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Koans and Levels of Consciousness

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This is a theoretical paper devoted to an examination of the phenomenon of the Zen koan. First, the existing understanding of the koan will be outlined from a number of sources. This will be followed by an examination of what the koan would look like from a structural point of view. Ken Wilber's outlook will then be used to look at the koan in a fresh way so that one might see it as a kind of test of the level of consciousness exhibited by each solution. The latter is related to recent thinking on models in general.

Keywords: ***levels of consciousness, Zen, koans, Wilber***

Koans are fascinating things. Most readers have doubtless come across them quite frequently. Familiar examples include the sound of one hand clapping and the goose in the glass bottle. Many people have discovered the very useful introductory text by Philip Kapleau (1967), which offered a good rundown and a number of examples. In a later book, Kapleau (2001) went deeply into eleven classic koans and also made some interesting remarks on *nirvana* as an aim in Buddhism. He noted:

> Years ago early translators of Sanskrit, many of whom were not Buddhists at all, used the work in a negative way. Since the root meaning of nirvana is 'to blow out, to extinguish', they took it to mean that one becomes a kind of nothing. Well, it is a nothing, but a Nothing that is Everything. And of course to blow out, or extinguish our mind of ego, of our deforming passions, so that our true, unlimited Mind, the Mind which is not born and so never dies, may come into consciousness. Nirvana is a state of absolute freedom, without restriction. (Kapleau, 2001, p. 15)

This then links with a number of other disciplines such that the koan can be seen as one of a series of systematic approaches to the pursuit of nirvana, such as those of Aurobindo, Vedanta, Sufism, Mahamudra, yoga, and so forth. Zen came from the Ch'an tradition in China where the koan was called the kung-an, or public case, but it was in Japan that the koan reached its fullest expression—most fully in the Rinzai tradition, but also in the Soto discipline.

In the Japanese monasteries koans are taken very seriously. Sato (1972) explained that:

> There are periods of intensive zazen during the year, such as *rohatsu dai sesshin*, when the monks must endure severe cold, make do with only two or three hours of sleep in the zazen position, and devote themselves entirely to finding a solution to the *koan* they have been given. (p. 150)

However, in the West we do not have this culture, and so we can stand back and look at the questions with greater freedom.

Even in Japan, though, there are some contrary voices. According to Hoffman (1977):

> The *Kidogoroku* is the final part of a controversial book first published in Japan in 1916. Entitled *Gendai Sojizen Hyoron* [a critique of present-day pseudo-Zen] it was the work of a renegade Zen monk (whose true identity may never be known) who set out to reform what he judged to be the moral corruption and overall ossification of institutionalised Zen in Japan. (p. 13)

It was Hoffman who translated *Gendai Sojizen Hyoron*, which contains what are considered correct answers to 281 koans. For example, the correct answer to the koan *Mu* is for the postulant to face the roshi and shout "Mu!" at the top of his voice. The correct answer to the koan "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" is for the postulant to face the roshi and thrust out his hand with force and confidence. This is, of course, somewhat pointlesss even if it is a true record of what has been done in practice. To think that one could learn such a performance and produce it on demand has obviously no relation to any useful pursuit of one's own truth or

one's own spiritual discoveries. Hoffman (1975) related that this monk actually had studied in several different monasteries and had grilled the monks on what had happened in the past.

One of the curious features of Zen is the way in which enlightenment is treated. It is common in the Zen stories in such books as the *Mumonkan* (today often known as the *Wumenguan*), the *Shoyoroku* (*Book of Equanimity*), the *Denkoroku* (*Book of the Transmission of the Lamp*) and the *Hekinganroku* (the *Blue Cliff* or *Blue Rock Record*) to come across phrases such as "with this, the monk gained enlightenment" (e.g., Mascetti, 1997). However, it is not clear exactly what this means. The idea of a once and for all total enlightenment does not seem to correspond with the actual experience of advanced meditators or of those who have studied the matter (Loy, 1988).

In this paper, I propose to look at the whole question from a different angle. As is well known, there is general ignorance and even prejudice in the area of levels of consciousness. Most people just do not want to know about the idea that there might be anything like a hierarchy or even a holarchy in such matters. In what follows, I simply set this aside and assume that it does indeed make sense to regard consciousness in an evolutionary light and as something that does fall into a number of categories that are usefully distinguished.

Personally, I find Ken Wilber's (2000) general map a useful one. He has presented evidence from many different sources showing that the same set of levels appears in every serious attempt to outline spiritual progress or process. What would happen, I thought, if one approached a koan from each of the levels postulated by Wilber? What would that look like, and what would it reveal?

