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The Phenomenology of Koan Meditation in Zen Buddhism

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Abstract

Zen students described their experiences when working with koans, and a phenomenological method was used to identify the structure of those experiences. Zen koans are statements or stories developed in China and Japan by Zen masters in order to help students transform their conscious awareness of the world. Eight participants including 3 females and 5 males from Southern California with 1 to 30 years of experience in Zen answered open-ended questions about koan practice in one tape-recorded session for each participant. Reflection yielded the following thematic clusters: (a) motivation, (b) approaches to working with koans, (c) experiences while working with koans, (d) experiences of insight into koans, (e) working with a teacher, and (f) transformation. Participants described positive transformations including better control of emotions and concentration, better awareness of prejudices and biases with the ability to suppress those types of habitual associations, and a new relation to and acceptance of spiritual questions and doubts.

Keywords

koans, meditation, phenomenology, Zen, transformation

Psychology studies human behavior and experience in an attempt to understand the characteristics of human existence and where possible to improve the quality of life. Religions also seek to improve the quality of people's lives, although the methods may be different from those of psychology. Psychologists can help strengthen the bridge between psychology and religion through a systematic investigation of the activities and experiences of practitioners of the various religions. The current study attempts

to provide a description of the experiences of those who practice koan meditation in Zen Buddhism in the hope that this information will provide some insight into the psychology of that religion.

History and Principles of Buddhism

A brief review of the history and principles of Buddhism is included in order to establish some background for this study. It is difficult to understand the narrative of persons practicing a religion without some understanding of the language and history of that religion. For a complete review of the history of Buddhism and Zen, the reader is referred to more detailed texts (Bercholz & Kohn, 1993; Dumoulin, 1963; Lopez, 2001; Seager, 1999; Smith, 1991; D. T. Suzuki, 1964).

The Buddha was born in 563 BC in what is now Nepal. He was the son of a king, and his name at birth was Siddhartha Gautama of the Sakyas (Smith, 1991). After coming into contact with an old man, a diseased man, and a corpse, he realized that his father's wealth could not prevent him from suffering old age, disease, and death. Siddhartha began a spiritual quest through which he became the enlightened one, the Buddha. The teachings of the Buddha are based upon what he learned in his quest for enlightenment. These teachings are the foundation of Buddhism, and they influenced the development of many of the forms used in Zen including koan practice.

One of the most important teachings is the Four Noble Truths including: (1) truth of suffering, (2) truth of the origin of suffering, (3) truth of the cessation of suffering, and (4) truth of the means to putting an end to suffering (Lopez, 2001). The truth of suffering includes the trauma of birth, sickness, decrepitude, phobia of death, separation from what we love, and being tied to what we dislike (Smith, 1991). The truth of the origin of suffering is that it is caused by ignorance of the law of causality and of the nature of reality (Dalai Lama, 1999). The truth of cessation of suffering describes the absence of suffering achieved by overcoming the causes of suffering. The truth of the path to end suffering is the prescription or treatment to develop a direct intuitive realization of emptiness and this leads to the cessation of suffering (Dalai Lama, 1999). Emptiness comes from an understanding of dependent origination according to the

Buddha, who taught that objects and events do not have an independent existence because they are the result of various causal factors (Dalai Lama, 1999). The false sense of an independent existence of things and events in our minds is a result of the conventional identity that we assign to the aggregation of particular characteristics. This false sense of independent existence includes, for example, our concept of a separate self, but in truth, the self is only an aggregate of our experiences and thoughts. Belief in a separate and lasting self ultimately leads to suffering when this false sense of self is confronted by sickness and death, which are perceived as unnatural attacks on our false sense of an absolute, immortal self. If we can stop projecting qualities on things in the world, we can overcome strong afflictive emotions like anger and hatred that assume the existence of an objective reality. Understanding appearances and dependent origination prevents the suffering that comes from grasping onto absolutes that don't exist (Dalai Lama, 1999).

Buddhism spread from India into China in the late 5th century where an early form of Zen emerged and was known as Chan. Chan developed and flourished in China for many centuries. Confucianism and especially Taoism had a strong influence on Chan (Smith, 1991; Watts, 1961). The primary practice in Zen is sitting in *zazen* (Austin, 1998; Buksbazen, 2002; Dogen, 1971; Kapleau, 2000; Loori, 1992; D. T. Suzuki, 1964). *Zazen* is a type of meditation described by Master Dogen in his work called, *Fukenzazengi* (Dogen, 1977). A meditator maintains a straight back and places the hands in their lap with the palms up and the thumbs lightly touching. The meditator then begins to think of not thinking. *Zazen* is viewed as the way that a meditator realizes his or her own nature and the nature of the mind (D. T. Suzuki, 1964). By understanding the nature of the self, one learns to avoid attachments and grasping for absolutes, which is the cause of suffering (Loori, 1992; Puhakka, 1998; D. T. Suzuki, 1964, S. Suzuki, 1970).

