

Sand in the Rice: One Koan, Infinite Possibilities

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Hsueh-feng was serving as the rice cook. Once ... the Master asked, “do you cull out pebbles and set the rice aside, or do you cull out the rice and set the pebbles aside?”

“I set aside the rice and the pebbles at one and the same time,” replied Hsueh-feng.

“What will the monks eat?” asked the Master.

Hsueh-feng immediately turned over the rice bucket.¹

This vignette exemplifies the apophatic nature of the Zen discourse in terms of action. That is, whatever statement is made about ultimate reality or the ineffable also needs to be “spoken away” or “unsaid.” Koan dialogues typically oscillate between reified reference points and the ongoing deconstruction of such references. Hsueh-feng turns over the rice bucket and walks away thus privileging neither side – rice or pebbles.

Joshu’s enigmatic response to his students regarding his encounter with the Tea Lady also serves a performative function.² That is, as Michael Sells notes, with respect to mystical languages (and certain psychoanalytic languages), that “unnameability is not only asserted, it is performed” (1998: 3).

Issues of koan interpretation center on variations in a relationship that fuses action, language and symbolism in terms of their religious function and structure. The relation between language and dialogue exemplifies this issue with equal relevance to both psychoanalysis and Zen. One might ask: “What is the intention of a statement? Does an interpretation, for instance, promote or derail dialogue?” In either case, the basic question for the iconoclastic Zennist is whether or not the interaction deconstructs reified conceptions, cuts through linear discursive thinking and dissolves dogmatic preconceptions that occlude the practitioner’s direct experience.

Similarly, the psychoanalyst might ask if an interpretation, regardless of whether or not it facilitates dialogue or engenders silence, deconstructs old object relations, self – object dyads, transferences, and synthesizes disparate aspects of the person? For instance, an obsessive narrative that leaves the analyst feeling excluded, closed out, or erased, might result in an intervention intended to disrupt the analysand’s monologue, short-circuit a tendency toward intellectualization, engender an in-the-moment, lived emotional experience, and create an opportunity for relatedness and self-reflection.

The Zen scholar Stephan Heine notes, with equal relevance to psychoanalysis that “The main factor that contributes to the effectiveness of the koan as a means of spiritual training is not a matter of setting up a contrast between words and wordlessness, speech and silence, or prolixity and brevity. Rather ... that the interpretation ... resists being turned into a formula, conceptual crutch, or object of dependence, that is, ritualized so that mere repetition diminishes spontaneity” (1994: 61).

For the analyst who practices both any response to a patient will depend on how one’s theoretical orientation and religious beliefs are internalized. For example, the psychoanalytic notion of pure neutrality, “blank screen,” or the Zen notion of “no belief” are also subject to unconscious reification, dogmatic skewing and require scrutiny.

Both Zen and psychoanalysis exploit the polysemous nature of words, phrases and silences. The capacity for a word to hold several meanings contributed to Freud’s conceptualization of unconscious processes and to his technique of unpacking condensations in dreams and to uncovering the latent meaning of manifest content. With this point in mind, koan study holds the potential to provide an entry into the examination of the multi-determined meanings and functions of the said and the unsaid without dualistic polarizations. In this regard,

we can think of Zen and psychoanalysis as members of what Matte-Blanco (1988) describes as equivalence sets that include similarities, differences and identities. For Dogen, the 13th Century Zen master, koans function both as a means and simultaneously as an expression of realization. He used what has been described as the “scenic route” because he endeavored to promote dialogue. Although recently subjected to the critique and questioning of modern scholarship, traditionally Dogen has been contrasted with the highly influential 12th Century Chinese monk, Ta-hui who utilized the *wato* or cutting-word [short cut] method to disrupt intellectualized dialogue and to provoke a self-reflective silence. In different ways, both Dogen and Ta-hui criticized traditional koan study, which they argued, shut down creative dialogue because the koan became subjected to the same pervasive reifying forces they were designed to cut through, and thus became institutionalized, codified, brittle, stagnant and oppressive.

The koan’s disruption of logical, sequential thinking engenders a gap. The iconic function of the gap, to use Eric Rhode’s meaning, facilitated by Zen praxis engenders an intuitive experiential awareness of emptiness and of the truth of “...unity of self and reality, humans and nature, subject and object” (Heine, S. 1984: 44) and that parallels what Bion describes as experienced through the intuition of “O” (1970). Bion keeps the ineffable open. He writes, “I shall use the sign O to denote that which is the ultimate reality, absolute truth, the godhead, the infinite, the thing-in-itself” (1970: 26). Rhode adds that “It explores and defines the existence of the gap, as though to exorcise the gap of meaning” (1998: 35).

