open your eyes wide and observe what truth it is.

Suddenly, then I wanted to go back to the meditation hall.

So he reports how quickly the mind changes, doesn't it? From confusion, to longing to understand, to sleepiness, to ignorance. Over years it just changes back and forth like this.

But as soon as I sat on the meditation cushion what was before my eyes emptied out and opened up like the ground falling away. I could not explain what it was like. It was not something that could be described.

Wu-men says, "At a certain stage you are like a dumb person who has had a dream and you know it for yourself alone."

When I walked out I saw Tzu and saw me and instantly recognized my state.

He said: How happy you are. How happy I am for you. He took me by the hand and we walked around the willowy embankment in front of the temple gate. I looked up and down between the sky and the earth and I saw the whole dense array of myriad images. All that my eyes saw and my ears heard. All things that I had previously felt disgusted with and tried to abandon. All this was actually flowing forth from my own wondrous, illuminated true nature.

This was his first opening.

Whenever I went to sleep my realization broke into two. Koans that had an obvious meaning I could understand, but those that were like silver mountains or an iron wall, I did not understand.

So I went on like this, blocked within my breast, for ten more years. One day I was walking in the Buddha's shrine at Tianmu (sp???) Temple when I glanced up and saw an ancient pine tree. As soon as my eyes made contact with it, insight came forth and the enlightenment that I had previously attained and been attached to tumbled down and disappeared. It was like going from a dark room into the bright sunlight. After this I finally saw the meaning of the saying, "Right where you stand you deserve thirty blows."

Another teacher of the same general era, late thirteenth century teacher, said

I was fifteen when I left home. At twenty I became a monk and entered the Pure Compassion Temple. I set myself a firm three year limit to learn zen.

I kind of like this. There's another story of a student who came to his teacher and said,

I really want to learn zen.

The teacher said: You must do this for ten years. You must just sit as if you are an ancient pine tree in the forest. Every moment bring your attention back to your koan.

The student said: Ten years is far too long. I'm in a great hurry. How long will it take if I really work hard?

The teacher said: Oh, then it should be twenty years.

So he decided he had a three year limit to learn zen. I recognize this person even though he lived in the thirteenth century. Sounds familiar.

I studied with a master at Broken Bridge who directed me to come to grips with the koan 'Where do we come from when we are born and where do we go when we die?'

A famous puzzling and mysterious question.

So I studied this for some time and my thinking always divided into these two roots and I could not attain any kind of unity. Later I met the master Zway-ya Zu-kin (???) who told me to contemplate the word 'Mu.' He also directed me to come up to him every day like someone on a journey who wants to check his progress every day. Thus I saw that there was a systematic order in what he said. Later on when I came to his room, he stopped asking me about my practice, but as soon as I came in the door he asked me:

Who is hauling this dead body in here for you?

Then, before he had finished asking his question he hit me and drove me out.

Subsequently, I went back to the zendo. In a dream I

suddenly recalled the koan 'All things return to the one. Where does the one return to?' At this the feeling of doubt suddenly came forth and I no longer kept track of where I was.

On the sixth day after this I went along with a group of students into a room to recite sutras. I raised my head and suddenly saw a portrait of the master Wu-tsu Fa-yen. The portrait had an inscription and the last two lines read:

One hundred years, thirty-six thousand
mornings going back and forth;
All along it was this sky (???)

Suddenly I broke through the saying from the day before about hauling the dead body. My soul flew up and my guts dropped out. After annihilation came rebirth. It was like putting down a load of a hundred pounds. When this happened I was exactly twenty-four years old. I had fulfilled the three year limit that I had set.

After this I was questioned by the master.

He said: Can you act the master in the midst of your busy, everyday life?

I answered that I could.

He asked: Can you act the master in your dreams?

I answered that I could.

Where are you in the dreamless sleep? Where is the master then?

There was nothing I could say in reply to this.

So the master instructed me: From now on I don't want you to study the dharma or investigate the sayings. Just eat when you're hungry and sleep when you're tired and as soon as you awaken from sleep mobilize your spirit and ponder this question. Ultimately, where does the master of this wakefulness of mine put his body and his life?

I swore to stake my whole life on this. I would act oblivious of everything else determined to see clearly into the issue.

