

KOAN-TEDDIES

The Tao of Teddy bear



Jarmo Saarti

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Kōans and their significance in Buddhist meditation

Kōans are short texts or narratives used in Zen practice. Their purpose is to induce a mental state of great confusion or suspicion in the student or novice monk. They seek to have the same effect as an unexpected slap: the mental state is shaken and the experiencer loses control of his constructed mind and, in trying to restore it, finds his task hopeless. You have to step outside the narrative in your own mind.

Kōans can take the form of short stories, dialogues, arguments, even jokes, and thus they also have cultural-historical value, especially when real or invented religious authorities have been used as persons. They also always inform about the time, landscape as well as the people and their culture in which they were created.

Enlightenment, or satori, has also been sought or defined with the help of kōans. The definition of that space is fuzzy, as is the space itself. Buddhist rhetoric and logic involve a lot of talk and definitions of what cannot be defined or verbalized.

A similar way of speaking can be found in several religions and especially in their branches that are familiar with or steeped in mysticism. The allegory of enlightenment is indeed a frequently used description of satori. However, in the speech of the masters, it is not clear whether this space actually exists or that it is somehow fuzzy or vague to the experiencer of the space. It simply is. Seeing directly or looking past one's own mind is satori.

The purpose of Zen practice is to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the universe and its relationships in this moment and the kōans can serve as a tool here. Satori, or genuine understanding, involves both liberation and freedom. Liberation takes place by understanding the limits of one's own mind and at the same time overcoming one's own mind's limitations.

Freedom is when you move to understand or perhaps better, experience how the universe is. This experience cannot be exhaustively explained, but only experienced. A master can only lead his student towards this state. This space is not collective.

Practicing is central to the practice of Zenism. It is based on repetition and continuous structures created by practitioners. The exercise is divided into meditation, study of texts (e.g., kōans) and everyday lifestyle.

Repetition is important due to the fact that the structures that kōans aim to break have arisen through the long history of both humanity and the individual. That's why they don't break easily: even though the descriptions of enlightenment look plain - the path to enlightenment is not easy and you have to continue with it in everyday life all the time.

The purpose of meditation is to understand the workings of the perceiving and meaning-generating mind, and at the same time to strive to move away from such structures that prevent direct experience. The study of the text expands the understanding of the history of experiencing and being, and at the same time reveals something about the activity that creates meaning and its historical nature.

Everyday life is related to the cycle of human being in the flesh. Eastern thinking about discipline in carnality also strives to liberate the individual from those concepts and the customs and commitments born through concepts that society and history have created. We often take them for granted and as the only right ways that things should be. These habits can represent the same obstacle in spiritual development as erroneous thinking. More specifically: realizing that what we do and think is not who we really are, is key.

The following discussions and their explanatory texts serve as an exercise in developing the mind and actions towards liberation. You can read them as a basis for your own meditation or act them out with a friend who is on the same path.

Talking out loud and dialogue is a good way to practice common meditation as a daily lifestyle. In addition, laughing is desirable - humor and experiencing the world through laughter is a key part of freedom from suffering and living in the moment.

Sources and further reading

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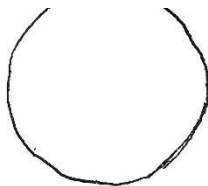
My master and me

I had wandered wearily for thousands of miles. Looking for something I had lost. My eyes were watering and the sun was heating up. I couldn't go on any longer, but I won't go back to where I started, the place I had left behind a long time ago.

I sat down and looked out into the valley. I saw a sturdy monk there, sitting on the ground and smiling with his eyes, invitingly.

I felt like asking him something related to my life and its purpose.

However, we drank tea first.



**I WOULD LIKE
TO TRAVEL
AROUND THE WORLD!**

**BUT
YOU'RE
ALREADY
THERE.**

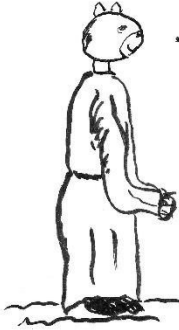


The first lesson

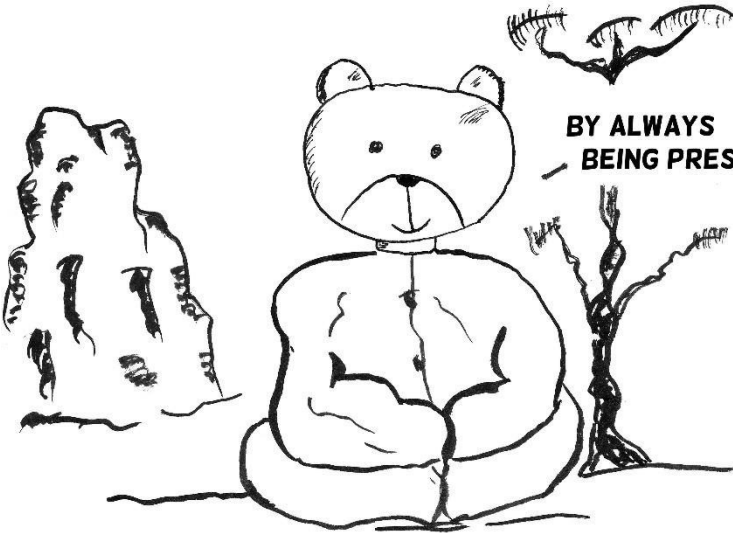
I was sure that the master wouldn't even talk to me on the first day. How wrong I was.

I always felt like I wasn't caught in the moment that mattered. My eyes wandered and my mind ran from place to place like a wild stallion in a meadow in the springtime.

We sat next to each other and listened to the silence.



**HOW CAN
I BE AWAY?**



**BY ALWAYS
BEING PRESENT.**

Koan Teddy bears meditate on the meaning of life and the meaning of being. Together they seek enlightenment and enjoy nature as it is. They ask us for a joint journey to learn the truths of Zen.

The nineteenth lesson

I pulled myself together from small pieces, I started thinking too much about me, myself. I was like I was the only one.

My master said:

- Who will remember you when you leave this world?

I had to start all over again, the fool.

Jarmo Saarti acted as the Library Director of the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) from 2010 till 2021. He has published about 300 professional and academic papers and he has written, co-written or edited about 50 books.

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