In this regard, the identified and experienced gap is stripped of meaning. Meaning, from this perspective can occlude experience and thus requires deconstruction or “unsaying.”

D.T. Suzuki notes that “Zen in its essence is the art of seeing into the nature of one’s own being, and it points the way from bondage to freedom” (1949: 13).

With this Zen salvational intention in mind, we might ask “how does the koan “Joshu see through the old lady” facilitate experiential knowing of one’s own mind as the Tea Lady suggests by asserting “Go straight on!” ? Enigmatically, she directs the seeker inwardly.

Commenting on this koan, Kōun Yamada (1979) notes that “Old woman” in the Zen tradition is a title of respect that connotes a spiritually advanced being. However, women are often depicted as simultaneously wise and dangerous in the Zen literature. Not unlike the psychoanalyst, their status is often intentionally left ambiguous (Powell, W.: 1986, Heine, S.: 2002).

The text’s performative function provides access to another dimension of experiencing. What movement does the Tea Lady exert on the student who reads studies and practices this koan? Does the student look outwardly or inwardly for an answer? The Tea Lady’s response and Joshu’s silence operate to open the gap between being and knowing and stimulates the potential to alter perception, which is the key to Buddhism’s salvational function (Klein, A.:1986). In this regard, “the way to Mt. Gotai (AKA Taizan, Wu tai shen)” is the actual practice. One climbs the mountain sitting still. Mt. Gotai was believed to be the dwelling place of Manjushri who in Buddhist cosmology represents wisdom and as Robert Aitken notes “is our archetype of insight into the void” (Aitken, 1991: 196).

So the answer to the question: “straight ahead, keep practicing.” Like the New York City koan: Tourist: “How do you get to Carnegie Hall?” Taxi Driver: “Practice!”

The Tea Lady is instructing the student to go straight into his practice. Yamada notes that “...if the practitioner searches for Manjushri somewhere outside of himself, he is going the wrong way” (Op. Cit.: 164). The 9th Century Zen master Rinzai notes: “There is something at this moment at work in you, never doubting, never faltering – this is your living Manjushri” (Op.

Cit.:196). As icon Manjushri becomes an entry point into internal self-insight; into “O” evolution. As idol he is worshipped and sought after externally.

Michael Eigen writes that “Bion notes that the human race is ill-equipped to tolerate its own experiential capacity. It naturally orients itself toward external objects and the tasks of survival” (1993: 224). For the Buddhist, ignorance, an active not-knowing, reifies fluid experience and phenomena into solid fact, engenders a separation of self and other, and perpetuates grasping for externals such for Manjushri and Mt Gotai. Joshu’s silence, the student’s mindless walking, the Tea Lady’s ambiguous directive reflect different aspects of this fundamental human tendency and become simultaneously a diagnosis and a prescription.

Eigen also notes that “It is more natural to be related to objects in sensuous terms and avoid the uncanny intuition of alternate psychic realities” (Op. cit.: 220-221). Koan practice and the psychoanalytic encounter, similarly, are *not* natural psychic realities. They both press through and beyond old established patterns of individual and mass hallucination. This koan functions as a tool that reflects this basic movement and the difficulties encountered in the process involved in cutting through established patterns of reasoning, and intellect, with its dualistic baggage, hardened through time and experience. Bion describes this process of movement as emotionally turbulent and catastrophic, ultimately engendering the experience of “at-one-ment.” Heine characterizes this process as a “constructive conflict resulting in a spiritual release from fixation and delusion” (1994: 51). A koan does propel the practitioner to a basic ground of being, which Lopez- Korvo identifies by defining, “O” alternatively as “origin.” (2005: 314). Lopez-Korvo quotes Herrigel’s classic, *Zen and the Art of Archery*. “He must dare to leap into the Origin so as to live by Truth, like one who has become one with it”³ However, its important to note here that a significant point of divergence, between Bion and the Zen

experience, related to this ground of being, is that Bion struggles with the original catastrophe of psychic birth. Zen posits an original existential anxiety that reifies experience which is then maintained by this active “not knowing” and that supports splitting and reification.”

Reification processes contribute to a patient’s transferences and object relations. Anxiety forces the individual’s search into the external world. For example, Glenn presents to me as helpless and wants to move forward. He pressures me for direction and for answers. His path to Mt. Gotai is his development, which he describes as delayed. He sees himself as “lagging behind, immature, a Peter Pan.” Unable to tolerate internal states, he compares himself to a rudderless boat that does fine on a calm sea, but not in an emotional storm. His need to present himself this way resides in unconscious dimensions of the transference. Without experiencing the transparency of this reified transference dynamic, Glenn’s aggression, capacity for assertion and self-motivation remain split-off and his life remains stalled.

