

The master gives the student a koan to think about, resolve, and then report back on to the master. Concentration intensifies as the student first tries to solve the koan intellectually. This initial effort proves impossible, however, for a koan cannot be solved rationally. Indeed, it is a kind of spoof on the human intellect. Concentration and irrationality — these two elements constitute the characteristic psychic situation that engulfs the student wrestling with a koan. As this persistent effort to concentrate intellectually becomes unbearable, anxiety sets in. The entirety of one's consciousness and psychic life is now filled with one thought. The exertion of the search is like wrestling with a deadly enemy or trying to make one's way through a ring of flames. Such assaults on the fortress of human reason inevitably give rise to a distrust of all rational perception. This gnawing doubt [Great Doubt], combined with a futile search for a way out, creates a state of extreme and intense yearning for deliverance. The state may persist for days, weeks or even years; eventually the tension has to break. (Dumoulin, Zen Buddhism, Vol. I, p.253.)

An interesting koan is the koan of Buddha Recitation. Unlike other koans, it works in two ways. First of all, if a cultivator succeeds in his meditation through this koan, he can achieve awakening as with other koans. However, if he does not succeed, and experience shows that many cultivators do not, then the meditation on the Buddha's name helps him to achieve rebirth in the Pure Land. This is so provided he believes (as most practitioners in Asia do) in Amitabha and the expedient Pure Land. Thus, the Buddha Recitation koan provides a safety net, and demonstrates the underlying unity of Zen and Pure Land.

Don't say mindlessness is itself Zen; there is an even more recondite road herein. After you have overturned the donkey-tethering stake, as you hit the south you move the north.

-Huai-shan

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Before the cosmic net is spread, how can its thousands of pearls be seen? When it is suddenly raised by its universal rope, the myriad eyes spontaneously open.

-Ts'ao-t'ang

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When facing the end, generally beautiful scenes appear. According to your mental inclinations, the most impressive are experienced first. If you do not do bad things right now, then there will be no unpleasant scenes when you face death. Even if there are some unpleasant scenes, they too will change into pleasant scenes.

-Pai-chang

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If you really want to deal with birth and death, just avoid drifting off under any circumstances, whether you are dressing or eating, attending the calls of nature, walking, standing, sitting, or lying down.

Be like someone who sees a ferocious tiger, totally engrossed in getting away and escaping with his life.

Or be like someone on a battle front, who only wants to kill the leader of a rebellion" only when he has taken the leader's head can he rest.

Why bother with grasping and rejection, purity and defilement, profane and sacred, right and wrong, and so on?

Otherwise, it's all a waste of effort—when will peace ever be attained?

If you work in this way, it has some relevance to birth and death; otherwise, it's all contrivance, without benefit on the way. A former teacher said, "Don't get stuck in small successes, you must reach the state of the ancients before you attain freedom in life and death." Otherwise it is all something on the shore of birth and death; there's really no end in sight.

-Chien-ju

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Ch'eng-t'ien was asked, "How should I apply my mind twenty-four hours a day?" He replied, "When chickens are cold, they roost in trees; when ducks are cold, they plunge into water." The questioner said, "Then I don't need cultivated realization, and won't pursue Buddhahood or Zen mastery." Ch'eng-t'ien responded, "You've saved half my effort."

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A man named Liu Shiyu asked Yangshan, "May I hear the principle of attaining mind?"

Yangshan said, "If you want to attain mind, then there's no mind that can be attained. It is this unattainable mind that is known as truth."

-Zen's Chinese Heritage

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Do not just memorize sayings, recite words, and discuss Zen and the way based on books. The Zen way is not in books.

Even if you can recite the teachings of the whole canon and all the masters and philosophers, they are just useless words of no avail when you are facing death.

-Chien-ju

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Those of superior faculties and great wisdom get the point right off the bat—guidance doesn't mean gum-beating and lip-flapping. Truly awakened people with clear eyes would just laugh.

