

The development of koans in Chan Buddhism and their adoption in Japan and Western modernity. A survey of their origins and applications.

An essay by Arno Hess, 23.5.2019

Introduction

The central research question taken up here simply asks: how and why did cases (Chin: *gong-an*; Jap: *kōan*) develop as a practice in Chan Buddhism and how were they promulgated as a practice model in Japan and in the West? Since the word “koan” has now entered common English parlance I will hereafter use the term koan to designate Chan cases or *gong-an*. In order to survey the development of cases in Chan Buddhism and beyond, this essay aims to explicate their functions and soteriological purpose in Zen-Buddhist practice across cultures and over a 1000-year time span.

Scholars typically date the development of koans proper, to late Song dynasty (960-1279) Chan (Jpn: Zen) schools, which Schlütter termed “mature Chan”, as also being the catalyst for framing subsequent developments in Japanese Zen-Buddhism and Korean Sōn schools (Schlütter 2008, p.3). As such, koans are a Chinese innovation, used as a method that developed as a highly distinctive form of literature, which is used as an applied form of “spiritual” engagement between a teacher and a student to both elicit awakening experiences and to gauge spiritual insight in practitioners. There is, at least to this author, no other apparent parallel known in other religions or traditions that offers a similar concept. While koan engagement, is often described as an intellectual puzzle or scriptural exegesis, it is, according to Hori, a profound religious practice undertaken primarily to “awaken to wisdom and selfless compassion” (Hori 2003 p.6). While koan practice evolved as an expedient means (Skt: *upāya*) or pedagogical device in Song China proper, Chan lineages claim that the first koan between a teacher and student can be traced to Shakyamuni Buddha. According to the *Record of Transmitting the Light*, the World Honored One held up a flower, upon which his disciple Mahakashyapa smiled. The Buddha is said to have recognised Mahakashyapa’s “realisation” or “awakening” during this encounter and transmitted¹ the “wondrous mind of Nirvana” to him (Cook 2003 p.32; Schlütter 2008, p.13). Here, Chinese Chan interpreted this encounter between the Buddha and Mahakashyapa as a recognition and a validation of a spiritual attainment, which was later adopted in Chinese Chan as a legitimization convention in order to bestow spiritual and lineage authority to an ascending line of Chan masters. According to McRae, we can see reliable textual evidence of this spiritual and lineage validation process in early ninth century Chan doctrinal documents such as *The Essentials of the*

¹ Transmission in Zen, also known as Dharma transmission, is a convention in which a successor is appointed in an unbroken lineage of teachers and disciples. The minds of the teacher and that of the student are said to become one (Bodiford 1991, p. 423).

Transmission of Mind, where it states:

“Ever since the Tathāgata conferred the Dharma on Kāśyapa, [his successors] have used the mind to seal the mind, and the minds [of all those successors] have not differed [from one another]” (McRae 2017, p. 26-27).

The concept of spiritual and lineage transmission in Chan thus became a defining characteristic of this emerging Buddhist movement which continued to have a profound influence in Chinese Buddhism and beyond.

Background and methods

As this essay aims to identify the development of koans and their applications within an historical context, I have classified them into two main categories and four distinct epochs and phases. The categories are: 1) koan-literature and 2) koan-practice.

In regards to the epochs and phases of koan developments, I have borrowed and elaborated on McRae's formulation (McRae 2004, p.13), which charts the phases of Chinese Chan, but modified it to chart the development of koan literature and practice to the present day instead. The epochs and phases are: 1) Tang-Dynasty Chan 618-907; 2) Song-Dynasty Chan 950-1300; 3) Japanese Zen 1224-present-day; 4) Contemporary western Zen 1950-present day. Due to the constraints of this research project, I have not reviewed any koan development in the Sōn and Thien schools of Korea and Vietnam respectively.

The research method I will be using for this essay is through a literature review and textual analysis in order to classify any findings into the above matrix.

Tang Dynasty Chan

The origin of Chan proper and the foundational encounter dialogues on which koans are based, can be traced to the Tang Dynasty (618-907), and is often cited as originating with the legendary arrival of Bodhidharma into China. According to Sharf, early Chan developed not so much as a school but as a 'meta-critique' that challenged the prevailing doctrines of this period, which underwrote the mainstream Indian Buddhist practices of that time (Sharf 2014, p.934). As there were no Chan ordinations as such, in both the Tang and Song dynasties, Chan was never a sectarian tradition, but rather, adherents identified themselves to Chan lineages whose masters belonged to a general Buddhist order and not a particular sect (Schlütter 2008, p.15).

