

A MONK ASKED THE MASTER,  
“DOES A DOG HAVE BUDDHA NATURE?”  
THE MASTER SAID, “MU.”



**the book  
of MU**

*essential writings  
on zen's most important koan*

EDITED BY JAMES ISHMAEL FORD & MELISSA MYOZEN BLACKER

WITH A FOREWORD BY JOHN TARRANT

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*"Mu" by Shodo Harada*

THE BOOK OF MU  
ESSENTIAL WRITINGS  
ON ZEN'S MOST IMPORTANT KOAN

edited by  
James Ishmael Ford  
and Melissa Myozen Blacker

*foreword by  
John Tarrant*



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To  
*Jan Seymour-Ford,*  
*David Dae An Rynick,*  
*and Rachel Blacker Rynick*





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James Ishmael Ford  
Melissa Myozen Blacker

Boundless Way Temple  
Worcester, Massachusetts



## FOREWORD: THE GREAT KOAN, YOUR DOG

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John Tarrant

A KOAN BRINGS ABOUT a change of heart—its value is to transform the mind.

The problem we are trying to solve with a koan is this:

The mind we work with every day evolved to flee saber tooth tigers, hunt mammoths, not kill each other too often, share food, gossip, make babies and develop theories of the universe. To manage all this, the mind makes hypotheses, wondering, “Is that a stick on the path or is it a snake?” or “Is that boy or girl hot?” or “Do I have egg on my face?” or “What will the cancer biopsy numbers be when they come in?”

So we wander along, having thoughts, believing them, acting on them, dealing with the results we get. We scheme and plot, fear and want, trying to wrestle our states of mind into a comfortable shape. People think, “I want not to be crazy when I see my mother,” or “I don’t want to feel jealous, or afraid,” and it’s hard work and painful to be always two inches to the left of where we want to be. Adjusting our states of mind is a gymnastic workout that never ends. Our minds are still in beta and we live at some distance from our actual lives.

Koans take account of the confusion and cross-purposes that are a feature of the mind. They lead us to rest in our uncertainty, including what’s happening now and what we want to flee.

Koans offer the possibility that you could free the mind in one jump, without passing through stages or any pretense at logical steps. In the territory that koans open up, we live down a level, before explanations occur, beneath the ground that fear is based on, before the wanting and

the scrambling around for advantage, before there is a handle on the problem, before we were alienated from the world.

A koan doesn't hide or even manage fear or despair or rage or anything that appears in your mind. Instead, with a koan you might stop finding fault with what your mind presents, stop assuming you already know what your thoughts and feelings are about and how they need to be handled. At some stage my thoughts stopped being compelling and I found a joy in what was advancing toward me. Everyone thinks you need a patch of earth to stand on or you will fall down. Your patch of earth might be someone's approval or a certain amount of money. When the koan opens, you don't need somewhere to stand, or a handle on your experience.

The kindness of a koan consists mainly in taking away what you are sure of about yourself. This isn't a sinister trick, and though I found it disorienting it was more relieving than painful. Taking away is the first gift of a koan.

Among the thousands of koans in the curriculum, the koan Mu (as it's known in Japanese), or Wu (Chinese), or No (English) has been used for about 1200 years. It is popular as a first koan, the koan that stands for all koans, the exemplar and representative, confusing, irritating, mysterious, beautiful, and freeing, a gateway into the *isness* of life, where things are exactly what they are and have not yet become problems. It begins by looking at the question of whether we are alienated or whether we participate fully in life. It comes from a long dialogue with an ancient, twinkly, Chinese grandmaster called Zhaozhou. Here is the full version from *The Book of Serenity*, as translated by Joan Sutherland and me:

A monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?"

"Yes," replied Zhaozhou,

"Then why did it jump into that bag of fur?"

"It knew what it was doing and that's why it dogged."

Another time a monk asked Zhaozhou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?"

"No."



“All beings have buddha nature. Why doesn’t a dog have it?”

“Because it’s beginning to awaken in the world of ignorance.”<sup>1</sup>

Teachers usually offer the student the one word “No” or “Mu.” There is a long history to this tactic and it was how I first encountered the koan, reading about it in books. It offered a completely different way of approaching the world, something that, given the confused state of my mind at that time, seemed worth trying. I took the koan up by myself without a teacher and made all the beginner’s errors, treating the koan more or less as a gadget. I tried to discover the use of it, the way a hunter-gatherer would deal with a toaster found by the trail—pulling on the cord, banging it on the ground, using it as a mirror. “This gadget doesn’t seem to be working,” I said to myself, scheming and plotting. The other error I made was to treat *myself* as a gadget that had to be tuned to receive the koan—more scheming and plotting.

Eventually, I can’t really say why, things changed. I allowed myself to spend all my time with the koan even while I did other things. Especially I allowed myself to persevere without quite knowing why. This meant enlarging my idea of koan work and enlarging my idea of what a “me” was. I stopped identifying with what my mind was telling me, including what it was telling me about meditation. At any given moment, no matter what I was doing, or how busy or tormented my mind appeared to be, I didn’t have to think that the koan wasn’t present.

When the koan started to change me, there was a figure/ground reversal. I no longer had to remember the koan because that process had become autonomous. In the way that a poet learns a craft and then finds that the poem appears beneath or before the level of volition, the koan showed up without being summoned. I still remember how difficulties disappeared, and I sat in the darkness and became as large as the night with the rain raining through my body. The kindness of the universe seemed to have no limit. And in some sense that moment is still going on.

I like the koan being about a dog. It addresses the question of whether we can actually change, whether we defeat ourselves, and the way we often rule ourselves out. I live with a border collie puppy and

in the morning she is complete in the world, and amazingly kinetic. Her heart beats quickly, and she hurtles toward me on her big paddy paws—she is now grown enough that occasionally when she leaps and I'm sitting on the floor she descends from above, a surprise, flailing and excited. There is no flaw in her universe. The koan is about me, about my buddha nature in any state I happen to be in. If I think life is hard, that thought is the dog with buddha nature, and peace is exactly inside that thought when it jumps on me. Then the apparent difficulty of life suddenly isn't a difficulty.