The great masters of India and China only met mind to mind—from the first, there was never any "mind" to attain. But if you make a rationale of mindlessness, that is the same as having a certain mentality.

-Ying-an

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When mind and Buddha are both observed, that is seeing; when mind and Buddha are both forgotten, that is stopping. Once concentration and insight are balanced, what mind is not Buddha, what Buddha not mind? Mind and Buddha being thus, then myriad situations, myriad conditions, are all meditation.

-Ts'ao-t'ang

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A person getting enlightened is like the moon reflecting in the water. The moon does not get wet, the water is not disturbed. Though it is a great expanse of light, it reflects in a little bit of water; the whole moon and the whole sky reflect even in the dew on the grass; they reflect even in a single drop of water. Enlightenment not disturbing the person is like the moon not piercing the water. A person not obstructing enlightenment is like the dewdrop not obstructing the heavens.

-Dogen, "Flowers Fall"

*From "263 Buddha: Daily Meditations," edited by Jeff Schmidt. Reprinted by arrangement with Tercher/Putnam, a division of Penguin Putnam Inc.*

When subjective feelings arrange your effort, and activity is obsessed with objects, the matter of your self is neglected; not believing in true universal knowledge in oneself, you'll never attain true awakening.

-Chen-ching

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Do not follow the ideas of others, but learn to listen to the voice within yourself. Your body and mind will become clear and you will realize the unity of all things.

The Buddha meditated for six years, Bodhidharma for nine. The practice of meditation is not a method for the attainment of realization—it is enlightenment itself.

-Zen Master Dogen, "The Practice of Meditation"

*From "Teachings of the Buddha," edited by Jack Kornfield, 1993. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Boston, www.shambhala.com.*

If false thinking suddenly stops for an instant, and you see through your own mind, the vastness of its original perfect light, the purity of its original state, no thing in it at all, this is called awakening. There is nothing to be awakened or cultivated other than this mind.

-Han-shan

*From "The Pocket Zen Reader," edited by Thomas Cleary, 1999. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Boston, www.shambhala.com.*

Keep on pondering, and suddenly the flower of mind will bloom with enlightenment, illuminating the whole universe.

This can be called getting it in the mind, responding to it in action. Thereupon you can turn the earth into gold and churn the rivers into cream. Wouldn't that make life exhilarating?

-Chien-ju

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From this point on you really know. This is called the pinnacle of Zen; the sovereignty of Zen. It is also called knowledge of what is knowable; it produces all the various states of meditation, and anoints the heads of all spiritual princes. In all fields of form, sound, fragrance, flavor, feeling, and phenomena, you realize complete perfect enlightenment. Inside and outside are in complete communion, without any obstruction at all.

-Pai-chang, "The Sphere of the Enlightened"

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A gold Buddha can't get through a furnace, a wood Buddha can't get through a fire, and a clay Buddha can't get through water. The real Buddha sits within: enlightenment, nirvana, suchness, and Buddha-nature are all sticking to the body.

-Chao-chou

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Sitting peacefully on a cushion day and night seeking to attain Buddhahood, rejecting life and death in hopes of realizing enlightenment, is all like a monkey grasping at the moon reflected in the water.

-Shoitsu

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Your true nature is something never lost to you even in moments of delusion, nor is it gained at the moment of enlightenment. It is the Nature of the Suchness. In it is neither delusion nor right understanding. It fills the Void everywhere and is intrinsically of the substance of the One Mind.

-"The Zen Teachings of Huang Po," translated by John Blofeld

*From "Teachings of the Buddha," edited by Jack Kornfield, 1993. Reprinted by arrangement with Shambhala Publications, Boston, www.shambhala.com.*

Your search among books, word upon word, may lead you to the depths of knowledge, but it is not the way to receive the reflection of your true self.

When you have thrown off your ideas as to mind and body, the original truth will fully appear. Zen is simply the expression of truth; therefore longing and striving are not the true attitudes of Zen.

-Dogen, "The Practice of Meditation"

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