A defining moment which can be said to have spurred on the development of koans as a spiritual

practice can be traced to the legendary and famous poetry contest between Dajian Huineng (638-713) (sixth patriarch) and Shenxiu (605?-706). This contest is frequently interpreted as the seed of growth of Chan into the Northern (followers of Shenxiu) and Southern (followers of Huineng) schools (Ferguson 2011 p. 49), and also established a categorical distinction between the sudden and gradual form of awakening. This contest may be interpreted as having had a major influence in the development of koans, first as a literary practice to articulate insights and also as a validation agent to examine these insights by a qualified master. In this contest, the fifth patriarch, Daman Hongren (601-674) challenged his monks to write a verse that would signify their understanding of Chan. The head monk Shenxiu, wrote:

*The body is the Tree of Wisdom,
The mind but a bright mirror,
At all times diligently polish it,
To remain untainted by dust.*

According to legend, Huineng, an illiterate rice farmer at the time, enlisted another monk to write his own verse as follows:

*The Tree of Wisdom fundamentally does not exist,
Nor is there a stand for the mirror,
Originally, there is not a single thing,
So where would dust alight?*

As Hongren recognised Huineng as being spiritually superior than Shenxiu, he transmitted his mind seal or lineage to Huineng (Chan 1973, p. 430). According to the transmission of the lamp literature, Huineng had twenty-six subsequent successors through whom all of the five houses of the Southern school traced their ancestry (Ferguson 2011, p. 46)

The mirror analogy by Huineng, could also be interpreted as being perhaps an early Chan catalyst of the 'encounter dialogues' that subsequently developed in Tang China between Chan masters and their disciples, which eventually morphed into koan literature in the later Song Dynasty. John McRae, cites these early encounter dialogues between masters and disciples as being their primary mode of spiritual cultivation (McRae 2017, p. 6). Encounter dialogues can thus be said to have evolved as a distinct spiritual practice model, in contrast to the prevailing conventional sense of expounding doctrine.

Song Dynasty Chan

While the Chan movement in Tang China developed a dynamic meditation lineage with an ensuing model of encounter dialogue practices (McRae 2017, p. 78), it was not until the Song dynasty that those now characteristically pithy dialogues of Tang emerged as pedagogical devices that became known as *gong-an* in China or *kōan* in Japan or koan in the West.

The term koan, originated in China as indicating a public case record or a precedent of the public law courts in ancient China. In Chinese, *Gong* (*go*) or public, is the "track followed by all sages

and worthies, the highest principle which serves as a road to all people". *An*, or "records," are the "orthodox writings that recorded what the sages regarded as principles" (Loori et al. 2006, p.13). Koans are therefore not meant to be seen as private opinions of a single person but rather represent a "spiritual principle" as Ruth Fuller Sasaki terms it, to be realised (Loori et al. 2006, p.13). According to Dumoulin, the first Rinzai (Chin: Linji d. 866) master that used a koan as a practice device of an encounter dialogue between early masters, was *Nan-yüan* (d. 930). Here, an encounter dialogue of a Tang master was reportedly used to elicit spiritual insight as from of practice. Around this time, Chan followers began to assemble the many encounter dialogues from their ancestral masters and further added commentaries and verse as a way to hone and prove their insight (Loori et al. 2006, p. 17-18).

According to Hori, the practice of using koans as an applied method in Song China, developed into a threefold curriculum. First, a koan was used as means to verify an insight for presentation "beyond the boundaries of language" directly to the master. Upon "passing" the koan, certain "advanced" monks were further instructed to assign a capping phrase especially compiled for this purpose, to the koan. In some Chan lineages, as a third practice, learned monks were further tasked to write, as a literary assignment, verses or capping phrases themselves as a means to articulate their insights through literary forms (Hori 2003, p.3-4). These capping phrases and verses have over time become koans themselves and have been compiled as an addendum to their corresponding koans and published into various collections (Gregory et al. 2002, p. 281; Clearly 2002, pp, X-XI). These koans, capping phrases and verses, according to Dale Wright, also convey "non-dual words" (*pu-erh chih yen*), he likens to embodying a transformative power in an encounter dialogue. These words were also termed "turning words" in Chan and gained their power not on their own, but rather through fitting into a context in such a way that they open that context to view in some revealing way (Wright 2003, p.102).

