
Reviewed by John Jorgensen

Published on H-Buddhism (May, 2015)

Commissioned by Gregory A. Scott (University of Edinburgh)

Koans (公案) or cases are generally described as a major method of teaching used in Zen (in Chinese, Chan; in Korean, Seon) Buddhism to induce a student to reach enlightenment. By concentrating intensely on these paradoxical conundrums, students are led to an overwhelming doubt produced by a logical impasse, the tension of which is broken by adopting a new outlook that supposedly overcomes dualism and other distorting psychological concepts and conditions. This enlightenment needs to be verified in turn by a certified master for it to be deemed legitimate and not a self-delusion.

Because of the cryptic and seemingly illogical statements and actions depicted in koans, attempts have been made to analyze their functions beyond the basic idea that they are skillful means. Steve Heine’s *Zen Koans* attempts to go beyond the stereotypical idea of the koan and such instrumentalist interpretations by arguing that koans have two main aims: personal religious transformations and transmission, which are both related to the process of realizing transcendence. Transformation is made up of doubt in pursuit of the goal, the experience of a spontaneous breakthrough or enlightenment, and the expression of enlightenment by communicating the path to enlightenment. Transmission includes a mythology to deal with a crisis, monasticism and the enforcement of behavioral regulations, and succession or the choice of a true heir who will continue the transmission. It is this analysis into six elements that constitutes the core and strength of this book. As the aim of this series, Dimensions of Asian Spirituality, is to provide a short work on an Asian school of religious thought or central concept for general readers, this book includes no notes, references, indexes, or Chinese characters. However, the core arguments will also be useful for scholars of Zen.

The core theme of Heine’s book—detailing the functions of koans into six elements—parallels a number of similar attempts by Chinese scholars. Yang Xinying’s *Chanzong Wumenguan zhongyao gongan zhi yanjiu* (Studies of the significant koans of the Wumenguan of the Chan school) (1989) analyzes koans according to rules of thought, language, behavior, and the appropriate use of objects as found in the Wumenguan, a major koan collection of 1,229 that is the chief object of Heine’s analysis. Another attempt at such analysis was made by Huang Lianzhong in his *Chanzong gongan ti-xiang-yong sixiang zhi yanjiu* (Studies of the substance, form, and function
thought of Chan school koan) (2002). This analysis uses the key terms of the Dasheng qixin lun (Mahayana Awakening of Faith): the substance that is the mind of sentient beings, the expression of that characteristic or form, and the functions of the rising and ceasing mind to explain koans. These terms are further subdivided. For example, functions are divided into the recording of incidents of enlightenment, the establishment of a topic via dialogue, suggestions that unify contradiction, guidance to a correct method of realization, direct conversion by getting the student to see their mind-source, and the process of bringing students to a correct understanding of Buddhism. There are probably other such analyses in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese of koans, but unfortunately Heine and other writers using English seem to have largely ignored these analyses.

Some of the above interpretations are in danger of being reduced to what Victor Sōgen Hori describes as “instrumentalist approaches” or interpreting koans as “scriptural exegesis” and not as “experience.” Heine’s transmission category overlaps at times with such instrumentalist approaches. This is not, however, to deny that koans may have some instrumentalist aims, but Hori contends that koans are “realizational,” in which the koan and the mind merge.[1]

Despite my minor misgivings about his instrumental approaches, and his largely ignoring these alternative visions of koans, I think that Heine’s analyses in chapters 3 to 5, those that cover the topics of the six themes that Heine has detected, are valuable and corrective contributions to the literature on koans, and are well demonstrated from the koans selected as examples. Of course, not all of the koans contain all six of these aims, and in an appendix Heine designates the main theme or aim of each case in the Wumenguan.

One case, number 23, “Thinking of neither good nor evil,” contains all six themes. Each paragraph or section of the translation of this koan is labeled with the dominant theme, which is later explained and analyzed. While I largely concur with the analysis, there are places in the translation that are dubious and have implications for the analysis. For example, in this case, the hero, Huineng, the sixth patriarch, who is fleeing south with the robe and bowl symbolic of the patriarchal transmission of Zen from the Buddha in a direct transmission, is addressed by head monk Ming, a former general, as “powerful master” (p. 89). The term xingzhe, translated as “powerful master” by Heine, is properly translated as “postulant.” Despite Heine’s later discussion of xingzhe and its various meanings, here it is definitely “postulant” as can be seen from the hagiography of Huineng from which this koan is extracted and from its use in a Vinaya text. In this point in the hagiography, Huineng was not yet a monk; he had not been tonsured and was working as a menial, hulling grain in the monastery of the fifth patriarch. Thus the head monk, a person of considerable status in the monastic system, is asking a person of the lowest status, not even a formal member of the monkhood, and an illiterate southern barbarian to boot, for instruction. The use of xingzhe was meant to convey surprise that a head monk would ask this uncouth youth for instruction. If Huineng was a “powerful master,” something not attested in Zen dictionaries as a rendering of xingzhe, it would be unremarkable that the head monk would request instruction from Huineng.