Five years passed. One morning I woke in doubt over the issue. The companion in the path, that I was sharing lodgings with, unexpectedly pushed his (wooden) pillow and it fell to the ground making a sound. Suddenly the massive doubt smashed. It was like leaping out of a net. I completely understood all the inexplicable koans, all the ancient and modern stories. From then on the land was secure and the state firmly established. Everything under heaven enjoyed great peace.

So you can see how he struggled to and fro. The main thing he did was he really wanted the way. He had the desire for the way in him so that everything he did, even his errors, served to help him. And you can see that he moved from time to time trying the practice in different ways. But he didn't have any special skill, really. He was kind of clumsy. He didn't develop any special techniques. He just really threw his heart into it and that's what counts most.

The koan 'Ultimately where does the master of this wakefulness put his body and his life?' 'Where does the master of this wakefulness put her body and her life?' That's the same koan as 'Who is the one who is hearing that sound?' 'Who is the master of hearing, of feeling, of walking about? Who is it who was existing before you were born and continues after you die?'

Thursday I went into one of the zendos in the city to see Zenshin Philip Whalen, who has had congestive heart failure. Everybody who knows him wants him to have open heart surgery because they want him around. He

will be seventy at the end of this year. He's not sure whether he needs him around or not still. So he's got this decision to make about whether to just go ahead and die now, or have heart surgery and die in a few more years. For a zen person this is a real decision. One doesn't just automatically make decisions that other people want us to make. Is it the time to go on? We talked this through and one of the things that came up was, what question is important to you to decide this matter? The koan question is, is there some dharma work that still needs to be done by him? Is there some teaching that he still needs to do? Somebody that he can still serve and help in the way. That would make some point for having open heart surgery. I guess by now he will have decided one way or the other.

So you can see that these are real matters. These are matters that you need to, in some way, take your stand in life before you get old and sick. This is what the koan study is about. That we don't just drift along in our lives. We find a place to really stand. We find a place so that when we sit down, we are sitting in the center of the earth. When we can sit there, then we will not be frightened of the things that rise up whether it is death or sorrow. Joy will not carry us off our feet either and make us do stupid things. It will just be joy.

As you know, Wu-men gave very similar advice.

He said: The great way has no gate. There are a thousand different paths. Once you pass through the barrier you walk the universe alone.

When I was studying in Australia, I didn't have a teacher. I had to make everything up. So I took up the koan 'Mu'. All I could do was decide that I would just hold onto it in any circumstances. Kind of like a small terrier clinging to an elephant. I'm not always sure that the elephant even knew that I was holding onto its tail. I was flung about. That was what I could do. I could meditate and hold the koan. Sometimes I would be completely sleeping and sometimes it would seem rather clear and everything would seem exciting and clear. Then the next day it would shatter again. Then another koan I would read or somebody would talk to me and it would come to me and I would take up that. I took up the one, 'What is the sound of a single hand?' 'You know what the sound of two hands is. What is the sound of a single hand?' I remember taking that up. I was going into surgery and I was going under general anesthetic and I had the idea it would be good to take a very strong koan. So I grabbed that koan. I remember going down in the anesthetic going, 'What is the sound of a single hand?' As I came back out of the anesthetic, 'What is the sound of a single hand?' hours later after the surgery. I was still no closer to knowing. Nevertheless, that surgery went very well.

Then later when I came to my teacher, he gave me 'Mu' again and I worked on that. Then I went to another teacher before I had resolved 'Mu' and he gave me another koan. It's another story about Chao-chou.

Chao-chou went to see a hermit and said: Is anybody in?
anybody in?

The hermit just held up a fist.

Chao-chou said: The water here is too shallow for a ship to anchor.

And left.

Then he went to a hermit again and said: Is anybody in?
anybody in?

This hermit lifted up a fist.

A big presentation of the way.

Chao-chou said: Freely you give. Freely you take away.
Freely you kill and freely you bestow life.

With this he made a full bow.

And this other teacher asked me, "What is the difference between those two

hermits?" Chao-chou praised one and he blamed another and they only held up a fist. So I meditated with that and it seemed like I broke through something. Then I went back to my teacher very excited and he said, "What is Mu?" And I still couldn't show him.

