

# Zen Koans

## Ancient Wisdom for Today

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To my beloved Nation of Four  
*Concordia Domi – Foris Pax*

*We cannot see our reflection in running water.  
It is only in still water that we can – Zen proverb.*

### **Acknowledgements**

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Also the *Turrbal* and *Jagera* indigenous peoples, on whose ancestral land I write this book. This ancient continent has a profound story for those who would listen.

## Zen Koans

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The kōan is an enigmatic or paradoxical question used to develop a person's Intuition. Kōans are a valuable tool in your quest for enlightenment, but how do they work and why use them?

Kōans work by confounding logic and forcing a person out of their normal thinking and into the realm of Intuition. In other words, the inherent meaning is inaccessible to rational understanding, but perhaps accessible to Intuition.

This book presents some of the classic kōans from traditional Zen, originally written hundreds of years ago in Japanese, and re-interpreted from early English translations into early 21<sup>st</sup> Century English. The underlying meaning is still there, so they will still work as a kōan should, but they are expressed in language more easily understood by people in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

Each kōan encapsulates a profound truth for reflection. Zen counsels the lessening of the ego, not the strengthening of it as consumer culture would urge. Instead of making a name for ourselves in society, we should *listen to the voice of pines and cedars when no wind stirs*, in other words become *nothing*, entering instead the field of pure being that is behind the phenomenal world.

## ***The cup of tea***

A Zen master received a visit from a university professor who wanted the master to add to his knowledge by telling him about Zen.

The master politely offered the professor some tea. The professor accepted and the master poured the tea from the pot into the cup. When the cup was full, he kept pouring. The tea overflowed, much to the consternation of the professor who said, *there is no more room in the cup, it is overfull.*

The master replied, *the cup is like your mind, already full of opinions and beliefs. How can I teach you Zen unless you first empty your mind?*

## ***Is that so?***

A Zen master lived in a village and was respected by all for his virtuous ways.

One of his neighbours, a grocer, had a teenage daughter. One day, her parents discovered she was pregnant. They demanded angrily to know who the father was. Eventually the girl told her parents that it was master.

The parents were furious. They confronted the master with the accusation. All the master said was *is that so?* The parents went about the district, spreading blame with the intention of destroying the master's reputation. When word of this reached the master, all he said was *is that so?*

Months passed. When the child was born, the mother's parents took the baby to the master saying he was morally

obliged to care for the child. The master replied, *is that so?* He embraced the baby, and took good care of him.

When the baby was a year old, the mother could stand it no longer. Tearfully she told her parents that it was the butcher's boy who is the baby's father, not the master.

The baby's grand-parents were ashamed of the harm they had caused the master. They went again to the master's house and begged forgiveness. They wanted to return the baby to his mother who was to be wed to the butcher's boy. The master willingly gave them the baby, saying only *is that so?*

## ***Obedience***

A certain master was known for his down-to-earth talks that were aimed not just at students of Zen, but to people from all backgrounds. He did not quote from the Holy Scriptures; instead he spoke in everyday language from his heart to the hearts of those that listened.

A serious-minded priest from a certain sect known for its hard-line attitudes heard about the master. He was angered by what he heard. Members of the sect were leaving because they found the master more inspiring.

He, the priest intended to confront the master and humiliate him. So he went to the master's forum, and in front of the assembled listeners challenged the master to a debate. The priest said *those who respect you might obey you; but I do not respect you. See if you can make me obey?*

The master said *come up and sit beside me and I will show you.*

The priest muscled his way through the crowd to where the master sat. The master smiled, saying *come and sit here on my left*. The priest obeyed.

*No*, said the master, *on second thoughts it would be better if you sit here on my right*. Again, the priest obeyed.

*You see*, said the master, *you are obeying me, and I think you are basically a good person. Now sit down and listen*.

## ***If you love, love openly***

Twenty monks and one nun were studying meditation with a master.

The nun was a beautiful woman, a fact that was not lost on the monks, despite her head being shaven and her clothes very plain. Several of the monks fell in love with her. One went so far as to write her a letter, insisting that she meet him secretly.

The nun did not respond to the letter. The next day the master gave a lecture to the group. When it was finished, the nun stood up and addressed the monk who had written her the letter. *If you love me so much, embrace me now in front of everyone*.

## ***No loving - kindness***

An old woman had supported a reclusive monk for 20 years. She had built a modest hut for him, and provided food so that he might have the means to achieve enlightenment.

The old woman wondered whether the monk was making any progress after all this time. To find out, she asked a friend, a young woman who enjoyed sex, to go to the monk to see if she could seduce him.

The young woman went to the monk and tried to seduce him, saying (in effect) *let's have sex now*.

*An old tree grows on a cold rock in winter, the monk replied somewhat cryptically, Nowhere is there any warmth.*

The young woman went to the old and reported.

*To think I fed and housed that fellow for 20 years said the old woman angrily. He shows no compassion towards you. He need not have allowed himself to be seduced, but he should have shown you kindness.*

She went that same day to the hut of the monk and burned it to the ground.

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