The second thing this koan is good for is as a navigation aid in territory without maps. Once the gates in the mind start to open, the koan is pretty much all you have for navigation. The koan helps you to walk through the dim and bright paths that you have never walked before. You don't have to return to knowing things and assessing your value and skill, and working off the nice map you bought along the way. When you feel as if you are in a dark passage or not getting anywhere, all that is necessary is not to believe those thoughts about being lost in twisty passages. The koan is a nice substitute for wrestling around with your fears.

And if you do resort to your maps, you will find that they are temporary, you don't quite believe in them, and the world itself is more interesting than your explanations of it.

Everyone is new to this koan since everyone is new to this moment. You can drop everything you think you know about this koan and everything you are eager to tell others that you have already learned. Then the koan can find the space to meet you.

Lots of people from lots of cultures have been changed by this koan and I find that an encouraging thought. While it is exhilarating to step off the cliff of everything that has already convinced you, it can also be frightening. It can be consoling to know that lots of other people, who like ourselves have no special aptitudes, have found that this koan saved their lives.

With all the difficulties and absurdities of the koan path my own reaction has been gratitude to the ancient teachers who invented this way of changing my mind. They found a way to talk down through the centuries, a language that helps unshape what I see so that I can see that it is the first day of the world. That is an unforgettable gift.

Koans are a great treasure of civilization and their beauty is just beginning to be understood in the west. After an initial promising start in the West, koans came to be considered esoteric and by a couple of decades ago were being neglected as a method. One of the decisions I made at that time was to teach only koans and nothing but koans and to develop new ways of teaching them, ways that might fit Western culture. Along those lines, the teachers in this book are opening many possibilities for us. The koan Mu or No is the quarter horse of Zen practice—resilient, durable, and adaptable. It’s been used so often, in so many countries and eras, that there are many different and contradictory ways to encounter it. It is a mysterious guide, a hidden friend, a vial of ancient light, a rodent that undermines the foundations. *The Book of Mu* gathers different ways to accompany this great koan so you can try it for yourself and find what works for you.

I can tell that James Ford and Melissa Blacker have written a good book because word has gotten around and people are already asking me for the manuscript. When you read this book, a practice will leap out at you, and an impulse will rise out of your own heart to meet it. If you follow that practice with all your heart, or even with sort of most of your heart, and listen to how it’s going and adapt what you do, and follow some more, this koan will change your life. You will come to your own, unique understanding of freedom. You might get enlightened. That’s what this book is for—to give you a practice that works.

Pacific Zen Institute  
Santa Rosa, California

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## Notes

1. The last line of the koan is literally, “It has activity [or karma] consciousness.” This is an Indian system of describing layers of the mind. “Activity consciousness” has the sense that through the agency of ignorance an unenlightened mind begins to be disturbed or awakened.



James Ishmael Ford and Melissa Myozen Blacker

*The koan is not a conundrum to be solved by a nimble wit. It is not a verbal psychiatric device for shocking the disintegrated ego of a student into some kind of stability. Nor, in my opinion, is it ever a paradoxical statement except to those who view it from outside. When the koan is resolved it is realized to be a simple and clear statement made from the state of consciousness which it has helped to awaken.*

—from *The Zen Koan*, by Ruth Fuller Sasaki

THE FIRST VOLUME published in this series, *The Art of Just Sitting*, explores the practice of silent illumination, the practice called *shikantaza*. The next one, *Sitting With Koans*, explores koan study generally, the other great practice of the Zen way. This volume takes a single koan—called variously “Zhaozhou’s Dog,” “the Mu koan,” “the Wu koan” (its Chinese variant use), “the No koan,” and “the First koan,” and often just “Mu”—and gives it focused attention. Even if you read this volume first, we strongly encourage you to explore the other two books to more deeply understand how this one koan fits into the scheme of Zen practice.

As to Mu itself: the Zen teacher Robert Aitken, one of the elders of Western Zen, has said, “I am still working on Mu, a great mystery, though it is no longer alien.” The essays, texts, and Dharma talks collected in this book are attempts by Zen teachers from the past and present to point their students toward clarifying, for themselves, this great mystery of Mu. Anyone who has encountered a teacher of koan Zen or been intrigued by the great questions of this human existence—“Who am I?” or “What is the meaning of my life?” or any of the host of other forms these questions can take—has probably encountered Mu.

*Mu*, a Japanese word meaning “not,” “non-,” “nothing,” “no,” was spoken centuries ago in China by a great Zen master, the peerless master

Zhaozhou (called Joshu in Japanese)—and this word continues to resonate down through the ages to our time. And many people have had quite a lot to say about it. In this book, you will find many different ways of meeting and understanding this koan—and many words about this one word.

As most people who have read even a little about Zen may know, the word *koan* comes from the Chinese *gongan*, and means “public case,” as in a court document. A koan might be seen as an assertion about reality and an invitation to an intimate response to that assertion. Or perhaps it can be said a koan is an expression of the boundless nature of all things and explores how that boundlessness interacts, informs, and completes the particularities of our lives. Or, perhaps more prosaically, but maybe more usefully, a koan provides a point in Zen to be made clear.

Both of the editors of this volume have been touched deeply and personally by koan practice and in particular by the koan Mu.

My (JF) experience of koan introspection began with one of my teachers suggesting “that silent illumination is a mature practice for mature people, but that for more difficult cases such as the likes of *you*, koans can shake one up and put us on the right path.” I spent the first ten years or so of my Zen practice engaged in silent illumination, and today it is again my baseline practice. But it wasn’t until I found the koan way that I found myself opened up, my heart broken and restored, and my place in the world revealed.

