

# THE 5 ZEN KOAN WORKSHOPS

Monday December 2, 2024

## 1. THE "MU" KOAN OF CHAO-CHOU

The "Mu" koan is the best known of the 1,800 Zen koans. Many masters began their spiritual quest with the "Mu" koan.

A monk asks Master Chao-chou:

- Does a dog have Buddha nature?

Master Chao-chou immediately replies:

- Mu!

(Mu, in Japanese, means no).

How is this possible, when the sacred texts of Mahayana Buddhism affirm that all sentient beings (including, therefore, dogs) possess Buddha nature? However, Master Chao-chou, one of the most venerated masters of the ninth century who knew the texts perfectly, affirms the opposite!

In Asia, in traditional training, disciples must find the truth for themselves, which requires, on average, three years of intensive meditation.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the confusion is still as great as ever. Truths and lies are published pell-mell on the Internet and distinguishing the true from the false is often a challenge.

The conceptual and theoretical approach to solving the "Mu" koan is as follows (this indication in no way exempts the disciple from the three years of meditation):

What does a Zen master expect from his students and disciples?

- Let them get out of the imposture they show by indulging in obscurity, illusion, error, and lie.
- To do this, they will have to choose to show wisdom in light, lucidity, discernment and discretion.
- Then they will be able to discover their personal truth and their own life path.
- The first crucial step will be to acquire the ability to distinguish between truth and lie, and to reject inaccurate and misleading beliefs.
- Even if Maître Chao-chou plays the devil's advocate and, on purpose, tries to mislead them.
- They will then be in a new state of mind and consciousness: that of living with their intimate convictions, and learning from their mistakes.
- Errare humanum est, perseverare diabolicum: to err is human, but to persevere in error is diabolical.
- Students and disciples will therefore have to develop sufficient self-confidence to uncover untruths and lies, even those uttered by teachers for educational purposes.
- They will then cease to deceive themselves and to err in imposture, pride, arrogance, impatience.

- The essential thing will not be to be right or wrong, it will be assertiveness embodied and assumed, free will and a sense of responsibility.

In the end, the resolution of the "Mu" koan is therefore the perfection of self-confidence!

## 2. "I DON'T UNDERSTAND" KOAN OF LIN-TSI

Seeing and understanding is the beginning of everything, because execution is paramount, and it is action that produces results.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, half of the practitioners of Zen are descendants of Master Lin-tsi.

The circumstances of his awakening were nevertheless surprising:

- 3 times, he asked his teacher Huang-po the usual question: what is the great idea of Buddhism?
- 3 times, he was beaten by his master.
- 3 times, he didn't understand.

[The conditions of Master Lin-tsi's awakening are unexpected and tasty. You can find the detailed account on Google or in the attached document on the 5 masters.]

Once awakened, Lin-tsi was no longer the desperate monk who didn't understand anything, and afterwards beat his master several times, who then rejoiced.

What, then, is the lesson to be learned from Lin-tsi's awakening?

- When we don't see and understand, we miss every opportunity to turn opportunities into successes.
- We are then passive, inert, incapable of taking initiatives, of deciding, of acting and of undertaking.
- But once we see and understand, spontaneously or with the help of someone who shows us the way or whispers the right answer, we become bold and fearless.
- We dare and take risks, we stop hesitating and procrastinating.

The resolution of the "I don't understand" koan is the perfection of our self-esteem!

### 3. THE GREAT AWAKENING OF HOUEI-NENG

Since the eighth century, all Zen practitioners have been descended from the Sixth Patriarch Houei-neng.

Eight months after Houei-neng's arrival at the Huang-mei Monastery of the Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen, the master asked all his disciples to present a stanza expressing their understanding. And he promises the transmission of the Dharma, the robe and the bowl to the one who has penetrated the inner knowledge and seen its true nature.

No monk has enough self-confidence to compose a stanza. All of them leave this task to their chief Shen-siou, who, in any case, is the legitimate and official successor of the Fifth Patriarch.

Shen-siou suddenly finds himself confronted with his truth and his destiny. He succeeded in composing a quatrain, but not daring to hand it over to Hung-jen, he wrote it on a wall, visible to all:

- The body is the tree of bodhi
- The mind is the support of the shining mirror
- It must be wiped off again and again
- So that the dust of the world does not settle there.

Hung-jen read the poem, praised it, and recommended that the monks learn it by heart in order to put it into practice. Then he summons Shen-siou and asks him for another stanza, proving that he has truly crossed the threshold and deserves to receive the patriarchate.

A few days later, Houei-neng heard a novice recite the stanza of Shen-siou aloud. He immediately grasps the author's state of mind and the difference in understanding of the Dharma that exists between the two. Not knowing how to read or write, he asks a passing visitor to transcribe his stanza on the wall:

- Bodhi never has a tree
- The glossy mirror also has no stand
- Since the beginning not a single thing has existed
- Where does the dust of the world settle?

Houei-neng then returned to work in the kitchens, as if nothing had happened. His poem caused a stir, because it was a scathing response to the stanza of Shen-siou and, moreover, was faithful to the orthodoxy of the Mahayana teaching of emptiness. Hung-jen goes to the wall, erases the new quatrain, and declares that its author has not seen his true nature either.

The days passed, but Shen-siou did not manage to produce a second stanza. Hung-jen went to see Houei-neng in the kitchen and asked him:

- Is rice white?