We just walk along and the way does go on and on and on. I think that is a very good thing. Another teacher from the fourteenth century called Zong-feng Ming-ben (sp???) talks about doing meditation when you're sick.

It is not necessary for you to be energetic and vigorous. It is not necessary for you to open your eyes wide and stare. All that is necessary is for your mind to be still like wood or stone and your thoughts to be like cold ashes in a fireplace. Take the illusory body composed of all the elements and cast it off beyond the world. If you follow this, you will succeed even if you are sick. You will succeed even if you die. You will succeed if someone is watching you and if no one is watching you. You will succeed whether you are fragrant and fresh or whether you stink and your flesh is rotting. You will succeed if you are cured and regain your health and live to be a hundred and twenty (like Chao-chou did). You will succeed if you die and are dragged off to the torments of hell by your past deeds.

In any circumstances. So you do not need to wonder how you will be when you die. People, when they are sick, particularly if they're dying, often worry a lot about--I have a friend, who was talking recently to me, "What if I get dementia? What if I can't even compose my thoughts at the end? What if I have a stroke and am babbling? Won't that be inconvenient? Terrifying? As this teacher points out, "I know that if you have really settled matters in your heart, in any condition the diamond will be there." We call our group the California Diamond Sangha and the word comes from the "Diamond Sutra", which is truly the "Diamond-cutter's Sutra." Everyone knows that we use diamonds to cut things that cannot be cut by other means. It's such a hard substance. The "Diamond-cutter's Sutra" is the wisdom that is harder than diamonds and cuts diamonds. So you'll have that wisdom and it cuts through all conditions. It cuts through illness. It cuts through suffering. It cuts through grief, and you will find that there is a place beyond joy and sorrow, that is eternally living.

I love that, 'Even if you die and are dragged off to the torments of hell, you will succeed in any condition.' Some of my favorite icons are those tantric ones that show the torments of hell and suffering. We all know that the torments of hell happen here in this life. They happen in Bosnia; they happen in Oakland; they happen in Santa Rosa; they happen in Somalia. Those paintings that show hell, there's a little bodhisattva sitting there with a red face and horns and fangs smiling in meditation quite happy in the flames of hell. You will find that when you truly hold your meditation it becomes like that. Something sweeps up and over you.

At one stage in my meditation I used to notice that when I was teaching, I would get very serene and everything would be fine. I would think all the students were wonderful and everyone was enlightened. Then somebody would do something wrong and this rage and confusion would rise up suddenly and sweep me away. And then it would be gone. I realized that I had to meditate on this rage and confusion that came up within me and that it was like one of those hell realms that would come over me. I was attached to everyone doing well and getting enlightened. I had to let go of that, too.

You will find that even when confusion arises, even when fear or paranoia overtakes you and grief overtakes you, you can go into the midst of that fire and then you will find the thing that cuts diamonds. Just raise up your meditation at that moment. You don't need to struggle. It doesn't need to be something separate from you. Don't hang onto it as something that if only you'll get tense enough, you'll get there. Your body can be completely relaxed and at peace. You are sitting in the wide fields of the dharma, the green fields of the dharma, full of flowers. In that way your koan holds you. Let your koan hold you, you might say. You don't need to struggle for it. That means it's you here and the koan out there, holding onto the tail of an elephant like I was. You're too close to the elephant's feet and the elephant's ass. You must become one with that koan and the koan will hold onto you then. You will ride the elephant very peacefully and serenely.

Whatever comes up comes up for you; whatever comes from your life;

whatever is presented by the circumstances of sesshin; whatever comes up in your job in sesshin; whatever suffering arises for you; whether you feel like you can do your job well or not; whether you feel like you should be working now or not; whether you are longing to be back in the meditation hall; whether you are in the meditation hall and longing for the bell to go so that your legs will stop hurting, all these things arise and fall away. They are the visions of a dream really. All you have to do is become one with that koan and you will find that there is your field of flowers blooming eternally. There is your great peace shining in all directions and in you the compassion to help others. The love of the way will arise so deeply and spontaneously and it will carry you through all circumstances of your life no matter what comes to you.

Please keep it up. Meditate sincerely and enjoy the sweetness of it.

Thank you.