And I (MB) found Mu after many years of working with a different opening question, the “Who am I?” inquiry. After some time, my teacher asked me to live with Mu for a while, and by carrying this little word with me, as *Wumen* advises, “day and night,” the world opened up to my heart/mind dramatically and exquisitely. To this day, I return to Mu within my main practice of *shikantaza* as a reminder and as a friend.

## THE HISTORY OF KOAN INTROSPECTION

No one knows the precise origin of koan introspection as a distinct spiritual discipline. Some trace its origins in the Taoist tradition of “pure conversation.” Rinzai Zen priest and scholar Victor Sogen Hori, the premier writer on koan introspection in the English language today, advances a

compelling argument that the distant ancestor of koan study can be found in the Chinese tradition of literary games.

Whatever its origins, it is a practice most closely associated with the Linji or Rinzai branch of Zen, one of the two schools that dominate modern-day Zen. Two teachers in particular gave koan introspection the shape most Western Zen practitioners will encounter: the Chinese priest Dahui Zonggao and the Japanese priest Hakuin Ekaku. Writings from both of these great teachers on the koan Mu are included in this volume.

Dahui, a twelfth-century Linji-lineage master, is often identified as one of the first teachers to exclusively emphasize koan introspection. Having read the *Record of Yunmen* as a young man, he was inspired to undertake the Zen way. His first teacher, Zhan Tangzhun, pointed out that the young monk's inability to achieve awakening was due to his pride and intellectual acumen. In other words, Dahui's understanding of the outside prevented him from entering the inside.

When Dahui's teacher was on his deathbed, he directed him to go to Master Yuanwu Keqin—the master who would be remembered as the compiler of *The Blue Cliff Record*, one of the most important classic collections of koans. Eventually Yuanwu gave his Dharma transmission to Dahui who in 1137 would become abbot of Nengren Temple. While there he began to collect his own multivolume anthology of koans and became a strong advocate of using the koan explored in depth in this volume, “Zhaozhou's Dog.” In Dahui's teachings it is possible to see the beginnings of the approach that would flower with the eighteenth-century Japanese master Hakuin.

In the years he was abbot at Nengren Temple, war and famine plagued the country, and more than half the hundred monks in Dahui's monastery died. In 1158 he became abbot at Mount Jing near Hangzhou, and it was during these years that Dahui began to publicly criticize what he saw as an overemphasis on silent illumination practice then current among many Zen communities. Instead he held up the possibilities inherent in koan introspection. While he was personally quite close to Hongzhi Zhengjue, the great advocate of silent illumination at that time (who would interestingly request that Dahui serve as his executor upon his death) the famous division between koan introspection and silent illumination began at the temples of these two teachers.

We find it compelling that the masters of these monasteries were in fact friends, each respecting the other while at the same time criticizing a too-one-sided clinging to this practice or that. This friendship and disagreement is a powerful model for us as we engage with our various Zen practices today. Sadly, however, in the ensuing centuries, the division represented by silent illumination and koan introspection would continue to exist, with sectarian narrow-mindedness raging strong.

Over time koan introspection would gradually ossify, losing its dynamism and becoming more an exercise in formalism, mere study, though over the generations surely there were some who continued to find insight through deeply investigating koans. The next major development in koan introspection came in the eighteenth century with the Japanese master Hakuin Ekaku.

Hakuin and his Dharma successors are of particular importance because of Hakuin's systematization of the practice of koan introspection, helping forge it into a reliable tool of training that, when wielded by a skillful teacher, could bring powerful nondual insights to one's practice. Dahui and Hakuin gave koan introspection its unique shape and placed it as a clearly distinct practice within the Zen schools.

## THE NATURE OF KOAN INTROSPECTION

So, what is koan introspection? What does it mean to engage a koan as a spiritual discipline within the line of Dahui and Hakuin? These are important questions especially since koans and koan study are some of the perennially misunderstood elements of Zen. Indeed, the practice at the heart of koan introspection is unique to the Zen schools and has no significant corollary anywhere else in the world's spiritual traditions.

Unfortunately a great deal of what has been published in the English language only clouds the matter. This is partially the fault of the Zen tradition itself, which tends to guard the koan way as an esoteric treasure. And it is partially the fault of some European and American commentators who frequently and profoundly misunderstand both Zen and koan study.

The various scholars who have taken up the subject of koan introspection too often seem like the blind men described by the Buddha: investi-



gating an elephant and interpreting the leg, tail, or trunk as if it were the whole. As Sogen Hori writes, these scholars explore Zen's "nondual epistemology, its ritual and performance, its language, [or] its politics," and such perspectives can indeed help clarify how the koan can be engaged at different levels. Some point to the shortcomings of Zen institutions; some examine how koan study can be and in fact is abused or misused—all speak to one truth or another. But none of these considerations captures the essence of koan introspection.

It should be noted that some "pure" Soto Zen teachers also engage with koans, though this is usually in a discursive way, as objects of focused conversation among practitioners. These conversations are for the most part guided by mature practitioners who often have great insight but little or no formal training in koan introspection, and especially may be lacking in the particular knowledge of Master Hakuin's refined system. Without a doubt, contemporary Soto practitioners can profit from this dialogistic engagement, as can we all. We and they may find moments of startling clarity or gentle prodding toward greater depth in our practice through such deep conversations. In fact this dialogistic approach is one (among several) of the more traditional or "orthodox" uses of koans.

The Dahui/Hakuin legacy of koan practice, however, is more dramatic and intimate than the critical engagement of a spiritual literary tradition, even as a practice grounded in the discipline of silent illumination. To distinguish these disciplines, let us consider the emerging use of the term "koan introspection" for the Dahui/Hakuin style of koan engagement. And it is this style that is the primary focus of the selections in this book.

## GREAT FAITH, GREAT DOUBT, GREAT DETERMINATION

Traditional Dahui/Hakuin koan introspection is about our possible awakening, our turning in a heartbeat from delusion to awakening. To achieve this, Zen practice requires three things: great doubt, great faith, and great determination, points first articulated by the Linji master Gao-feng Yuanmiao. These become particularly obvious through koan introspection.