Japanese Zen

The Japanese tradition of Zen practice is closely linked to the famous Tang and Song masters. According to Bodiford, historical studies have concentrated mainly on Japanese Zen teachers who are credited with having promoted a pure form of Zen [Tang and Song] but have neglected their own innovations through the Chinese-Japanese acculturating process (Bodiford 1993, p.3). Nevertheless, the Japanese adopted the koan curriculum from Song China and their scholars typically explain the development of koan discourse as a Chinese rejection of abstract Indian terminology in favor of simple, concrete expressions (Loori et al. 2006, p.93).

While Japanese Zen predominantly evolved through its two largest and best-known Sōtō (Chin: *Cáodóng*) and Rinzai (Chin: *Línjì*) schools, koan practice is usually linked to the latter. This,

according to Looi is based on some scholars citing the founder of Sōtō, Eihei Dogen (1200-1253) as being an outspoken critic of koan study. What seems closer to the truth, according to Looi, is that Dogen opposed the “superficial” treatment of koans, not koan introspection itself. Looi suggests that Dogen was critical of the formal study of koans as a doctrinal discourse, rather than through the context of a vital teacher-student relationship (Looi et al. 2006, p.153).

Modern Japanese Zen koan introspection is however inextricably linked to Hakuin Ekaku (1686-1769), the reviver of traditional meditation and koan practice in the Japanese Rinzai school. Hakuin is credited to have encouraged laypersons to practice and introduced post-*kenshō*² koan engagement as a distinct method to cultivate insight or wisdom (Low 2006, p. 25-26). This precedent was later adopted and became a foundation of modern Zen pedagogy in the West.

Contemporary western Zen

Contemporary western Zen can be said to have evolved from Japan rather than China. This is because Japan, unlike Chan in China, maintained and cultivated traditional Chan orthodoxy. Zen in the West can trace its roots to both the Sōtō and Rinzai monastic traditions but also to a reformist Japanese Zen school (Sanbō-Zen), which concentrated to teach lay people outside a monastic framework, incorporating both Sōtō and Rinzai methods in its practices. (Hess 2018, p.6). The Sanbō-Zen school has had a large influence regarding the reformation of koan practice both in Japan and the West in that they have consolidated koan practice to exclude the literary aspect of koan study and focusing on Hakuin’s post *kenshō* koan engagement instead. This, according to Sato was necessary as the literary component of assigning verses to koans was deemed too complex from a translation point of view. (Hess 2018, p. 26). Formal koan practice was thus, through the Sanbō Zen school of Japan, able to be made accessible for Western students in Western settings. According to Ciolek, the Sanbō Zen school through its Harada Yasutani line, constitutes the lion share of all Zen teachers currently active in Europe, North America and Australia and still use koans as a pre and post kensho cultivation practice (Ciolek 2018).

Conclusion

The basic project undertaking here was to survey the purpose and development of Chan koans in China and their promulgation, as a practice model in Japan and in the West.

To this end, the textual analysis of the development of koans has been classified into phases and epochs as well as through their literary classifications, within an historical context, in order to

² Kensho is a Japanese term meaning *ken*: seeing and *shō*: nature. It is often translated as seeing into one’s own nature or Buddha nature (Kapleau 2000 p. 409)

extrapolate their epistemology and soteriological purpose. First, by linking the formation of koans in Song China to the encounter dialogues that originated in the Tang dynasty and secondly by highlighting koans literary evolution. A possible early Chan precedent of a literary form being used in the development of koans was cited by linking the poetry contest of Hongren, between his two disciples Shenxiu and Huineng, as a determining factor of their spiritual insight and subsequent succession. Here, the two poems of the contestants were shown to be used as a method to articulate (literary), validate (insight) and confirm (succession) spiritual authority. This early Tang example is strikingly similar to the later Song formulations of koan pedagogy, which used koans as a method to test, validate and confirm spiritual insights through koans proper, the methodology of which was also shown to still be in use today.