Zen philologists, such as Mujaku Dōchū (1653-1745) who is responsible for the standard edition of the Linji lu used in Japan, were very particular about the accuracy of the Zen texts, for a koan could lose its impact if it was not correctly transmitted or translated. “What is the sound of two hands clapping?” instead of Hakuin’s in-your-face koan of “What is the sound of one hand clapping?” would be of no value as a koan. Therefore even a minor deviation from the presumed original text has implications. Heine translates the famous mu (no) koan as, “Does even a dog have the Buddha-nature or not?” The “even” is a misread-
There are other such examples of the confusion of myth or legend with history. There needs to be a clearly stated distinction between what modern historians regard as history and what Zen propagandists deem as "history" for the aims of this book to be achieved. For example, koans are read back into the early history of Zen on the assumption that records of incidents of enlightenment were read in the early period as koan and used as koans. Moreover, there is an error concerning the lineal affiliation of Zhaozhou Congshen, a major figure who appears in the koan tradition. Heine states that Zhaozhou "was in a collateral lineage to Mazu's" (p. 44). Zhaozhou was in a direct lineage from Mazu via Nanquan Puyuan. The statement should probably read "Zhaozhou was in a collateral lineage to Linji's."

The "history" improves as Heine shifts his attention to the Song dynasty, but even here I have qualms about some statements, such as when he writes that Dahui was "ever wary of imperial authorities, who sought to suppress any cultural expression that might be considered subversive" (p. 48). While it was the case that the imperial authorities suppressed any suggestions of subversion, the reason why Dahui and his chief lay supporter, who were seeking students among the bureaucrats, were both punished by exile was not subversive cultural expression but rather their pointed criticism of the appeasement policies of the then chief minister, Qin Gui (1090-1155). This was more about political factional fights than about subversive cultural expression.

I also have concerns about a number of statements made about Zen beyond China. I would argue that the claim that the first evidence of Zen in Japan, unless by Zen it is meant koan practice, which is too narrow a definition, was in the late 1100s is wrong (p. 35), for it ignores evidence of "Zen" being brought to Japan as early as 663 by Dōshō and in the ninth century by Tendai monks, such as Saichō. Again, I do not think that Jinul (1158-1210), who introduced koan practice in Ko-
rea, abandoned Huayan (in Korean, Hwaeom) once he had learned of Dahui’s method of koan practice (p. 22). Rather, Jinul taught koans to only the most advanced students while continuing to use Huayan and Zen materials exclusive of koans to teach less able students. He used Huayan, as interpreted by Li Tongxuan and Zongmi, to provide a doctrinal foundation for Zen practice.

Overall, the “history” here is far too romantic, Zen being described as a “renegade” school during the Tang dynasty (pp. 46, 129). This is buying into Zen rhetoric. In fact, Shenxiu, later labeled the Northern Chan leader, was invited with great fanfare to the imperial court circa 700. Emperors Zhongzong in 706 and Xuanzong in 725 ordered Puji, Shenxiu’s heir, to head Shenxiu’s assembly and to live in a specified monastery. Shenhui, the champion of Huineng and Southern Chan, was employed by the state to raise funds from 745 and was invited to meet Emperor Xuanzong in 753. Huijian (719-92), one of Shenhui’s heirs, was ordered by Emperor Daizong during the period from 766 to 780 to build a lineage hall for the seven patriarchs of Zen, in which Shenhui was probably enshrined as the seventh patriarch. Huijian was also ordered by Emperor Dezong sometime after 785 to “confirm the Chan teachers of the two lineages of North and South.” Dayi (746-818), a disciple of Mazu, was invited to worship at the court chapel and was closely associated with the heir-apparent to the throne, the future Shunzong circa 800 to 805.

[3] Given such evidence and the support for “Zen” monks given by leading scholars and top bureaucrats during that latter half of the Tang dynasty, Zen can hardly be described as a “renegade” school. Although Zen’s claim to an exclusive lineage and a teaching beyond doctrine ranked some other Buddhist schools during the Tang, these schools themselves had their own disputes, such as those between Huayan and Faxiang. This does not make Zen “renegade” Buddhism.