Language is also subject to reification processes and results in the activation of the idolic function of the koan. As idol, Manjushri and Mt. Gotai are both taken as a linear, sequential, logical external literal path “straight ahead!” The monk who continues on this literal path simply accumulates. Bion describes “K” accumulations, which saturate psychic space, cloud the gap and foreclose potential “O” evolutions. Eric Rhode describes the destructive function of “K” accumulations related to a pervasive over idealization of the scientific model and the complimentary devaluation of the mystical model. He points to the pervasiveness of unconscious reification processes which he identifies as a “specificity and configuration.” Human beings crave structure, predictability and the illusion of an ordered reality. It *feels* better when things make sense. Freud's dictum “Where id was shall ego be” echoes this basic need. The Tea Lady’s rote response represents this craving for structure, answers, predictability. However, her noted

ambiguity also simultaneously points to infinite possibilities presented by the potential gap. She points to a disconnection from internal awareness and responds to the question in terms of its religious or salvational significance. However, the student hears her answer from a linear perspective. In order to hear from the mystical perspective, all expectations need to be dropped. Such expectations, when not dropped, as noted above, saturate psychic space and obscure the “void” from which Bion argues ultimate truth can be intuited.

This position holds practical implications. For example, we can view meditation as palliative or as radically salvational. Joshu remains silent. He offers no solution, no palliative. Can Glenn steer his own boat or does he need a palliative reassuring tow? Both functions exist in the practice. As palliative the gap becomes sealed along with the anxiety engendered by awareness of the gap and the overwhelming infinite possibilities that it presents. As radically salvational, the gap opens and the void is experienced as it is. “Just this!” “Just this!”

Similarly, a psychoanalytic interpretation can function in both ways. An interpretation that Bion would describe as well-practiced, rote and over-saturated with meaning closes off the gap. Zen monk Hogen notes: “If one just sticks to his teacher’s way and memorizes his expressions, it is not penetrating enlightenment at all and he is totally in the realm of intellectual knowledge” (In: Cleary, T., 1979, xxxii).

Such an interpretation might be viewed as the “last word.” If the patient disagrees, s/he is believed to be resistant. We are all familiar with the extensive psychoanalytic literature on resistance, which I am not interested in devaluing or negating. I simply point out its vulnerability to reification processes and the potential for oppression when viewed and misused dogmatically or rigidly in an endeavor to foreclose the gap. The iconic function of the interpretation facilitates openings, it becomes a creative entry point, and an invitation just as the Tea Lady invites the

student to open up to an alternative way of experiencing that is not necessarily linear and logical. The call is to break out of the tyranny of oppression of preconception and dogma. From the point of view of logical thinking, question and answer imply cause and effect in linear progression and are part of what Eric Rhode describes as "... an idealization of continuity" (1998: 20). The intuited meaning becomes occluded by an oversaturation of continuity. He notes that "In the religious vertex, on the other hand, discontinuity may be a source of meaning" (Op. cit.: 20). Similarly, none of our concepts and intellect-driven ideas facilitate contact with the experienced wisdom that the koan holds. None of our well-reasoned hypotheses about a patient's unconscious dynamics can replace the lived experience of the moment-to-moment fluctuations of lived Truth.

The iconic function engenders access to the infinite. This is the iconic function of the koan. This is the iconic function of a good interpretation: opening, expanding, creating more emotional elbow room. Joshu "gets" the iconic function of the Tea Lady's directive. Do we "get" it? Can the Zennist climb Mt. Gotai sitting still on the cushion breath-by-breath? Can we, sitting still with our patients hour-by-hour?

In his commentary, Mumon asks, "Tell me now what insight did Joshu have into the old woman?" (Shibayama, Z., 1974: 164). Do we really need to know? Joshu's insight is his own. Hence, silence. My insight is my own. Glenn's is his own. Can insight be embraced and then relinquished before it becomes another source of saturation and foreclosure? What insight will facilitate an awareness of our rote, habitual repetitions, our transferences and our countertransferences, our capacity for and our failures in attention and intuition of evolving truth?

Some Concluding Remarks:

Joshu's silence typifies the apophatic approach. "At the heart of that unsaying is a radical dialectic of transcendence and immanence. That which is utterly "beyond" is revealed or reveals itself as most intimately "within" (Sells, M., 1994: 7). At-one-ment evolves experientially. In his commentary, Mumon notes, "For the first time her heart and soul were penetrated by a true acquaintance." (166).

