

SOUNDING OUT ONE HAND : THE ZEN KOAN AS LITERARY FORM AND SITE OF REALISATION

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'In the ideal detective story,' as Bernard Lonergan reminds us, 'the reader is given all the clues yet fails to spot the criminal.'¹ The *Zen koan*, I would like to suggest, is similar to Lonergan's ideal detective story in that it presents to us that with which we are most familiar yet fail to see and recognise. But while the traditional approach to *koan* study involves working with a master in the context of silent meditation in the stillness of the lotus posture, I believe that it can also be entered into in much the same way as we do a literary work of art. And so I take up that most famous and apparently most trivial of koans, Hakuin's 'Sound of One Hand'.

What, then, is this 'Sound of One Hand'? In *dokusan*, where the Zen practitioner goes alone to be examined in a formal interview by the teacher, it would be unacceptable to respond to this question with a theoretical or historical account of the koan in general and the 'Sound of One Hand' in particular. For what the teacher is looking for in this context is not a display of learning but the student's intimacy with the 'Sound of One Hand'. If the student has that intimacy the teacher's question will receive a response that is as spontaneous as it is fitting. In the student's mind there will be no hindrance.

However, for those of us who come to the study or practice of Zen without benefit of the formative influence of a Buddhist culture, it is helpful to note the distinctive form of this question (if indeed it is a question). For we must come to recognise that it is neither an ordinary request for information nor an invitation to reflect. Still less is it merely a riddle designed to test the student's ingenuity. When the Zen teacher asks a practitioner 'What is the sound of one hand?' he or she is offering the student a koan, that is an opportunity to realise and manifest the student's own True Self.

But can we be more precise about this thing called a 'koan'? As soon as we start to inquire seriously about it we come up against the fact that although Zen Buddhism has been part of the religious scene in the West for most of the twentieth century, a great deal of obscurity still surrounds many of its key terms. And this is particularly true of the word 'koan', even though it has received so much attention in the reception accorded to Zen in

the West. As Eido T. Shimano writes: 'In the West today the meaning of the word koan remains unclear or even mysterious'.²

The mystery deepens in that koan is now an English word for a Zen riddle designed to bring out the inadequacy of logical reasoning. Consequently, many associate koan with formularised nonsense that is said to be used as a teaching and meditational device in Zen. This view only reinforces Zen's reputation for being irrational and nonsensical. And it is in keeping with the evident delight that D. T. Suzuki took in the paradoxical and irrational character of those aspects of Zen on which he chose to concentrate.³

As a corrective to what is now widely recognised as a one sided and even exaggerated account of Zen, we might reflect on Ruth Fuller Sasaki's considered opinion that the koan is never 'a paradoxical statement except to those who view it from the outside'.⁴ For those who have become intimate with it, the koan is 'a simple and clear statement made from the state of consciousness which it has helped to awaken'.⁵ Far from being a rejection of logical reasoning, or even a mere technique for marking out the limitations of that reasoning, the koan is the expression of a mindfulness that is inclusive of the logical even while it operates in a dimension that goes beyond rational thought. For it is not conceptual knowledge that Zen objects to but rather the 'clinging to intellection'.⁶

Still, there remain Zen's supposed antitextualism, scorn of learning, distaste for the scriptures. This no doubt is based on its insistence on 'heart-to-heart transmission' that is 'not dependent on words', as well as on the heroic status accorded to an illiterate sixth Patriarch who tears up sutras.⁷ Nevertheless, as Kenneth Kraft points out, Zen 'takes its own literature seriously',⁸ and Zen master Dogen is on record as teaching that 'an enlightened person always masters the sutras to full advantage'.⁹ We even find the practice of koan inspection referred to as a substitute for sutra study and koan itself is spoken of as 'a highly distinctive element in the literature of Zen Buddhism'.¹⁰ Heinrich Dumoulin insists that it is 'a form unique in religious literature'.¹¹

However, the description of the koan as a literary form might still appear paradoxical. This is especially so if 'every place, every day, every event, every thought, every deed, and every person is a koan', as Shimano insists. 'A Koan', according to this writer, 'is simply the time and place where Truth is manifest'.¹² Of course, such a description leaves open the possibility that some koans, though by no means all, can be equated with literary forms such as poems or short stories that provide the occasion for

truth to make itself manifest. Indeed, there is one type of koan (the *gonsen*) which is specifically concerned with the investigation of words and the practice of verbal expression and so should be eligible for classification as a literary form. Thus Shimano says: 'A *haiku* poem... can be *gonsen* - if it is not merely description'.¹³

What, then, of the 'Sound of One Hand'? Does it constitute a literary form? Linguistically it takes the form of a question, a question which was first posed as a koan by Hakuin Ekaku in eighteenth century Japan. But, as John Stevens tells us, this question was not always given a verbal form by Hakuin. In *dokusan*, for example, Hakuin would hold up one hand to silently challenge a student to hear its sound. Sometimes the koan would be presented to a student as a piece of calligraphy or as a painting which the student was to hang up somewhere and contemplate day and night.¹⁴ For one such visual koan see the famous painting Hakuin did of himself as an elderly Hotei raising his right hand. The painting bears the inscription: 'Young people! Whatever you say, unless you hear the sound of one hand, all your efforts are wasted'. It is signed: 'The 82-year-old daddy in this place'.¹⁵

Historically, the koan enters into literature in the *Hekiganroku* and the *Shoyo Roku*. These collections, created and given written form in Sung period China, gather together accounts of the words and deeds of the great Ch'an masters of T'ang period China. What were originally the spontaneous actions or responses of a master have become in the course of time and literary composition the neatly packaged and formalised statements that are to be found in the collections. These are the famous koans of ancient paradigms (*kosoku-koan*).