Heine also seeks to “uncover and interpret profound levels of metaphorical significance” (p. 12). This is a useful endeavor and these metaphors are mostly well analyzed. However, in some instances the analysis could be misleading, as in the gloss on the “transmission of the lamp” as “symbolizing the torch being passed from the main master of one generation to his successor in the next” (p. 46). This metaphor is not like the handing over of the Olympic torch from the hands of one runner to the next as in a relay, but rather the ignition of one lamp from another lamp or torch as in the metaphor of lighting one candle from another candle used by Buddhists to illustrate that nothing is transmitted, like a soul, during rebirth.

Again, in regard to the cypress tree in the courtyard that was Zhaozhou’s reply to the question, “What is the meaning of the first patriarch Bodhidharma coming from the West?” (case 37 of the Wumenguan), Heine writes that “it is crucial to see that the cypress tree was emblematic in Chinese lore of longevity and loyalty” (p. 29). Rather, the cypress was usually associated with death, as imperial tombs in particular were surrounded with planted cypress trees. In ancient times, when a person died, the mourners erected a cypress tree or plank of cypress wood in the courtyard of the deceased into which the spirit of the dead entered. This was called “the gate of misfortune.” The cypress was also associated with the west, the direction where the sun set, symbolic of death.[4] So, the cypress, if it was not used simply due to circumstances by Zhaozhou, but metaphorically, would not suggest longevity but rather that Bodhidharma came to China to die, which is why Wumen’s verse says, “Those who accept [Zhaozhou’s] words will die (sang)” or lose (Wumenguan, T48.297c10). Sang also has a sense of funeral, and the link of the cypress and the courtyard makes this a more likely interpretation in my view.

One aspect missing from this analysis of koan practice is the overall Buddhist context, in particular the omission of the issue of faith or confidence.
and of the bodhisattva vows that Zen monastics, like other Buddhist monastics in East Asia, take on admission to the Buddhist Order. Although Heine covers doubt and intensive practice, he does not deal with faith, especially in his discussion of the six stages of narrative of the spiritual process. Faith is the first of the three essentials of koan practice according to many Zen masters, such as Gaofeng Yuanmiao (1238-95) in his Chanyao (The Essentials of Chan) or Seosan Hyujeong (1520-1604). In summary they said, “There are three essentials for Zen investigation [of the koan]: the first is to have a basis of great faith, the second is to have zealous ambition, and the third is to have great doubt” (Xu Zangjing 122.673a17-b1). Faith was a prerequisite for practice, as stated by the Huayan jing (Avatamsaka Sutra): “Faith is the origin of the Way” (T9.433a26). Faith is the core message also of the influential Mahayana Awakening of Faith. This faith is a confidence that Buddhism, and not some other religion, holds the answer to one’s quest, and that Zen in particular is worth the strenuous effort required. Even then one has to choose a style of Zen or which master to entrust one’s spiritual guidance to. Given the allegations of sexual impropriety made against some so-called enlightened Zen masters, as well as the active promotion of war by Japanese masters before the Pacific War, and the advocacy of killing Communists by some South Korean masters, the issue of faith or trust becomes even more crucial. Heine suggests, following Alan Watts, that one refer back to “genuine Zen” and the “classic literature and practice as seen in appropriate historical perspective” (p. 163). However, this depends on getting the historical perspective right and finding a “genuine” Zen teacher, no easy matter.

Heine is right in seeking to eliminate the misuse of koans and Zen more broadly and to advocate ethical behavior and repentance, but some of the other suggested remedies, such as “government oversight of temple budgetary affairs” in Korea (p. 171), have proven to lead to even greater problems, such as the government persecution of Buddhism in October 1980, resulting in the Minjung Buddhist movement that was critical of much of institutional Zen practice and doctrine. While Heine excoriates an observer who problematized the word “enlightenment,” which has “myriad levels,” as an apologist for misconduct by a Zen master (p. 172), Heine himself defends koan practice. For example, Heine claims that Mishima Yukio (1925-70) made a “forgone conclusion” in his novel Kinakakuji (1956) about the negative effects of koans because Mishima was a Shinto nationalist who “rejected Buddhism as a foreign ideology” and so was “inclined to repudiate Buddhism” (pp. 169, 73). As Heine admits, Mishima was following court documents that revealed abuse via koan rhetoric, and I think Heine here has himself made a hasty judgment. Shotaro Iida and Hagihara Takao argue that Mishima later made a “more than amateurish treatment of the formidable system of ‘Buddhist Idealism.’” They claim that “this is the first ever literary expression of ‘Buddhist Idealism’ ... in the world.”[5] Mishima may then have been criticizing Zen from a Yuishiki (nothing-but consciousness) position, just like some of the Critical Buddhists of China, Ouyang Jingwu (1871-1943) and Lü Cheng (1896-1989). They and the later Critical Buddhists in Japan criticized Zen and by implication koan practice for lacking a proper critical and analytical approach, and for maintaining the existence of a permanent essence in the guise of the Buddha-nature. One cannot simply attack the superficial critics of koans who merely maintain that they are illogical nonsense or “gobbledygook” (p. 71), for that is attacking straw men. One needs to engage the informed and analytical critics.

