

6.4 Kōans And Mu

There is value in exercising the mind with impossible questions.

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Zen kōans are stories, statements, or questions for which a solution is sought, but no such solution or answer exists. For example:

- If a tree falls in the forest and nobody is there, does it make a sound?
- Does a dog have Buddha-nature?
- Show me your original face before you were born.

Such propositions defy our usual way of thinking, and any attempt to arrive at a definitive answer can be daunting or impossible. Nonetheless, there is value in asking them repeatedly and observing what the mind conjures in response. Sometimes, the best approach to take with these propositions is simply to experience them and give up on attempting to reach a rational reply. This attitude can be encapsulated in the concept of Mu.

Mu's meaning, at least as popularized by Robert M. Pirsig in *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, is, "No class; not one, not zero, not yes, not no," or, in short, "Unask the question." In other words, the inquiry does not fall into the category of questions with a concrete answer. Rather, it is intended as a tool to exercise the mind with the ultimate goal of completely bypassing thought and discovering one's true nature.

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- Working on kōans is a powerful path to expanding your awareness.
- Mu allows you to think the unthinkable and encapsulate in a word that which is inexpressible.

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- For some people, the fact that kōans have no correct answer can be quite frustrating.
- One can misuse Mu as a shortcut or as a way to avoid working with an impossible question and thus miss its fruits.

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There are various ways of working with kōans. Traditionally, Zen teachers assigned a specific kōan to each student with instructions to meditate on it or "walk with" it throughout the day. Students were not expected to achieve a particular correct answer but rather were judged on their overall approach. After weeks, months, or even years, the student presented a reply to their teacher, who guided them in turn using approval, disapproval, or terse further instructions. Thus, the student proceeded through a series of kōans with the intent of reshaping their mind and triggering a spiritual awakening.

These days, the traditional Zen method might not be suitable for everyone, especially Westerners. It's not easy to dedicate huge parts of one's life to practice. As Westerners, we are more used to bite-sized meditation, making our spiritual search one of a number of important activities in our

lives, as opposed to dedicating every moment to it. If you're seeking to explore this path with a more limited commitment, you might want to practice either by reading a list of kōans or a practice book or by listening to specific guided meditations that delve into kōan practice.

You may also wish to explore couples exercises such as "Who is in?" To do this, sit facing one another. One partner looks into the other's eyes and asks, "Who are you?" The other answers with whatever comes to mind. The first partner then repeats the question, whereupon the second voices another answer, and so on. The purpose of this exercise is not to cling to these answers but rather to see them as endless false attempts to answer an unanswerable question. Behind the false answers lies valuable nonverbal insight into the truth behind the words.

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1. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koan>.
2. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mu_\(negative\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mu_(negative)).

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, by Robert M. Pirsig