Since Hakuin first held up his hand in the 18th century and silently challenged his disciples to hear its sound, his action has joined the ranks of these paradigm cases. But as far as I am aware it has not been mediated to us via a literature of commentary as have the ancient paradigm cases. It thus maintains something of the character of a naked koan, the koan that arises in one's life situation, the *genjo-koan*.¹⁶ When the teacher asks the student in *dokusan* 'What is the sound of one hand?', the student will most likely find that he or she is facing a blank wall, alone with this apparently nonsensical question and without support or direction from experienced and learned commentary.

Perhaps it is not without significance, then, that the most popular of the classical koan collections, at least with Japanese masters, has been the *Mumonkan*. This short work consisting of 48 koans or cases, with brief prose and verse commentaries on each case by the thirteenth century Ch'an

master Mumon, has a straight forward, practical purpose. Its verses make no pretence at poetry and its commentary is as enigmatic as the koans themselves. To a Western student the basic text of the *Mumonkan* must appear as a fairly naked koan in itself even though its koans are presented to us swathed in words and images. Nowadays, of course, no Western student need remain confined to the basic text. The new commentaries on this collection that continue to be written and published give the *Mumonkan* a more literary context. Hence the importance of keeping in mind Mumon's warning about 'those who try to understand through other people's words', which, he says, is like 'scratching a shoe' when 'it is the foot that itches'.¹⁷

With Mumon's caution in mind, let us note that according to Hakuin's own practice and classification, the 'One Hand' was usually assigned to beginners. Technically it is a *hosshin* or Dharma-body koan.¹⁸ It is designed to break the student's habitual tendency to conceptualise 'the ten thousand things' of the phenomenal world. With the breaking of this habit the possibility arises for a realisation of the underlying unity of all things. Hakuin tended to use it instead of the classical koan that is normally given to students in the early phase of practice. This is the 'Mu' of Joshu, which is Case 1 of the *Mumonkan*.

We can find in the classical collections how at least one of the great masters from the T'ang period would have responded to Hakuin's question. Case 3 in the *Mumonkan*, Case 19 in the *Hekiganroku* and Case 84 in the *Shoyo Roku* deal with the teaching of Master Gutei. They all agree that when Gutei was asked a question (any question!) about Zen he would reply by simply raising one finger.

But the move from Hakuin's 'One Hand' to Gutei's 'One Finger', as with the transition from life to literature, is fraught with the danger of mimesis. It was because of this danger that the *Hekiganroku* was destroyed early in its history so that nowadays we have only a reconstruction of the original text.¹⁹ And no doubt this is why Gutei's 'One Finger', which is succinctly stated in the *Hekiganroku* and the *Shoyo Roku*, is fleshed out in the *Mumonkan* with the dramatic story about Gutei's boy attendant. When Gutei learnt that his attendant had imitated his practice of answering questions by raising one finger, he cut off the boy's finger. When Dahui found that in their study of the *Hekiganroku* students were attempting to understand Zen conceptually, he destroyed the original edition.

This tension between thought and thing, word and deed, literature and life, has been traditionally resolved in Zen, or so we have been led to believe, by the cutting away of thoughts, words, books. Thus the archetype of

Zen transmission and of Zen's connection with Shakyamuni Buddha is found in the story of the Buddha twirling a flower as a presentation to his assembled disciples and how this wordless action brought a smile to the face of Mahakashyapa and how the Buddha acknowledged Mahakashyapa as his Dharma heir.²⁰ This (supposed) episode in the life of the Buddha is held up as the model of that heart-to-heart transmission outside the scriptures in which Zen claims to find its unique identity.²¹ It is said to demonstrate both the futility of words and that 'the way is beyond language'.²²

But already in thirteenth century Japan Zen master Dogen Kigen of the Soto School was attempting to liberate koan and sutra study from the narrow confines of the traditional Zen Buddhist approach to language.²³ Dogen argues against the interpretation of the flower koan which sees the absence of words as a demonstration of the profundity of the truth being taught. Dogen writes: 'If Buddha's speech is shallow, his raising flowers without a word must also be superficial'.²⁴ In Dogen's view the act itself of twirling a flower is a form of speech, a word, an expression of the self. Heejin Kim comments: 'Dogen's view is neither a derogation nor an idolisation of language, but simply an acknowledgement of the legitimate place of language in the spiritual scheme of things'.²⁵ Indeed for Dogen, as Kim further remarks, 'the function of language... becomes coextensive with that of human activities... language and activity are inseparably one in his thought'.²⁶ The Koan for Dogen is not a means to Enlightenment-Realisation but rather the embodiment of that Realisation.