The method and practice of Song dynasty koan engagement was maintained as a “pure” Chan practice in Japan until the twentieth century where a new school split from the traditional Sōtō and Rinzai schools and reformed koan practice by omitting the literary assignments of koan study, to focus instead on their primary soteriological purpose. This being to elicit an insight (Jap: *kenshō*) experience, and to use koans as a post *kenshō* deepening and personalisation practice, as well as to subsequently confirm or not confirm spiritual authority as a teacher in that tradition.

Most Western Zen lineages linked to the new Japanese school have adopted the new reformed koan practice model and continue to use the original Song China koan curriculum through a student-teacher practice model.

Koan practice has thus survived and established itself in the modern era as a classic and timeless form of spirituality whose core aims and methods have not been affected through a millennia of cultural contexts.

References

- Bodiford, WM 1993, *Sōtō Zen in Medieval Japan*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
- Bodiford, WM 1991, *Dharma transmission in Soto Zen. Manzan Dohaku's Reform Movement*, Monumenta Nipponica, Vol. 46, No.4 (Winter, 1991, pp 423-451), Sophia University, viewed 11.4.2019, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/2385187.pdf?ab_segments=0%252Fdefault-2%252Fcontrol&refreqid=excelsior%3Ade366e40bf7c48a4b23530ce80d11ee4
- Ciolek, TM 2018, *Sanbo Kyodan: Harada Yasutani School of Zen Buddhism and its teachers*, Asia Pacific Research Online, viewed 9 April 2018, <http://www.ciolek.com/wwwv1pages/zenpages/haradayasutani.html>
- Chan, WT 1973, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy, Translated and compiled by Wing-Tsing Chan*, Princeton University Press, Princeton,
- Cleary, T 2002, *Secrets of the Blue Cliff Record, Zen comments by Hakuin and Tenkai*, trans. Thomas Cleary, Shambhala Boston.
- Cook, FD 2003, Trans, *The Record of Transmitting the Light, Zen Master Keizan's Denkoroku*, Wisdom Publications, Boston.
- Ferguson, A 2011, *Zen's Chinese Heritage, The Masters and Their Teachings*, Expanded edition, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA
- Gregory, PN, Getz, DA, Jr 2002, *Studies in East Asian Buddhism, Buddhism in the Sung*, edited by Peter N. Gregory and Daniel A. Getz, Jr. University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu
- Hakuin, E 2014, *Poison Blossoms from a Thicket of Thorn, Hakuin Zenji*, trans. Norman Waddell, Counterpoint, Berkeley.
- Hess, HA 2018, *The relationship between the Zen process of awakening, as taught and practiced in the Sanbō-Zen lineage, and the threefold training principle of the Eightfold Path: a review of contemporary practices and teaching materials*, A thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Applied Buddhist Studies, Nan Tien Institute, Unanderra.
- Hori, VS 2003, *Zen Sand, The Book of Capping Phrases for Kōan Practice*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.
- Kapleau, P 2000, *The Three Pillars of Zen, Teaching, Practice, and Enlightenment*, Anchor Books, New York.
- Loori, JD, Chung-Fen, MP, Dumoulin, H, Buswell, RE, Bodiford, WM, Hori, VS, Cook, FD, Kaizan J, Yampolsky, P, Ekaku, H, Sasaki, SA, Senzaki, N, Nakagawa, S, Shibayama, Z, Yasutani, H, Shimano, E, Aitkin, R, Kapleau, P, Merzel, DG, Chayat, RS, 2006, *Sitting with Koans, essential writings on the practice of zen koan introspection*, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA.
- McRae, J 2004, *Seeing through Zen, Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism*, University of California Press, Berkeley.
- McRae, J 2017, trans, *The Essentials of the Transmission of the Mind* (Taishō Volume 48, Number 2012-A, BDK English Tripitaka 730III, 98-VIII, 980IX, 104-I, Numata Centre for Buddhist Translation and Research 2005, dBet Beta PDF Version, viewed 2.4.2019: http://www.bdk.or.jp/document/dgtl-dl/dBET_ZenTexts_2005.pdf

Schlütter, M 2008, *How Zen Became Zen, The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism in Song-Dynasty China*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu.

Sharf, R 2014, *Mindfulness and Mindlessness in early Chan*, *Philosophy East and West*, 64(4), 933-964. Retrieved 24.03.2019: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43285932>

Write, DS 2003, *Philosophical Meditations on Zen Buddhism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Yamada, K 1990, *Gateless Gate*, second edition, The University of Arizona Press, Tucson.