

WHAT IS THE SOUND OF ONE HAND CLAPPING?

Caleb Emmons

Writer's comment: Often people are attracted or repelled by Eastern philosophy simply because it is exotic and difficult to grasp. An interesting question is whether this strangeness is inherent in the philosophy or whether it is magnified inordinately by our brain's "American lense." By writing this essay for English 101 (Advanced Composition), I attempted to answer this question on a limited scale. I hoped to explain the concept of koans clearly, yet still let their beautiful weirdness shine through. On the other hand, I encourage you to get a book of koans and read 'em yourself, skipping any commentary; you'll probably get more from that than from my essay.

— Caleb Emmons

Instructor's comment: If "koans crack reality slightly," then Caleb Emmons acted as the koan in my Spring 1999 English 101: Advanced Composition class. The following essay is only one of a series of mind-bending ones that Caleb wrote in that quarter, essays that demonstrated not just a quirky sense of humor but also a razor-sharp intellect and distinctive voice. This particular essay was written in response to an assignment asking students to explain a concept. From the first line of this essay, I knew I was on to something special: how many people would choose to explain an element of Zen using Bart Simpson? And the essay does not disappoint. If you don't have a new appreciation for all those seemingly unanswerable questions that are a part of any spiritual (or even intellectual) discipline, at least you'll know whether, like Bart Simpson, you can clap one hand loudly. For Caleb's essay, I'd suggest using two hands for the applause.

— Lara Gary, English Department

Bart Simpson, America's favorite animated smart-aleck kid, replied to the famous question "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" by slapping the fingers of his right hand against his right palm, creating a loose flapping noise. Ask around and you'll find only a few people with this talent (I am one of the lucky ones able to accomplish this feat). But the question becomes: am I and my fellow smug-single-hand-clappers missing the point? That, my friend, is a darn good question.

The sound of one hand clapping is a koan. Zen Buddhist masters use these paradoxical stories or questions to force their pupils to slough reason in favor of sudden enlightenment. Koans are designed to be nonsensical, shocking, or humorous.

So are koans serious or fun? Another good question, but a strikingly Western one. Why must seriousness and fun be mutually exclusive? Why are we so serious about whether seriousness and fun are mutually exclusive? All koans. We Americans can learn a lot by studying these little buggers. Pure Reason has failed to answer questions of how, or more importantly, *why* we should live. Sadly, many people also see learning (or thinking) as a dry, boring act. Perhaps our teachers need to tell us not merely what they do know, but what they don't know. Zen masters were not afraid to do as much.

Koans sneak up on you. Each koan is a well-wrapped chocolate Easter egg of wisdom that reveals itself in layers. The first is either pure titillation, or a slap in the face. Try to read the following without smirking:

- (1) Wakuan complained when he saw a picture of bearded Bodhidharma, 'Why hasn't that fellow a beard?'¹
- (2) A student asked Joshu, 'If I haven't anything in my mind, what shall I do? Joshu replied, 'Throw it out.' 'But if I haven't anything, how can I throw it out?' continued the student. 'Well,' said Joshu, 'then carry it out.'²
- (3) A monk asked Unmon, 'What is Buddha?' Unmon answered, 'A dung-wiping stick.'³

All have some joke or inconsistency that throw you for a mental loop. The outer layer of the koan draws us into the next, that of nagging questions. What does Wakuan mean by asking why a clearly bearded man doesn't have a beard? If you can't throw out nothing, how can you carry it out? How can Buddha, the Enlightened One, be a vulgar dung-wiping stick? Can we disregard koans as the simple fancy of undisciplined minds? I don't believe so. Although koans may be non-sense, they are not nonsense.

Each question generated by a koan can eventually be answered either through meditation or sudden insight. Koans encourage a fresh approach, a new direction. Indeed, in Koan 1, Wakuan is asking the hearer to precisely give up all his preconceptions of Bodhidharma. (For Americans, granted, the number of preconceptions is small.) The point, however, is perhaps that although Bodhidharma has a beard, the beard does not characterize him. Yet with each answer comes another question: what, then, can we say characterizes any given person? Answer this question, and another lurks behind it. Koans crack reality ever so slightly. If disturbed, if pondered, the crack widens and torrents of questions pour out.

Zen masters specifically designed koans to be so engaging and universal. Indeed the word koan comes from the Japanese "ko" plus "an," literally "public record."⁴ Koans are a way of passing knowledge down as well as initiating new monks. Masters saw koans as having three parts: (1) *the box and lid*, (b) *cutting off the flow of delusions*, and (c) *waves following waves*.⁵ As I analyzed my own reaction to reading a koan, I felt these three stages at work. The *box and lid* means giving an unexpected response. *Cutting off the flow of delusions* is the stage where one takes stock of how the koan has affected one's previous thought on the issue. Finally, *waves following waves* refers to the endless questions and answers flowing out to infinity.

Let me back up for a second though, way back. As soon as you start ticking things off a list, you're in

trouble. I have begun to paint koans into a corner with classic Western analysis, the very illusion that koans seek to destroy:

(4) Nansen said: ‘This mind is not Buddha. Learning is not the Way.’⁶

Zen Buddhists don’t believe Reason to be the ultimate key. Nonetheless, Zen is a very intellectual and meditative approach to Buddhism. Koan 4 merely highlights Buddhist non-attachment. One must not fall into comfortable attachment to any one form or one way.

Although often unfamiliar with the word, Americans are not wholly unversed in koans of their own. Physics, a cornerstone of our world-view, has recently been riddled with, well, riddles. Einstein’s Relativity kills absolute time, distance, or space. Objects change shape and size based on their speed. Compare these quandaries to:

(5) Shuzan held out his short staff and said, ‘If you call this a short staff, you oppose its reality. If you do not call it a short staff, you ignore the fact. Now what do you wish to call this?’⁷

But we don’t even need to stretch to crazy physics to find Western koans. Who hasn’t heard, *Which came first-the chicken or the egg?*, or *Why did the chicken cross the road?* or (for a non-chicken-oriented example) *How many angels can you fit on the head of a pin?* Or maybe Descartes’ *Cogito ergo sum: I think therefore I am*. Western koans, however, are not standardized, and so only a few pass predictably from generation to generation.

Ultimately koans are word arrangements that evoke an entire paradigm-shift, phrases that go head-over-heals beyond communication, turn a triple somersault in the void and land with a resounding redefinition of reality. In the end, maybe we’ll all find ourselves...

Empty-handed, yet holding a hoe;
Walking, yet riding a water buffalo
...and merrily clapping just one hand as we go.

Works Cited

1. Translated in Kubose, Gyomay M. Zen Koans. Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1973. 14.
2. Kubose, 188.
3. Kubose, 75.
4. Kubose, xi.
5. Kadowaki, J.K. Zen and the Bible. Translated by Joan Rieck. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980. 93.
6. Kubose, 72.
7. Kubose, 5.
8. Miura, Isshu and Ruth Fuller Sasaki. The Zen Koan. New York: Harcourt, Brace & world, 1965. 49.