Again, the “observer” or apologist for the misdeeds of certain Zen masters who have broken the Buddhist behavioral codes is correct in problematizing the word “enlightenment” and noting “there are myriad levels of enlightenment” (p. 172). The respected modern scholar and Chan master Shengyen (1930-2009) stated in a lecture in 1978 titled “Kung-an” (i.e., koan) that there are “various
levels of enlightenment.”[6] Song dynasty Zen texts mention multiple incidents of enlightenment in a monk’s career, and Jinul had three “enlightenments,” the second on reading the Platform Sutra and the last on meditating on Zhaozhou’s “No” koan as introduced in a text by Dahui. Furthermore, sometimes an “enlightened” master, a bodhisattva, may exhibit signs of what may appear to be inappropriate but unintentional behavior. A bodhisattva may have wet dreams, but these are involuntary and are the result of residual karmic habitation.[7] This is why, in many cases, Zen masters continued to train long after their initial enlightenment and acceptance by a teacher as their successor, something advocated by Zongmi (780-840) in his slogan of “sudden enlightenment and then gradual cultivation,” and possibly why the reputedly long-lived Zhaozhou (778?-897) only taught in the last forty years of his life, thirty years after he was supposedly enlightened (p. 29).

An enlightened individual, one who has taken the bodhisattva vows and acted on them, is said to have embodied the non-karmic producing precepts, those that continually adhere in the body but do not appear in language and actions. In other words, a fully trained Zen master ideally does not violate the precepts.

The problems of selecting a master are compounded by the apparently antinomian conduct of a number of famous Zen monks, some with high reputations. In Korea, examples include the “reviver” of Zen, Gyeonghee Seong’u (1849-1912), who in a later stage of his life ate meat, drank alcohol, and sported with women. His pupil, Han’am Chungwon (1876-1951), in his account of conduct for Gyeonghee, warned readers to learn from Gyeonghee’s Dharma teachings and not from his conduct because in Buddhism one relies on the Dharma and not on the person. He reasoned that unless one is enlightened, one can only trust, which can lead one into error. Another example of the mad monk is Jungkwang, who boasted of having sex with many women, even with chickens. And yet he had been the abbot of an important Zen monastery.[8] Even though “only a Zen master can determine who is being authentic” (p. 31), I think a would-be student should study Buddhism first and observe the master’s conduct before committing to following a master.

Moreover, I would eschew any idea that the powers of Zen masters and koans can be described as “mystical,” something Heine does at least twelve times in this book, because this could hinder any attempt to dispassionately examine koans and intended masters as worthy of trust. As this book is part advocacy (see page 6), I feel the need to caution against certain ideas about Zen and the need for would-be practitioners to take to heart Heine’s laudable analysis of the “transmission” aspect of koan practice, which emphasizes the necessity of ethical observance, institutional propriety, and the imperative for the truly enlightened to communicate and lead others to enlightenment. This requirement lies at the core of the bodhisattva precepts, which declare one will not enter nirvana until all sentient beings are liberated. I would also stress that koan practice is not the be-all and end-all practice of Zen, and that a single anecdote, such as that of Dōgen and Gemmyo, that “leave[s] little room for ... repentance” (p. 133) does not make a rule. After all, there is much material, even from the Tang dynasty, on Zen repentance.[9]

In conclusion, this book, while excellent in its analysis of koans overall, has faults that detract from its declared aims and its conclusions. Although there is much to admire in the book, the devil is in the details.

Notes


[4]. See entries for baicheng and baili among others in Morohashi Tetsuji, ed., Dai Kan-Wa jiten and Hanyu dacidian (Shanghai: Shanghai cishu chubanshe, 2012). See also baizi Chan, meaning the Chan school, from the fact that Chan monks burned cypress or juniper as incense. This term appears in the late Tang period.


[6]. Shengyen, Ch’an (Taipei: Dongchu chubanshe, 1979), 108.


[9]. See Bai Jinxian, Tangdai Chanzong chan-hui sixiang yanjiu (Taipei: Wenshizhe chubanshe, 2009).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-buddhism