The idea of great doubt might seem startling in this context. Matters of religion often seem to be about faith and sometimes, sadly, even about the crushing of doubters. In Zen, however, doubt is the universal solvent, cast upon every thought, every emotion, every idea. It is meant to be a relentless and intense wondering. As such, this “great doubt” must not be confused with a merely dismissive variety of skeptical doubt. We can catch a hint of the true meaning of great doubt in a reply from Robert Aitken when asked what he thought about contemporary deconstructionist philosophy. He replied that it could be valuable so long as it includes the necessary step of deconstructing *itself*. Turning doubt on ourselves, we strive to manifest the truth behind that delightful contemporary bumper sticker “Don’t Believe Everything You Think.” Although the invitation here is even more radical: Don’t believe *anything* you think.

Koans cultivate and make profound use of this great doubt. Contrary to what some might say on the subject, koans are not meaningless phrases meant to break through to a transrational consciousness (whatever we might imagine that phrase refers to). Rather, koans are a direct pointing to reality, an invitation for us to taste water and to know for ourselves whether it is cool or warm. While there is an aspect in koan introspection that is beyond discursive thought, this practice very much includes our experiences of judging and assessing. The fundamental matter includes everything.

In the hallway of James’s house hangs a large calligraphy of the character Mu by the Zen teacher John Tarrant. Tarrant Roshi appends a comment to the character: “Mu fills all of space. No one ever falls out of it.”

Great faith is discovered within great doubt. It doesn’t take much faith to begin a spiritual practice like Zen. All one really needs to begin is a feeling that something positive might come out of the discipline. While this is a belief, it is of a relatively minor sort. Now, when one finds herself or himself on such a spiritual path, there probably is some deeper, perhaps less well articulated, hope—that the dissatisfactions of our lives can be resolved and may be illuminated by this practice. Quickly we discover various intimations that enlarge that meager faith. This evolving faith becomes Great Faith, deserving those capital letters, within our growing openness to what is, and our growing confidence in what we

encounter as really being of use on the way. Great Faith starts as curiosity and blossoms into a dynamic engagement, a dance of the soul.

In koan introspection, doubt and faith travel together. Each informs the other. It is our relentless presence to doubt and faith that takes us to the gate of nondual insight. Indeed both the path to the gate and the gate itself are discovered within that relentlessness, that willingness to not turn away. This relentlessness is that Great Determination. Other good words besides determination might be energy or perhaps courage, great energy and great courage.

From an instrumentalist view of koan introspection, words like *Mu* or phrases like “What is the sound of the single hand?” or “What is your original face from before your parents were born?” are often mistakenly assumed to be meaningless. It is assumed that the “point” of such koans is to simply “startle” the discursive mind into some kind of transrational state. But this understanding of koans simply posits a new dualism: a “lower” discursive consciousness and a “higher” nondiscursive state. This is not what koan introspection is about.

Rather, as we push through any koan—experiencing great doubt, great faith, and great determination—we find the exact identity between our ordinary consciousness and fundamental openness. Nondual reality includes subject and object, each itself and freely transposing with the other; first this, now that, sometimes one drops away, sometimes the other, sometimes both drop away, sometimes one emerges from the other, sometimes both emerge together—but we *rest* nowhere. Resting nowhere and moving fluidly among these perspectives is the true practice of koan introspection.

## VARIETIES OF KOANS AND KOAN INTROSPECTION

In China and Korea the primary form of koan engagement is through a *huatou* (in Chinese; *wato* in Japanese), which literally means “word head.” In this practice, we are given one single koan, which is seen as being useful for a lifetime. Occasionally, for various reasons, a practitioner will take on a second or even more rarely a third case. But the heart of this is found in fully throwing oneself into one koan. This koan becomes a touchstone of our practice: it is a place to put our doubt, to

cultivate great doubt, to allow the various revelations of great faith, and to focus our great energy.

In Japan and the Japanese-derived koan lineages in the West, koan introspection has taken on a new dimension. By the eighteenth century, various Japanese Rinzai teachers began introducing what one could rightly call *koan curricula*. These were programs of koan study through which a student might “pass” during the course of many years. While there is some dispute over who actually developed this system, it is usually believed to have culminated in the work of the great master Hakuin Ekaku and his principal students or, at least, in the work of teachers who followed them. This program is used by Japanese Rinzai to this day—and it is the source of the modern reform used in some of the Soto schools that also have an inherited tradition of koan introspection, the so-called Harada-Yasutani curriculum.

It should also be noted that the Korean master Seung Sahn has introduced a collection of koans used in the Kwan Um School that resembles the Hakuin system although its practitioners are uncomfortable with the terms “system” or “curriculum.” As the Kwan Um School is perhaps the largest Zen lineage in the West, one may well encounter this new and creative use of koan introspection. Interestingly, Master Seung Sahn was not particularly intrigued with the Mu koan and it does not have the prominence in his school that it does in Japanese-derived koan Zen. Within the Japanese-derived koan schools, koan introspection begins with a step reminiscent of the Chinese original: the beginning student is given a “breakthrough” koan, a case specifically meant to elicit an initial experience of nonduality. The Japanese term for this koan is *shokan*, or “first barrier.” A student might spend years struggling with this first koan; only rarely does someone pass through the breakthrough koan quickly. And, usually if one does, that person has been practicing silent illumination for some years prior to taking up this practice.

A breakthrough koan might be “What is your face before your parents were born?” or Hakuin’s own question “What is the sound of the single hand?” But most commonly it is Zhaozhou’s Mu. This simple koan is the most common of the gateways to koan practice.

The talks and essays that follow explore this koan in great depth, so we won’t go into its shape with any detail in this brief introduction.

Instead we'll simply outline some of what one encounters in the way of koan introspection.

We throw ourselves into the great matter, allowing the doubt to rise. At some point we may try critical analysis; at another point, it may become a mantra—chanted, breathed, whispered, yelled. And each time we think we gain some insight, we take it into the interview room where, most probably, our teacher will reject our response.