The translation of koans into literary form during the Sung period in China is often seen as a symptom of a decline in the spirit and creativity of Zen Buddhism.²⁷ In their teaching, the Sung masters would draw on the words and deeds of their ancestors. But to argue that the spontaneous act of a master is somehow more authentic and creative than the turning of a koan into a literary work of art, and the *Hekiganroku* and the *Shoyo Roku* are highly complex works of literature, is to set up a false dichotomy between words and deeds. In Western terms, we might think of it as subscribing to Plato's mimetic theory of art which sees the artist as operating at three removes from the 'really real' of the *eidōs*.²⁸

Underlying this Platonic legacy in Western thought is a dualism between the intelligible and the sensible. Heidegger is one Western philosopher who has expended a great deal of energy in trying to overcome this dualism.²⁹ And so he sought to bring out the 'thingly' character of the art work in order to establish that it is a thing in itself and not a copy. According to Heidegger, the art work does not point to something beyond

itself but rather draws attention to what takes place within it.³⁰ For in the thingliness of the art work truth occurs. And this truth is not the saying of something true; it is not the kind of truth that can be captured and formulated in a proposition. It is the happening of truth itself.³¹ If all art, then, is essentially poetry, as Heidegger argues,³² there should be no problem in describing the koan, in its literary form, as a site of Enlightenment-Realisation, the place where truth manifests itself.

What is the sound of one hand? Do we hear it in the forty-eight cases of the *Mumonkan*, the one hundred cases of the *Hekiganroku* and the one hundred cases of the *Shoyo Roku*? Do we hear it in the commentaries of Mumon and Engo and Wansong, in the verses of Setcho and Tiantong? I once asked a learned friend, 'What is the sound of one hand?' He patiently explained to me that my question made no sense. So I asked my three-year-old. He immediately thrust out his hand, and laughed. Here we must discover for ourselves, along with the scholar-monk Tokusan, that even though we might light a candle at midnight, it can be suddenly, and unexpectedly, blown out.³³

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² 'Zen Koans' by Eido T. Shimano in *Zen: Tradition & Transition - An Overview of Zen in the Modern World*, Edited by Kenneth Kraft, London, 1988.
³ Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century*, Translated by Joseph S. O'Leary, New York, 1992, pp. 4-5.
⁴ Quoted in Heinrich Dumoulin, *Zen Enlightenment: Origins and Meaning*, Translated by John C. Maraldo, New York, 1985, p. 65. By 'outside' Sasaki would seem to be referring to modes of thought that are caught in the subject-object dualism.
⁵ *Ibid.*
⁶ D. Howard Smith, *Chinese Religions*, London, 1968, p. 131.
⁷ Cf. 'Introduction' by Kenneth Kraft in *Zen: Tradition & Transition*, p. 3.
⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.
⁹ *Ibid.*
¹⁰ *Two Zen Classics: Mumonkan and Hekiganroku*, Translated with commentaries by Katsuki Sekida; edited and introduced by A. V. Grimstone, New York, 1995, p.13.
¹¹ Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century*, p.70.
¹² *Ibid.*
¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 77.
¹⁴ John Stevens, *Three Zen Masters: Ikkyu, Hakuin, Ryokan*, Tokyo, 1993, pp. 73, 83, 97.
¹⁵ Omori Sogen and Terayama Katsujō, *Zen and the Art of Calligraphy: The essence of shō*, Translated by John Stevens, London, p.78.
¹⁶ For a discussion of *kosoku-koan* and *genjo-koan*, see Hee-jin Kim, *Dogen Kigen: Mystical Realist*, Foreword by Robert Aitken, Tucson, 1987, pp. 76-77
¹⁷ Sekida, *op. cit.*, p. 26.
¹⁸ For classification of koans, see Shimano, *op. cit.*, pp. 74 - 82.
¹⁹ Cf. A. V. Grimstone's 'Introduction' to *Two Zen Classics*, p. 19.
²⁰ See Case 6 of the *Mumonkan*.
²¹ Cf. *The Gateless Barrier: The Wu-men Kuan (Mumonkan)*, Translated and with a Commentary by Robert Aitken, San Francisco. 1990, p. 47.

²² 'On Believing in the Mind: Shinjin-no-mei' in *Sutras of Bodhi Zendo*, p. 8.

²³ Cf. Hee-jin Kim, op. cit., p. 78.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

²⁷ Dumoulin, *Zen Buddhism in the 20th Century*, p. 123.

²⁸ Plato, *The Republic and Other Works*, Translated by B Jowett, New York, 1973. p. 291.

²⁹ Cf. 'The Origin of the Work of Art' by Martin Heidegger in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, New York, p. 36.

³⁰ Ibid., pp. 20. 56.

³¹ Ibid., p. 36.

³² Ibid., p. 74.

³³ Cf. Case 28 of the *Mumonkan*.