The first one I tried was Mu. This is the one in which someone asks the great sage Joshu—"Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" It is one of the basic koans used in early teaching. Joshu (now often called Zhaozhou) responded with the reply "Mu," which is generally regarded as a No--though there is also rather a large amount of elaboration on what Mu might stand for in Buddhist circles—almost to the extent of it becoming meaningless. Yet, to say that a dog does not have Buddha nature is regarded as controversial and even scandalous in some Buddhist disciplines. There is a good discussion of this in Cleary (1993). If one looks at this from each level in turn, the results seem quite interesting (see Table 1).

Table 1

Approaches to the Koan, "Does a dog have Buddha-nature?" (Mu), from each of Wilber's levels of consciousness.

Level	*Response*
Magic/Mythic	*Joshu is clearly in touch with the supernatural source of all knowledge. The best thing is to follow Joshu and learn from him. From now on, Joshu is my great leader and teacher.*
Mental Ego	*The Nirvana Sutra tells us that all sentient beings have Buddha-nature, so the answer is just wrong. Joshu made a mistake.*
Centaur	*To have Buddha-nature is to be conscious of being conscious. Therefore, a man can have Buddha-nature but a dog cannot. Joshu is correct. To have the Buddha-nature is to be fully human—that is to be authentic. There is no such thing as an authentic dog.*
Subtle	*I can communicate with trees, animals, fairies, angels, gods and goddesses alike, and I know that they all have Buddha-nature. Joshu must have been forgetful of all this.*
Causal	*Not only all sentient beings but also all things of whatever kind partake of the Buddha-nature. There is only Buddha-nature. The whole universe is Buddha-nature from top to bottom. Joshu had somehow lost sight of this.*
Nondual	*To say Yes and to say No are equally meaningless. Joshu was wicked and humorous to pick one and not the other. The point is to see the joke. The only possible answer is to laugh. When we laugh, we are standing toe to toe with Joshu. You might just well ask to have a great tree brought to you upside down in a bucket.*

It seems obvious that a koan can be regarded as a test of levels of insight. Within Buddhism itself, Mu has become something of a wild horse—used in all sorts of ways to enhance the teaching of various teachers of different persuasions and becoming quite disengaged from its origins. Hence it is directed very much at the area of individual consciousness—what Wilber (2006) has called the Upper Left Quadrant. It has very little relevance to the other three quadrants—the brain and

body, the social environment, or the social support system. This is a very basic koan, and it has often been used as an introduction to Zen Buddhism for new postulants. To discover that it is useful as a test of levels of consciousness is fascinating and gives a new way of looking at all the koans. To test this out, consider another favorite koan: "What was your original face before your parents were born?" (Table 2).

Here is a much trickier question, which really evades all the well-meaning attempts to deal with it. Of course, this is obvious from the very nature of the question as soon as one hears it. It is a tricky question and bears its trickiness before it like a banner. Some koans are like this. As soon as one looks at them, it is clear that something extraordinary is going on. They are exotic from the start. For some people, this makes koans fascinating; for others, it is quite off-putting and mystery mongering. Cleary (1993) has offered a very patient approach to this. He has given lengthy and elaborate commentaries on each koan as if it deserved close attention, which, of course, it does.

What happens with another koan, one that looks much more ordinary and answerable: "Who am I?" (Table 3). This is frequently used on retreats and training courses, and many highly esteemed people even outside of Zen have used it. But one can see how really tricky it is. It calls into question the very possibility of finding the "I" at all. It undermines itself even in the very act of asking it. If psychospiritual development exists, and I believe it does, this is one of the questions

Table 2

Approaches to the Koan, "What was your original face, before your parents were born?" from each of Wilber's levels of consciousness.

Level	*Response*
Magic/Mythic	*You will reveal the answer to me when you think I am ready to hear the truth, but, for now, it is a holy truth that I am not ready for.*
Mental Ego	*This a stupid question, and I am offended that you should even ask me such a thing. How could anyone answer this?*
Centaur	*My original face must be my authentic face, but I don't see how I could be authentic before being born. There is here an attempt at mystification that I reject. There is no existential meat in this question.*
Subtle	*My original face is beauty, and beauty is larger than any one expression of it. Beauty is in the world but not of it, and my original face shares in that destiny. That original beauty is still me.*
Causal	*There is no original face, just as there is no "my face" now. To assume that I have a face now is to miss the point. My no-face now is the same as my original face then, pure emptiness.*
Nondual	*You are joking again, you bad roshi! You want me to go scraping around looking for answers and for the right answer, the answer that will please you. Well, here is my answer! (Slaps the face of the roshi and leaves the room.)*

Table 3

Approaches to the Koan, "Who am I?" from each of Wilber's levels of consciousness.