My (JF) teacher once told me that “awakening is always an accident”—and we (JF and MB) tell our own students this today. There is no obvious causal relationship between nondual insight and anything we might do or not do. But if awakening is an accident, certain practices can help us become accident-prone. Koan practice is particularly effective at this.

If we open ourselves to this great adventure—with due diligence along with our doubt, faith, and energy—eventually it will happen: We are hit by a bus and everything changes. Or, perhaps the bus just grazes us as it passes by. But even that graze is valuable. This is the point of most koans. They give us an opportunity to break out of what we thought the world had been all about for us and encounter it anew.

When one has demonstrated insight into the basic matter, the teacher trained in koan introspection may go on to ask “checking questions,” which reveal how nuanced our insight is. In the case of a breakthrough koan, there might be dozens up to a hundred checking questions. As we move through the breakthrough koan into other cases, there are usually several checking questions for each case beyond the central point.

There are a few books to be found that purport to give “answers” to koans. Occasionally, for reasons that completely elude us, people will take other student’s answers and present them to their teacher in the interview room as if some formal or official “passing” of a koan were somehow the important thing, and not our own liberation from our own suffering. It doesn’t take too many checking questions to reveal the true quality of a student’s insight.

There are a number of ways to categorize koans, and over the years various systems developed to help clarify how one may engage them. A contemporary typology developed by Seung Sahn includes ten categories, which are explored in the book *Ten Gates: The Kong-an Teachings*

of Zen Master Seung Sahn. Hakuin's system is the most commonly represented in contemporary Western koan studies, although even it has variations. Hakuin suggested there are five types of koan, the Japanese terms for which are *hoshin*, *kikan*, *gonsen*, *nanto*, and *goi jujukin*.

*Hoshin* means "dharmakaya" ("Dharma body"—*kaya* being the Sanskrit word for "body"). These koans are concerned with our fundamental insight into nonduality. *Kikan*, or "dynamic action" koans, reveal the activity of emptiness. *Gonsen* or "explication of words" are often quite long and involved. Traditionally one is expected to memorize each of these koans and recite them in front of the teacher before actually engaging their points: for many of us simply memorizing the case can take longer than dealing with it face-to-face in the interview.

*Nanto* koans are "difficult to pass through"—or at least they seem to have been so for old Master Hakuin, who alluded to eight such cases. It isn't precisely clear what this designation really means. Sogen Hori quotes one roshi who remarked bluntly how "the nanto koans have no significance beyond the fact that Hakuin found them difficult to pass through." In our notes from teachers in our lineage, there are occasional references to one koan or another as being "particularly difficult." However, they were not all the ones that we have found problematic—nor are they reliably that for our students. We've come to suspect that all who walk this path each find their own nanto koans.

*Goi jujukin* koans are actually comprised of two sets of koans. In Japanese Rinzai the koans one first completes are the ten grave precepts of moral and ethical action. One also usually includes the three refuges of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha as well as the three pure precepts of ceasing from evil, practicing good, and actualizing good for others. Together with the ten grave precepts, these crown the formal study of koans. There can be hundreds of questions derived from the precepts, the exact number varying from one teacher to another. One then finishes with the Five Ranks, an ancient system of categorizations that recapitulate all that one has encountered over the years of koan study. In the Harada-Yasutani curriculum, the order is reversed, culminating in the investigation of the precepts as koans.

In Japan a student of koan Zen also engages a practice of *jakugo*, or "capping phrases." These are literary tags drawn from the range of East

Asian cultures and compiled in various books. Having completed the checking questions for some koan case, one must then find the appropriate phrase to “cap” the case. Capping phrases are largely eliminated in the Harada-Yasutani curriculum. This is also mostly true for the more “orthodox” Rinzai programs followed in the West.

Capping phrases, while undoubtedly useful, are largely extraneous to the larger point of koan work. Rather than helping to open the eye, this discipline invites the student to see how her or his opening to the world has been anticipated in the rich literature of East Asian culture. In the West what seems to be the original spirit of capping has been revitalized where following some cases a student is asked to compose a verse in appreciation. A few teachers have also been experimenting with creating Western capping phrase collections. It is, however, much too early to see where this spirit of experimentation will lead.

## THE UNFOLDING OF KOAN CURRICULA

The koan curricula of the Harada-Yasutani system (which ultimately derives from Hakuin’s disciple’s disciple Kosen Takuju) might be described like this: After encountering a breakthrough koan and satisfactorily investigating it and responding to up to a hundred checking questions around that koan, we pass through a collection of brief cases that set the form for future practice. This “miscellaneous collection” may consist of anywhere between twenty and a hundred koans. These are “in-house” collections not usually published, although a Christian Zen master in the Sanbo Kyodan, Elaine MacInnes, has written *The Flowing Bridge*, a luminous collection of comments on the formal Sanbokyodan miscellaneous collection. An excerpt from her book is included in this volume. After this, we generally work through several classic collections, normally the *Gateless Gate*, the *Blue Cliff Record*, the *Book of Equanimity*, and Jokin Keizan’s *Record of Transmitting the Light*.

The first two collections are associated with the historic Linji/Rinzai tradition; the last two are traditional Soto collections and represent the reformist and syncretistic inclinations of the Harada-Yasutani curriculum. While the varying traditions deriving from Master Hakuin may use somewhat different collections, the arc of training remains the same.

In Japanese Rinzai, according to Sogen Hori, two curricula are associated with the two principal heirs of Hakuin. In the Takuju school (which as already noted is also the source of the Harada-Yasutani curriculum) after the breakthrough students begin the *Gateless Gate* and then investigate the *Blue Cliff Record*. The third book is the *Shumon Kattoshu*, only recently published in English as *Entangling Vines*. The last collection is the *Chin'u-shu*, "the Collection of Poison Wings," which is not to our knowledge currently available in English.

