

# Zen Embodiment

EMBODIMENT, MEDITATION, ROSHI, UNCATEGORIZED, ZEN

## Describing Traditional Rinzai Koan Training

*Posted by* COREY ICHIGEN HESS *on* NOVEMBER 11, 2018NOVEMBER 12, 2018



*The Author at left, with Shodo Harada Roshi sitting*

Zen koans require the Zen practitioner to let go of his/her rational mind in order to receive the transformative wisdom and energy of the process.

In Zen, after our zazen meditation has deepened to a certain point, and after we have had a significant breakthrough in our consciousness, we begin to do koans. Koans are little stories, little situations, in which the enlightened masters express and display their states of mind. Through working with these situations, the student's own state of mind is molded to grasp the incomprehensible meaning of the koan. In a private interview with the Roshi (Zen Master), we are given a koan, often these days it is written on a piece of paper. We then go to the proper collection of koans and look up the koan in a book. Usually we don't have any clue what the koan is about. The

subject might be a small meeting between people. It might be a question and an answer. Usually we don't have any idea what the question is, let alone the answer. Here is a fairly straightforward example from the Blue Cliff Record:

## ***Fifth Case: Hsueh Feng's Grain of Rice***

*Hsueh Feng, teaching his community, said, "Pick up the whole great earth in your fingers, and it's as big as a grain of rice. Throw it down before you: if, like a lacquer bucket, you don't understand, I'll beat the drum to call everyone to look."*

After we look this koan up, we then have to find the answer to the koan and bring it to the Roshi later that day. Immediately our clinging, searching mind grasps onto it. Maybe we go back to our smart analytical mind from college. We think we'll outsmart those old men in the stories. We get excited. We take in our answer to sanzen (private interview) and the Roshi just scowls at us and tells us to not use our brains. To be **more real**. And just like all of the other koans, we cannot solve this one by being rational. We cannot solve it by being smart—can't figure it out. The Roshi will not allow us to be mental in our understanding of the answer. Ten thousand times he tapped his head with his stick and said to me, "**Isn't here.**" Even if we give the proper answer, he will not allow it if it comes from a mental idea. The answer has to come from becoming the koan.

We spend all day focusing on the koan. Raking leaves, working on the koan. Making plum pickles, working on the koan. Sometimes they leave one crying for days. Or feeling very strange. Two or three times a day we have to go see the Roshi and try to speak about it, or act out, or give some kind of answer. But the key to finding the answer is that the answer also is aligned with this great life energy, this Source of the universe. So we are simultaneously diving into what is most essential, what is our most basic innate truth of being alive. While at the same time holding a question out there (the koan) to allow it mold us. So, it requires being skillful enough **to hold both things at once**.

The koans, if done right, are tools to allow us to align with our original nature in all situations. Bringing our most basic truth to the world of dualism. If we discover the answer to the particular koan, we also more profoundly understand a universal truth. The koans are a process. We do not really pass koans. We go through the process of a koan.

Later, when all of our intellectual grasping is exhausted and we are totally absorbed in the koan, something cellular changes within us. We think we've been working on the koan, but the koan has really been working on us. A door opens within us, and the koan reveals something unknown, a light enters from some impossible place. We may be walking along, carrying wood for the bath fire, and our experience of reality matures in some profound unexpected way. It is as if we've died into the koan, and been reborn through it.

We go into the Roshi and something has fundamentally changed. He can tell immediately as we enter the room. We've somehow been cultivated by the field of information, the essence, of the koan. We have not solved the koan. The koan has emerged through us. We have become the koan.

Then, after we have gone through the initial process of the koan, the Roshi tells us to bring in a poem, or Go (Capping phrase) to clarify our koan understanding further. We are then given the task of searching through a huge tome of a book to find a poem connected to the koan we felt like we just killed ourselves getting through! We had just let go of our brain, and now we have to function with it!

The hours of the monastery are tight. We get up at 3:30am. Go to bed about 11pm. The day is packed. There is a short time when we are waiting for the interview with the Roshi to look up poems. Or we get up extra early to look for a poem to bring the Roshi. The name of the huge book is *Zen Sand*. The title refers to the act of searching through the grains of sand to find the gold specks hidden amongst the sand. Examples of the capping phrases are:

***14.549 'White Sea grasses in a light breeze, autumn river dusk, By the old banks, a boat returns swathed in mist.'***<sup>v</sup>

***Or:***

***10.83 'My bamboo hat is weighed down with Wu mountains snow, My shoes are scented with flowers from the fields of Chu'u.'***<sup>vi</sup>

You may say, "What the heck do these mean?!" Some are archaic references to something we as Westerners will never understand unless we grew up immersed in Confucian Scholarship. Others are Chinese colloquialisms equivalent to, "You must get your ducks in a row" or "You get what you pay for."

So, we don't know the references. We don't know the colloquialisms. Yet we are feverishly going through this book, at 2am, with no idea what we are looking for. It is like we are attempting to read a book in Farsi. But, we have had an opening with the koan. Something mysterious has seeped its way into our consciousness. Something that needs ripening—needs clarification. We are walking through the dark, but an inner illumination shows the way. And this mysterious light becomes the guide we use to zero in on the truth being expressed through the unique flavor of this koan.

Running back to the wansubeya (big pantry beside the kitchen) at 3pm while others are in sanzen (private interview) to look up a poem. Not knowing the answer. Not knowing the question. Searching through this book madly, needing an answer to take in to see the Roshi. But somehow there is a feeling, a strange clarification that occurs, going through the book, page after page, and then you come across one, and your whole body responds. You break out in sweat. There is something unmistakably resounding, and a new door has opened. Sitting there beside the fermenting pickles, it is as if our internal universe completely reorganizes. The organizing energy of the truth of the koan reformulates our consciousness.

## 14.84 'As I step slowly along to the sounds of running water, my wandering gaze catches the traces of flying birds.'vii

You take that in to the Roshi, and he knows when you enter the room that a big shift has occurred, even if the poem is not the exact one, you have unlocked the essence of it, and everything has changed because of it. And most importantly, **you have more exquisitely developed a way of searching without the intellect, an inner beacon to discover an answer which aligns with a greater field, a greater wisdom.** It is not so much that you have more intensely solved the koan as the capping phrase has transformed you through investigating it, through you engaging with an expansive, more connected reality. Through getting out of the way. The Roshi's laughing response, "Hmm. Not bad. Close enough." And we move on to the next koan.

Over time, our natural way of being is to move from this unknown power, this spontaneous inner guidance, not from our scheming, analytical, logical mind. Because we've walked through the dark so many times, we have found freedom in this. It is as if our internal north star is guiding us, organizing us as we navigate through our daily lives.

Thank you for reading. I hope this illuminates koan practice and perhaps inspires a few people out there to dive into this unique and this mystifying process. I am deeply indebted to Shodo Harada Roshi, the unequivocal greatest koan teacher alive. I had the great karma to spend my formative years training under him.

If this blog had been helpful or interesting to you, please share it. Also, there has been quite a bit of feedback hoping for more writing about koan practice. Please let me know if you would also appreciate more on this topic.

### References:

Cleary, T and Cleary, J.C., (1977) *The Blue Cliff Record* (p. 31) Boston and London: Shambala

Hori, V.S., (2003). *Zen Sand: The book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice* (p. 566) Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press

AdChoices

ADVERTISING