Herbert Rosenfeld writes that:

"I have found that patients respond to our interpretations not only as tools which make them aware of the meaning of the unconscious and conscious processes, but also as a reflection of the analyst's state of mind ...particularly his capacity to retain quietness and peacefulness and to focus on the central aspects of the patient's conscious and preconscious anxieties" (1987: 31) [And] "It is very reassuring for the patient if the analyst can succeed both in functioning well in his interpretive role and in retaining his quiet thoughtful state of mind" (Op. cit: 40).

What is Joshu's fault? Did he fail to sit still as Rosenfeld suggests? Can Joshu see through for others? The student must see for himself. Joshu can't do this for him. But, Joshu does, in fact, have his own insight. He "saw for himself." If he shared his insight, he would only be creating more "sand in rice" Can I sit still with Glenn or do I need to help him in reaction to my own anxiety? How can the analyst abstain from creating "sand in rice" while simultaneously sharing observations? Cynthia Stone addresses this question in the context of primary and secondary process.⁴ Depending on how it is used, language can create or destroy true insight. Joshu does not judge or evaluate. He witnesses and just sits with the experience, "just this!" He makes no diagnosis.

As analysts we are continuously faced with the fork in the road between conscious and unconscious, primary and secondary, knowledge and truth. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive states that one must choose. There is no privilege. Both forms of experience are necessary for an integrated and whole psychoanalysis.

Relationship implies a dialogue of what is said and/or not said. This dialogue is an important aspect of Zen training. Heine observes that "... genuine awareness must come through an active engagement with another person who helps illuminate the self. Ideally, this encounter becomes equalized without a sense of priority or hierarchy in the relationship ... "killing the Buddha" requires eliminating the gap between superiority and inferiority, or objective instruction and inner realization" (1994: 47). Hence, Joshu's visit and his resulting silence. In this manner, Joshu shifts responsibility for inner realization from external objects to a dialogically engendered self-realization and experientially realized personal discovery. We see this trend in contemporary subjectivity theory and in relational models. Without attention to the dyad in Zen practice and in the consulting room and in the Zen / psychoanalytic conversation we are left with "sand in rice", "thorns in mud" and the potential for stagnation.

The dialogue between the Tea Lady and the monk is no ordinary conversation. It is a teaching directed toward the kanna-zen practitioner. It contains both primary and secondary process in that it is both performative and exerts an emotional impact and didactic or informational. The monk locked into secondary process is listening and simultaneously unable to listen.

In another koan the questioning monk is told "Wash Your Bowl!" In pointing to the sand in rice, we are being asked to wash our bowls to see clearly what is. Without the obfuscation of theory, pre-conception, etc.; seeing clearly what is, no more, no less in the said and unsaid

moments of a psychoanalytic session. As Cynthia notes: “Both Zen and psychoanalysis aim at opening the channels to genuine experiences of the sensory, affective, undifferentiated primary process in the context of secondary process, adaptive functioning.” This koan shows how the intrusion of secondary process can obscure our capacity for intuitive knowing. As such, the koan might serve to explore subtle nuances of relationships in the psychoanalytic encounter.

The Zen / psychoanalytic conversation is a dialogue in and of itself that uses two very different languages and that holds the capacity to transform into a mutually enriched language. Often, the scientific language becomes privileged while mystical languages become subsumed although their presence and influence can be traced. Various permutations represent what Matte-Blanco describes as occurring along a continuum of “symmetrization,” oscillating between foreground and background. I feel invited by Cynthia Stone’s presentation to listen to the said and to the unsaid of both. Now we are challenged to discover, create, co-create, re-create what Truths might emerge in this lived moment.

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¹ The Record of Tung-shan (Trans.: W. F. Powell, 1986, p. 37)

² “Joshu Sees Through the Old Woman.” Joshu was a renowned Zen master in 9th century China. The koan goes as follows:

“A monk of Joshu’s asked an old woman the way to Mt. Gotai. She said, ‘Go straight on.’ After the monk had taken three or five steps, she said, ‘He may look like a fine monk, but he too goes off like that.’ Afterwards another monk told Joshu about this and Joshu said, ‘Wait a bit; I’ll go and investigate that old woman for you.’ The next day off he went and asked her same question and got the same reply. On returning, Joshu announced to his assembly of monks, ‘I’ve seen through the old woman of Mt. Gotai for you.’”

³ (1953: 80-81) In R. Lopez-Korvo (Op. Cit.: 317).

⁴ IFPE (2007) Conference presentation by C. Stone, Ph.D. “Sand in the Rice: Attention, Attunement and Hearing What is Not Said”