The other principal line of Hakuin's Zen, through another of his disciples' disciple Ien Inzan, uses its own internally generated list of koans, rather than those found in the traditional collections. This school's style is considered more direct and immediate, if by repute somewhat "rougher" in approach than within the Takuju style.

The two schools have minor stylistic differences. The Inzan school is said to be a bit more dynamic, while the Takuju school is said to be a bit more gentle and meticulous. Nevertheless, we can find teachers of either temperament in either tradition. And each school easily recognizes the work of the other.

In Japan, someone who "completes" formal koan study might have been practicing for thirty years or more. Without the capping phrases, the Harada-Yasutani curriculum is often completed in as little as ten years from "passing" the breakthrough koan, although usually it takes considerably longer. It appears that the Western Rinzai koan curricula can be passed through in about the same amount of time as the Harada-Yasutani.

In fact most people who take up koan study never complete the formal curriculum—and this isn't seen as a problem. Koans are really just invitations to practice. We do koans to deepen and clarify our zazen, to engage the matter of life and death. Truthfully, we never "complete" our koan work. In schools that use a koan introspection curriculum, however, completion of the formal curriculum is often a necessary, if not sufficient, condition for becoming a teacher.

## THE KOAN MU

So, we return to our exploration of Mu. As we have said, of all the breakthrough koans, Mu is the koan most commonly encountered, the heart



of most Zen practitioner's koan work. Mu is, from this view, arguably Zen's most important koan.

The scholar Andy Ferguson notes the idea of "penetrating the Mu obstruction" appears in Chinese Zen texts as far back as 730 or so, and he adds that "some textual evidence suggests it was part of Bodhidharma's teachings." The earliest reference to a dog in the context of buddha nature dates from the early ninth century, possibly half a century before Zhaozhou took up the matter with his student.

Ferguson translates the text of that earliest known account from an early lamp anthology, the *Ching-te ch'uan-teng lu*:

A monk asked, "Does a dog have buddha nature?"

The master said, "Yes."

The monk said, "Do you have buddha nature?"

The master said, "No."

The monk then said, "All beings have buddha nature. Why is it that you alone don't have it?"

The master said, "Because I'm not all beings."

The monk asked, "If you're not all beings, then are you Buddha?"

The master said, "I'm not Buddha."

The monk said, "Then what are you?"

The master said, "I'm not a thing."

The monk said, "Can you be seen or conceived of?"

The master said, "It [me] is inconceivable and its meaning can't be obtained. Therefore it is called inconceivable."

The koan mu appears in a long form as case 18 in the collection *The Book of Equanimity* (see John Daido Looi's chapter in this book for Mu in that context). But we encounter the koan Mu in its most succinct form in Wumen Huikai's classic collection the *Wumenguan* (or, in Japanese, *Mumonkan*), the "Gateless Barrier." Master Wumen set it as the first case, attaching a brief commentary and then an appreciative verse (reprinted in this volume, as translated by Robert Aitken). The teacher in the koan story, Zhaozhou Congshen, was a ninth-century Chinese Chan/Zen master. After his first awakening at the age of eighteen, he

studied Chan with his teacher Nanquan Puyuan until Nanquan's death, and then went on pilgrimage to deepen his practice through the challenge of meeting other teachers. He eventually settled down and taught until his death, apparently at the age of 120, having transmitted the Dharma to thirteen heirs.

Wumen himself lived in the thirteenth century. His teacher Yuelin Shiguan gave him the koan "Wu." Here is the account of his awakening to Wu from Andy Ferguson's *Zen's Chinese Heritage*:

Wumen worked with this famous koan for six years without progress. Finally, he vowed not to sleep until he penetrated the heart of this Zen gate. Finally, as he stood in the Dharma hall, he heard the bell sound for the midday meal and suddenly realized profound enlightenment. He then wrote a verse that included the following:

*A clear sky and shining sun,  
A great thunderclap,  
Instantly all beings' eyes are opened,  
And the myriad things come together.*

The following day, Wumen entered Yuelin's room to gain confirmation of his experience.

Yuelin said, "Where did you see these gods and devils?"

Wumen shouted

Yuelin also shouted.

Wumen shouted again.

In this exchange Wumen's enlightenment was confirmed.

## THE BOOK OF MU

History is history, and now is now. Zhaozhou's dog, your own buddha nature, and life itself can only be encountered in this moment. We encourage you to read this volume in any way that supports your investigation into what it means to live a life of freedom and aliveness. You can read it in sequence, or dip into it randomly. There are so many different ways of pointing at Mu, and to the practice of sitting with this apparently

simple and seemingly obscure koan. You may find yourself drawn to and inspired by the words or approach of one teacher, and confused by or averse to the words or approach of another. We encourage you to use whatever is useful in encouraging you to discover the truth of Mu for yourself, and let the rest fall away.

All of these many words about this one word are pointers toward your own intimate relationship to the koan Mu, to your own buddha nature. The sincere young monk and the venerable teacher Zhaozhou are alive right now, ready to accompany you on this journey of discovery. They truly are, after all, you yourself.



## ON THE TRANSLITERATION OF NAMES

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WE'VE TRIED to minimally edit the talks and essays that follow. One consequence is a variety of transliteration choices for proper names. Today the standard form for transliterating Chinese names is Pinyin, however many of these talks were composed when Wade-Giles was the standard. In addition, Japanese Zen has given all the Chinese teachers names easier for the Japanese to pronounce, and several of the following talks use those names. So, Zhaozhou is the Pinyin, Chao-chou is the Wade Giles, and Joshu is the Japanese for the same person. And there are two talks that use the Korean JoJu for Zhaozhou. The following is a table showing the variations for all names used by the various teachers, with their Chinese transliterations in Pinyin and Wade-Giles form, and their Japanese *romaji* transliteration.

