INTRODUCTION TO *THE IRON FLUTE*

Not What You Think

by Steve Hagen

When I first began practicing Zen under Dainin Katagiri Roshi, he asked me to comment on a Zen koan. I told him, in all honesty, that I found the koan puzzling. Immediately his face wrinkled up as if he had bitten into a lemon. “Not puzzle!” he shouted. He quickly made it clear to me that Zen teachings are not puzzles to which we students are expected to come up with clever answers.

People often think of koans as riddles or problems that need to be solved. But this is not the case at all. With every koan, the point is not to arrive at an answer through our ordinary, conceptualizing minds. Rather, the point is to see for ourselves that our concepts can never provide us with a satisfying answer. (This is not that satisfaction cannot be found. It can—but not through any concept or explanation.)

Unlike school exams, koans are not a matter of coming up with the right answer and thereby winning an endorsement or gaining the teacher’s approval. There is a great deal more at play in these exchanges between Zen teachers and their students. Indeed, if it were merely a matter of coming up with the right answer, you could simply look it up in one of several volumes that claim to provide answers to koans. But in an exchange with a true teacher, this isn’t going to do you much good. If you don’t understand the heart of a koan, it will be quite obvious the moment you’re asked a follow-up question—one that’s not in one of the books.

No concept, no idea, no piece of intellection will ever give you “the answer.” Whether we’re talking about life or koans (the same thing, really), there are no pat answers or solutions.

For this reason, koans have often been labeled anti-intellectual, or irrational, or as invitations for us to abandon ourselves to our impulses or our irrational minds. Indeed, some people unfamiliar with Zen think that Zen practice is about acting strange and silly, or making outlandish statements, or forgetting everything and just letting the flowers bloom. Some scholars and writers have even claimed that the purpose of koans is to break down and destroy the intellect. None of this, however, is true.

Though koans do reach beyond reason, they’re not a call to destroy or deny the intellect. They simply point out that Reality is not to be captured in a thought, or a phrase, or an explanation. Reality is the direct *seeing* of the world as it is, not as our intellects map it, describe it, or conceive it.

It’s not that human intellect is bad or that we must get rid of it; but we must bring ourselves back to the fact that the intellect can only construct models of Reality, never Reality itself. Our problem, however, is that we get taken in by our mental constructions, mistaking them for

Reality. The fact is that Reality cannot be constructed, nor does it need to be. It's already *here*—and we're all inseparable from it. If we could only *see this,* we'd be freed from a great and painful burden. We'd no longer be confused or cowed by human life.

Another common misunderstanding of koans is that they are exercises of wit in which the teacher asks the question, and the student must immediately come back with an adroit response. In this erroneous view, koans are a jousting game in which teacher and student strike and counter-strike, each trying to best the other. Though some teacher/student exchanges may give this appearance, to use the model of a debate or contest is to miss the point entirely.

Koans also have a reputation for being paradoxical, enigmatic, and inscrutable—and, thus, Zen itself has gotten a reputation for being the same. But koans themselves are not paradoxes at all. Rather, they direct our attention to the sense of contradiction or paradox that naturally arises in any conception of the world. Koans help us to see that these apparent contradictions in fact occur only within our minds, not within the world itself.

Rather than serving up an idea or conceptual framework that will supposedly save us, koans help us to recognize how we constantly do indeed reach for prefabricated explanations and answers. They also help us to see that this never gets us anywhere. Indeed, it is this very grasping for conceptual solutions and explanations that causes us so many problems. Yet even as we grasp at concepts, we overlook the supreme treasure that is right at hand—Reality itself.

The term *koan* is generally translated as "public case." But what, exactly, makes a koan public? Simply this: every koan is a finger pointing to Reality, to what is *right now, right here.* Reality is totally and immediately available to everyone all the time. It doesn't have to be transmitted to you by a teacher. In fact, it can't be. You can't get it from a book, either. Nobody can hand it to you. It's already *right here.* We're inseparable from it. There's nothing in our experience more public that Truth or Reality itself.

The koans presented in this volume were collected in the eighteenth century C.E by Genro, a Soto Zen master. This may seem somewhat unusual, since koans are thought to be more widely used by Rinzai Zen teachers. The Soto school generally does not use koans in one-to-one teacher/student interactions. This is probably due to Dogen Zenji, who transmitted Soto Zen from China to Japan in the thirteenth century C.E. Though he used koans as teaching stories, he frowned on their regular use as hoops for students to jump through. He found such graduated training to be wide of the mark and short on delivery.

Dogen defined the term *ko* as "sameness" or "ultimate equality." According to Dogen, every thing, thought, or emotion we encounter or experience is an equal and necessary component of Reality. Nothing is superfluous. Nothing is left out. In fact, nothing *can* be left out. Whether we recognize it or not, we're always dealing with Totality, which is utterly beyond our concepts of part or whole, equal or unequal.

The term *an,* according to Dogen, means that everything within Totality has its own natural territory or sphere. For Dogen, then, a true koan is an authentic expression of the merging of difference and unity, the thoroughgoing interpenetration of the Whole and its "parts."

Related to the matter of Totality is non-duality. Our conceptualizing minds are highly dualistic. They keep themselves busy thinking, analyzing, controlling, and scheming. To such a mind, everything is either good or bad, right or wrong, friend or foe, this or that—or else off our personal radar altogether. But koans point beyond all this, to the immediate and first-hand non-duality of Reality. Koans are expressions of immediate awareness—before we categorize, label, arrange, or evaluate everything.

Koans also point to the freedom of non-attachment—a major theme in Zen. Non-attachment is the recognition that thoughts of "this is right and that is wrong," "this we should do and that we shouldn't do," "it ought to be like this," or "this is what I want, and that is what I don't want," only serve to make our lives complicated, contradictory, confusing, and ultimately unbearable. Such thinking fills our hearts and minds with longing and loathing—all of which drives us to anger, frustration, and despair. Koans cut through such confusion and draw our attention to things as they are, before we make judgments about them and create contradictions for ourselves.

Non-attachment is not the same as detachment. Detachment presumes the realness of the objects of our longing and loathing, then counsels us to turn away from them. It's an attempt to escape from Reality. But there is no escape from Reality. Non-attachment, on the other hand, is to see the emptiness, the non-particularity, of every thing or thought we encounter.

Koans speak of genuineness and ordinariness—actual, True, Reality—without any need for explanation, embellishment, or improvement. They remind us that we don't need to push the river, or add legs to the snake.

Reality is always *right there,* out in the open—a public case. Dealing with it is forever a matter of calming down, focusing, and noticing how we spend the greater portion of our time explaining everything to ourselves. Koans—like meditation—are a practical way of watching our own minds, paying careful attention to what is really going on, and perceiving Reality directly, free of our ideas about it, explanations for it, and habitual responses to it.

In short, koans are serious business. They're about life and death, about all our deepest questions and concerns—the ones that are most immediate, urgent, and unavoidable. Life isn't a matter of pleasing the teacher or getting the right answer or passing a test. Koans direct us to be present with what is going on *now,* and to notice how our minds respond to *this.*

Once this is seen, there's no wasting of the day, or yourself, or the world. What binds you drops away, and you will let it go.