Houei-neng understands the meaning of the question and answers:

- It is already white, but it still needs to be winnowed.

With his stick, Hung-jen hits the mortar three times and then leaves. That same night, on the third watch, Houei-neng discreetly went to his master's room. Hung-jen then commented on the Diamond Sutra and especially the following passage:

- Subhuti asks the Buddha: How can we fix the mind?

The question is to fix the mind because human beings want truths, no matter if they are false beliefs or illusions.

The Buddha answers:

- The mind must not be fixed on form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or thought. When the mind is not fixed anywhere, the true spirit appears.

The answer annihilates the question:

- The mind must not be fixed on the objects of the 6 senses (the 5 usual senses plus thought).
- If the mind is fixed on an idea, a concept, or a phrase, then it's a disaster.

With this last sentence Houei-neng knows the great awakening and immediately reports it to Hung-jen:

- Who would suspect that our own nature, intrinsically, is pure and calm
- Who would suspect that our own nature, intrinsically, is without birth or destruction
- Who would suspect that our own nature, intrinsically, is complete
- Who would suspect that our own nature, intrinsically, is without agitation
- Who would suspect that our own nature, intrinsically, produces the ten thousand phenomena?

The episode of the 2 poems of Chen-siou and Houei-neng extends through all generations. Houei-neng's heirs are always trying to "do things differently and better!" And it is thanks to the Sixth Patriarch that generations of Zen practitioners live Eureka! every day.

The Eureka! is an inner astonishment that comes unexpectedly, without any particular expectation. It mainly concerns discoveries of scientific phenomena. The two most famous Eureka!, in popular culture, are Archimedes' thrust and Newton's gravity.

The initial stage is the opening, a sine qua non condition for the occurrence of Eureka! deep and subtle interiors.

This opening will become as natural and automatic as breathing. It will be obtained through 3 intensive and rigorous training sessions or 3 practices par excellence:

- Non-attention, which is beyond the perfection of attention
- Non-posture, which is beyond the perfection of posture or behavior
- Non-fixation, which is beyond the perfection of the unshakable stability of a mountain.

The great awakening of the Sixth Patriarch Houei-neng is the perfection of inner peace and insight that is natural, spontaneous and conscious.

## 4. THE GREAT ACTIVITY OF MOU-CHOU

Master Mou-chou is a disciple and successor of Master Huang-po, he is a big brother to Master Lin-tsi.

After receiving the transmission from his master, he erases all traces of him and returns to live at Chai-yuan Temple, near his mother's house. He makes straw sandals, sells some to feed himself and leaves the others at night in front of the doors of poor houses.

Voluntarily and deliberately, he decided once and for all to embody and live humility, modesty and patience, leaving the light and glory to his younger brother Lin-tsi: his wisdom is manifested in light, lucidity, discernment and discretion.

But let's not be fooled by appearances, Mou-chou is an iron fist in a velvet glove:

- For 2 days, twice, he closed his door in the face of the young monk Yun-men who had come to ask for his teaching.
- On the 3rd day, Yun-men is determined to enter at all costs: as soon as the door is ajar, he slips his leg inside.
- Mu-chou grabs him, shouting: "Speak! Speak! »
- Yun-men thinks, but Mou-chou throws him out and, slamming the door, crushes Yun-men's foot. The excruciating pain causes a scream and... enlightenment!
- Yun-men is one of the few examples where the disciple attains enlightenment at the cost of a fracture. However, he will not regret anything: all his life, he will walk with the help of a stick, but will feel that he has not paid enough money!
- Mu-chou thereafter sends Yun-men to the mandarin Chen-shao for three years.
- Then Mu-chou recommends that he become the disciple of Hsueh-feng.
- Yun-men would officially become Hsueh-feng's successor, but his teaching method would remain imbued with Mou-chou's severe demands.
- Mou-chou was thus the brutal and violent trigger of the great awakening of the young Yun-men, but, subsequently, will be a gentle and compassionate master.
- Yun-men is exceptional for the strength of his speech, and his School of Meditation has been dubbed "the School of One-Word Enlightenment."
- After a few generations, it has been put on hold, but it may one day return to the forefront thanks to awakened and talented masters.

Who today could understand Mu-chou intimately and pay homage to his greatness and kindness?

The great activity of Mou-chou is the perfection of the triggering of the great awakening!

## 5. THE STICK OF PA-CHIAO

Master Pa-chiao is famous thanks to a sentence that will be quoted by Wou-men in the *Wou-men-kuan*:

- If you have a stick, then I give you a stick.
- If you don't have a stick, then I'll snatch your stick from you.

Translated into modern language, this pithy statement means:

- If you are leaders, then we recommend and offer continuing education programs to become great leaders.
- If you are level 2 leaders, then we will pull you up so that you can become level 3 leaders, then level 5 leaders, then level 7 leaders, or even level 9 leaders.
- The Fifth Patriarch Hung-jen of Huang-mei Monastery pulled Houei-neng upwards by designating and appointing him as the Sixth Patriarch, and by handing him the bowl and robe received from the Fourth Patriarch Tao-hsin.
- If you are not leaders, then we will not be able to help you reach the next levels of leadership.
- If you do not have sufficient capacity, we will not be able to nominate you or appoint you to positions of responsibility within our ecosystem.

The stick of Pa-chiao is the perfection of authority!