PINYIN	WADE-GILES	ROMAJI
Dahui Zonggao	Ta-hui Tsung-kao	Daie Soko
Dongshan Liangjie	Tung-shan Liang-chieh	Tozan Ryokai
Gaofeng Yuanmiao	Kao-feng Yuan-miao	Koho Gemmyo
Hongzhi Zhengjue	Hung-chih Cheng-chueh	Wanshi Shogaku
Linji Yixuan	Lin-chi I-hsuan	Rinzai Gigen
Mazu Daoyi	Ma-tsu Tao-i	Baso Doitsu
Nanquan Puyuan	Nan-ch'uan P'u-yuan	Nansen Fugan
Nanyue Huairang	Nan-yueh Huai-jang	Nangaku Ejo
Wumen Huikai	Wu-men Hui-k'ai	Mumon Ekai
Xingshan Weikuan	Hsing-Shan Wei-K'uan	Ikan Kozen
Yuanwu Keqin	Yuan-wu K'e-ch'in	Engo Kokugon
Yuelin Shiguan	Yueh-lin Shih-kuan	Gatsurin Shikan
Zhaozhou Congshen	Chao-chou Ts'ung-shen	Joshu Jushin



# THE KOAN MU: TEXT, COMMENTARY, AND VERSE

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Wumen Huikai

*Translated by Robert Aitken*

## THE CASE

*A monk asked Chao-chou, "Has the dog buddha nature or not?"  
Chao-chou said, "Mu."*

## WU-MEN'S COMMENT

For the practice of Zen it is imperative that you pass through the barrier set up by the Ancestral Teachers. For subtle realization it is of the utmost importance that you cut off the mind road. If you do not pass the barrier of the ancestors, if you do not cut off the mind road, then you are a ghost clinging to bushes and grasses.

What is the barrier of the Ancestral Teachers? It is just this one word "Mu"—the one barrier of our faith. We call it the Gateless Barrier of the Zen tradition. When you pass through this barrier, you will not only interview Chao-chou intimately. You will walk hand in hand with all the Ancestral Teachers in the successive generations of our lineage—the hair of your eyebrows entangled with theirs, seeing with the same eyes, hearing with the same ears. Won't that be fulfilling? Is there anyone who would not want to pass this barrier?

So, then, make your whole body a mass of doubt, and with your three hundred and sixty bones and joints and your eighty-four thousand hair follicles concentrate on this one word "Mu." Day and night, keep digging into it. Don't consider it to be nothingness. Don't think in terms of "has" and "has not." It is like swallowing a red-hot iron ball. You try to vomit it out, but you can't.

Gradually you purify yourself, eliminating mistaken knowledge and attitudes you have held from the past. Inside and outside become one. You're like a mute person who has had a dream—you know it for yourself alone.

Suddenly Mu breaks open. The heavens are astonished, the earth is shaken. It is as though you have snatched the great sword of General Kuan. When you meet the Buddha, you kill the Buddha. When you meet Bodhidharma, you kill Bodhidharma. At the very cliff edge of birth-and-death, you find the Great Freedom. In the Six Worlds and the Four Modes of Birth, you enjoy a samadhi of frolic and play.

How, then, should you work with it? Exhaust all your life energy on this one word "Mu." If you do not falter, then it's done! A single spark lights your Dharma candle.

#### WU-MEN'S VERSE

*Dog, buddha nature—  
the full presentation of the whole;  
with a bit of "has" or "has not"  
body is lost, life is lost.*



HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE:  
THE FIRST TEACHERS OF THE KOAN WAY



## THREE COMMENTARIES

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Dahui Zonggao

*Translated by J.C.Cleary*

### 1. TO CH'EN LI-JEN CONTEMPLATING "NO"

A MONK ASKED CHAO-CHOU, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?" Chao-chou said, "No." This one word "no" is a knife to sunder the doubting mind of birth and death. The handle of this knife is in one's own hand alone: you can't have anyone else wield it for you: to succeed you must take hold of it yourself. You consent to take hold of it yourself only if you can abandon your life. If you cannot abandon your life, just keep to where your doubt remains unbroken for a while: suddenly you'll consent to abandon your life, and then you'll be done. Only then will you believe that when quiet it's the same as when noisy, when noisy it's the same as when quiet, when speaking it's the same as when silent, and when silent it's the same as when speaking. You won't have to ask anyone else, and naturally you won't accept the confusing talk of false teachers.

During your daily activities twenty-four hours a day, you shouldn't hold to birth and death and the Buddha Path as existent, nor should you deny them as nonexistent. Just contemplate this: A monk asked Chao-chou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?" Chao-chou said, "No."

### 2. TO CHANG AN-KUO CONTEMPLATING A SAYING

Before emotional consciousness has been smashed, the mind-fire burns bright. At just such a time, just take a saying you have doubts about to arouse and awaken yourself. For example: A monk asked Chao-chou, "Does a dog have buddha nature or not?" Chao-chou said, "No." Just

bring this up to arouse and awaken yourself. Whatever side you come at it from, that's not it, you're wrong. Moreover, don't use mind to await enlightenment. And you shouldn't take up the saying in the citation of it. And you shouldn't understand it as the original subtlety, or discuss it as existent or nonexistent, or assess it as the nothingness of true nothingness. And you shouldn't sit in the bag of unconcern. And you shouldn't understand it in sparks struck from stone or in the brilliance of a lightning flash. There should be no place to employ your mind. When there's no place for mind, don't be afraid of falling into emptiness—on the contrary, this is a good place. Suddenly the rat enters a hollow ox horn, [that is, discriminating consciousness reaches an impasse] and then wrong views are cut off.

This affair is neither difficult nor easy. Only if you have already planted deep the seeds of transcendent wisdom, and served men of knowledge through vast eons without beginning, and developed correct knowledge and correct views, does it strike you continuously in your present conduct as you meet situations and encounter circumstances in the midst of radiant spiritual consciousness, like recognizing your own parents in a crowd of people. At such a time, you don't have to ask anyone else: naturally the seeking mind does not scatter and run off.