Level	*Response*
Magic/Mythic	*I am whatever the authorities tell me I am. I need to look to higher authority for answers like this.*
Mental Ego	*I am my roles, the functions I perform. I read myself off from the way in which other people treat me. I can study myself scientifically through tests. I am a true functionary.*
Centaur	*I am me! I am the authentic person—self found and self defined. I do not need someone else to tell me who I am. I know! I am!!*
Subtle	*I am a divine being. I see myself in the rocks, the trees, the rivers—all those places where I can find myself and hear myself. I am all the water in the world—and the earth, the sky, the roaring flame.*
Causal	*I am the All-Self. I am the vast universe outside and the vast self inside. I have no limits. I am infinite.*
Nondual	*Another of those daft questions, which make me laugh. There is no end to questions like this. They all try to seduce us into finding the one right answer. Not, not—who's there?*

that most obviously relate to the twists and turns of the growth process. Of course, not everyone is as respectful as Cleary (1993), and at times a sense of humor comes in with happy results. According to Hoffman (1975), "Jonathan Swift could have made much of the little fact that monks in Soto Zen monasteries must sleep on their right sides, while those in Rinzai Zen monasteries must sleep on their backs" (p. 9). Here is another example—again often used in short retreats or workshops, and quite popular in the West: "What is another?" (Table 4).

It is becoming clear, I hope, that there is great similarity in the way each of these koans works. There is another koan that is often used, and I think it brings out the ways in which all these koans have a similar structure. They usually take the form of a question—either a direct question or a question about the interpretation of an act or a saying from some esteemed source. They usually sound reasonable. The last one I want to use is of this nature.

The paradox that is neatly brought out by all these answers is that the best answer is no answer. As soon as one tries to find an answer, one is caught by the question. In order to avoid being caught, one has to avoid all attempts at answers. In order to bring out this point, I invented a new koan myself: "There is a number which is less than 3 and more than 5. What is it?" Anyone who tries to answer this is simply falling for a fatal gambit. However, if I were a famous spiritual leader, it would be easy to find people to spend hours, days, or weeks trying to find the answer.

The whole object of a koan, it seems to me, is to draw in and then frustrate the intellect, thus opening the way for something deeper to arise and be recognized. In this way, it anticipates some of the latest thinking about the nature of models and the very way humans think about the world. Recent work in the field of the transpersonal, for example, has cast severe doubt on what it has called the Myth of the Given. This is the view, widely held in the West, that the world has pregiven features independent of any theory or process of consciousness and that valid knowledge consists in matching our thinking to this fixed world. This perspective is now deeply challenged by constructivism, constructionism, postmodernism, and the participatory view of the world put forward by many thinkers. Also, of course, it is challenged by Zen—the idea that everything can be known in this external way is just what one escapes from when we solve a koan. Suddenly, it becomes possible to see the freedom in which such fixed ideas cannot take hold. Such ideas "have been severely undermined by contemporary developments in the human sciences and hermeneutics, anthropology and linguistics, the philosophy and sociology of science, feminist and indigenous epistemologies, and modern cognitive science, among other disciplines" (Ferrer,

Table 4

Approaches to the Koan, "What is another?" from each of Wilber's levels of consciousness.

Level	*Response*
Magic/Mythic	*Another person is potentially threatening. Only those very close can be trusted. I shall be told whom to trust by parents and elders.*
Mental Ego	*Other people are defined by their roles. I know how to treat someone if I know what his or her role is in relation to me.*
Centaur	*I can relate to another person in an authentic way. If the other person is ready for this, I can be real and intimate with them. I do not need all the defences and can be genuinely nondefensive. But I can also be discriminating and not just a pushover. I know who I am and what I am about.*
Subtle	*Not only can I relate to another person but also I can be that person. I can enter fully into another's world and make it my world. We can meet soul to soul, and our everyday boundaries can fade away and be as nothing. There is a joy*
Causal	*My compassion is cool and steady. My boundaries are now so far away that they might as well not exist. I am open because I am everywhere. The other person just is, in the same way and in the same place, which I am.*
Nondual	*Another of these catch questions! But then, all questions are catch questions. They all invent distinctions and then puzzle over how to link the two parts they have just separated. There is no need to separate them in the first place. There is no need to invent them in the first place. You might as well try to ride an ostrich up the Matterhorn.*

2002, p.139). It is interesting that this last quotation comes from a recent exponent of transpersonal theory who is now catching up with the old Zen insights. Ferrer (2002) is not alone in this. Wilber (2002) concurred in his statement:

> A constructive postmodern approach – taken up as part of an integral approach (integrating premodern, modern and postmodern) – can leave their [earlier thinkers] important work and research just as it is, but plug their problematic epistemologies into an integral framework that gives them a fuller context. Failing that, the myth of the given, chaining minds to illusions, lives on in these endeavours, whose own self-image claims liberation, and yet the myth of the given creates the children of the lie. (p. 178)

Perhaps the Zen koan offers a means of rescue from this potentially sad state of affairs.

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