Yun-men said, "When you can't speak, it's there; when you don't speak, it's not there. When you can't discuss it, it's there; when you don't discuss it, it's not there." He also commented saying, "You tell me, what is it when you're not discussing it?" Fearing people wouldn't understand, he also said, "What else is it?"

### 3. TO TSUNG CHIH-KO CONTEMPLATING "NO"

You inform me that as you respond to circumstances in your daily involvement with differentiated objects, you're never not in the Buddhadharma. You also say that amidst your daily activities and conduct you use the saying "A dog has no buddha nature" to clear away emotional defilements. If you make efforts like this, I'm afraid you'll never attain enlightened entry. Please examine what's under your feet: where do differentiated objects arise from? How can you smash emotional defile-

ments in the midst of your activities with the saying “A dog has no buddha nature”? Who is it who can know he’s clearing away emotional defilements?

Didn’t Buddha say: “Sentient beings are inverted: they lose themselves and pursue things.” Basically things have no inherent nature: those who lose themselves pursue them on their own. Originally objects are undifferentiated: those who lose themselves do their own differentiating. (You say) you have daily contact with differentiated objects, and you’re also within the Buddhadharma. If you’re in the Buddhadharma, it’s not an object of differentiation; if you’re among differentiated objects, then it’s not the Buddhadharma. Pick one up, let one go—what end will there be?

At the Nirvana Assembly [when the Nirvana Sutra was expounded, just before the Buddha’s death], the broad-browed butcher put down his slaughtering knife and immediately attained buddhahood where he stood. How could you have so much sadness and sorrow? In your daily activities as you respond to circumstances, as soon as you become aware of being involved with differentiated objects, just go to the differentiating to raise the saying “A dog has no buddha nature.” Don’t think of it as clearing away, and don’t think of it as emotional defilement; don’t think of it as differentiation, and don’t think of it as the Buddhadharma—simply contemplate the saying “A dog has no buddha nature.” Just bring up the word “No.” And don’t set your mind on it and await enlightenment. If you do, objects and the Buddhadharma are differentiated, emotional defilements and the saying “A dog has no buddha nature” are differentiated, interrupted and uninterrupted are differentiated, and encountering the confusion of emotional defilements so body and mind are unsettled and being able to know so many differentiations are also differentiated.

If you want to remove this disease, just contemplate the word “No.” Just look at the broad-browed butcher putting down his knife and saying, “I am one of the thousand buddhas.” True or false? If you assess it as false or true, again you plunge into objects of differentiation. It’s not as good as cutting it in two with a single stroke. Don’t think of before and after: if you think of before and after, this is more differentiating.

Hsuan-sha said this matter “Cannot be limited—the road of thought

is cut off. It does not depend on an array of adornments—from the beginning it's been real and pure. Moving, acting, talking, laughing, clearly understanding wherever you are, there's nothing more lacking. People these days do not understand the truth in this, and vainly involve themselves with sensory phenomena, getting defiled all over and tied down everywhere. Even if they understand, sense objects are present in complex confusion, names and forms are not genuine, so they try to freeze their minds and gather in their attention, taking things and returning them to emptiness, shutting their eyes, hiding their eyes; if a thought starts up, they immediately demolish it; as soon as the slightest conception arises, they immediately press it down. Those with a view like this are outsiders who have fallen into empty annihilation, dead men whose spirits have not yet departed, dark and silent, without awareness or knowledge. They're "covering their ears to steal the bell," vainly deluding themselves.

All you said in your letter was the disease Hsuan-sha condemned—the perverted Ch'an of quiescent illumination, a pit to bury people in. You must realize this. When you bring up a saying, don't use so many maneuvers at all—just don't let there be any interruption whether you're walking, standing, sitting, or lying down. Don't discriminate joy and anger, sorrow and bliss. Just keep on bringing up the saying, raising it and raising it, looking and looking. When you feel there's no road for reason and no flavor, and in your mind you're oppressed and troubled, this is the place for each person to abandon his body and his life. Remember, don't shrink back in your mind when you see a realm like this—such a realm is precisely the scene for becoming a buddha and being an ancestral teacher.

And yet the false teachers of silent illumination just consider wordlessness as the ultimate principle, calling it the matter of "the Other Side of the Primordial Buddha," or of "before the Empty Eon." They don't believe there is a gate of enlightenment, and consider enlightenment as a lie, as something secondary, as an expedient word, as an expression to draw people in. This crowd deceive others and deceive themselves, lead others into error and go wrong themselves. You should also realize this.

In the conduct of your daily activities, as you're involved with differentiated objects, when you become aware of saving power, this is where

you gain power. If you use the slightest power to uphold it, this is definitely a false method—it's not Buddhism. Just take the mind, so long-lasting, and bring it together with the saying "A dog has no buddha nature." Keep them together till the mind has no place to go—suddenly, it's like awakening from a dream, like a lotus flower opening, like parting the clouds and seeing the moon. When you reach such a moment, naturally you attain unity. Through the upsets and errors of your daily activities, just contemplate the word "No." Don't be concerned with awakening or not awakening, getting through or not getting through. All the buddhas of the three worlds were just unconcerned people, people for whom there is nothing; all the generations of ancestral teachers too were just people without concerns. An ancient worthy said, "just comprehend nothingness in the midst of things, unconcern amidst concerns: when seeing forms and hearing sounds, don't act blind and deaf." Another ancient worthy said, "Fools remove objects but don't obliterate mind; the wise wipe out mind without removing objects." Since in all places there's no mind, all kinds of objects of differentiation are nonexistent of themselves.

Gentlemen of affairs these days, though, are quick to want to understand Ch'an. They think a lot about the scriptural teachings and the sayings of the ancestral teachers, wanting to be able to explain clearly. They are far from knowing that this clarity is nonetheless an unclear matter. If you can penetrate the word "No," you won't have to ask anyone else about clear and unclear. I teach gentlemen of affairs to let go and make themselves dull—this is this same principle. And it's not bad to get first prize in looking dull, either—I'm just afraid you'll hand in an empty paper. What a laugh!