The use of koans was a unique development within Zen (Chan) meditation practice (Austin, 1998; Kubose, 1973; Glassman, 1979; Miura & Sasaki, 1966; Puhakka, 1998; D. T. Suzuki, 1964). Koans are questions and stories provided for students that cannot be understood on a conceptual level. Koans exhaust the logical activity of the mind so that the mind will break out of its conventional view of the nature of reality (Smith, 1991). According to Miura and Sasaki (1965, p. xi), "When the koan is

resolved, it is realized to be a simple and clear statement made for the state of consciousness which it has helped to awaken.”

The Chan masters in China began to develop and use koans when teaching students. Chan split into two major schools in China during the ninth century. The Soto school emphasizes gradual enlightenment through sitting in *zazen* without the use of koans. The Rinzai school emphasizes sudden enlightenment through sitting in *zazen*, koan study, and personal interviews with the master. The Zen masters that are associated with bringing these schools to Japan from China include Dogen (1200–1253) who helped introduce the Soto school and Hakuin (1686–1769) who helped introduce the Rinzai school in Japan (Austin, 1998). Hakuin was the first Zen master to gather koans and start organizing a system of koan practice that is currently in use (Glassman, 1979). The practice of using koans was brought to the United States from Japan by a number of Japanese masters such as the late Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi who founded the Zen Center of Los Angeles in 1967.

The Zen Master uses the koan to stimulate the student to come to the truth of Zen more rapidly than simply through *zazen*. Koan practice helps students obtain glimpses of the nature of dependent origination, for example, as opposed to our conventional view of reality where self and other have independent identities. Dependent origination is a very difficult concept to fully accept and apply to daily life, which is why Zen masters began using koan practice as a means for helping students directly experience the ineffable. The typical procedure used for koan practice includes meditation and one-to-one interviews with a Zen teacher. The teacher assigns a koan to a student during an interview, and then after the interview, the student sits with the koan in *zazen* and waits for an insight to understand or penetrate the koan. Interviews typically occur once per week unless the student is attending a Zen retreat called a *sesshin* during which students meditate 4 to 6 hours per day and meet daily with a teacher. At each interview with the teacher, the student is expected to present an understanding of the koan. The presentation is typically some sort of physical movement instead of verbal comment although it is possible to use either verbal or physical expressions. The teacher may reject the presentation and send the student back to sit with the koan, or the teacher may accept the presentation and give the student a new koan. The teacher rings a small bell to signal the end of the interview.

There is no literature available on what a teacher looks for in a student's presentation, but it is unlikely that there is only one appropriate physical movement that expresses an understanding of a koan. Zen practitioners who wish to become teachers receive their training through participation in koan practice with a Zen master, and the master determines when the student has gained sufficient understanding of Zen to become a teacher. The lineage of this dharma transmission, as it is called, is carefully recorded and honored within the Zen tradition.

One koan in particular is well known among Zen practitioners. It is known as the koan, Mu, although the title for the koan in the *Gateless Gate* (Yamada, 1979) is "Joshu's Dog." The koan is usually the first koan given in a monastic setting, but some teachers in the United States give other koans to lay persons first because of the difficult nature of this koan for someone living outside the monastery. The koan is presented here for two reasons. First, several of the participants in this research project comment on their experiences with this koan. Second, the koan will provide the reader with some sense of how the teachings of Zen point the way toward spiritual understanding, but the lessons cannot fully describe the spiritual experience of Zen. There always seems to be irrational or mysterious aspects to the teachings.

The presentation of the koan, Mu, in the *Gateless Gate* includes the text of the koan, commentary on the koan, a verse, and a lesson or *teisho* on the koan (Yamada, 1979). Only the koan and a part of the commentary are given below for space considerations.

Joshu's Dog

A monk ask Joshu in all earnestness, "Has a dog Buddha nature or not?"
Joshu answered, "Mu!"

Mumon's Commentary

For the practice of Zen, you must pass the barrier set up by the ancient masters of Zen. To attain to marvelous enlightenment, you must completely extinguish all the delusive thoughts of the ordinary mind. If you have not passed the barrier and have not extinguished delusive thoughts, you are a phantom haunting the weeds and trees. Now, just tell me, what is the barrier set up by the Zen masters of old? Merely this Mu—the one barrier of our sect. It has come to be called "The Gateless Barrier of the Zen Sect."

Those who have passed the barrier are able not only to see Joshu face to face, but also to walk hand in hand with the whole descending line of Zen masters. . . .

Some explanation of the koan is necessary. The principal character in the koan, Joshu, is a renowned Chinese Zen master, and he appears to be challenged by a monk. Buddha-nature is the subject of the koan, and it is one of the fundamental principles of Mahayana Buddhism. All sentient beings possess a Buddha-nature, and therefore it is possible for them to attain enlightenment and become a Buddha. All animals including dogs would be considered by Zen Buddhists to have a Buddha-nature and the monk would probably know this (Yasutani, 2000). Joshu appears to answer in the negative however because the meaning of the Japanese word Mu is, “nothing, not, nothingness, is not, has not, not any,” according to Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener (1991).

Yasutani (2000) provides a detailed commentary on this koan, and he attempts to explain why Joshu answers, “Mu!” Briefly, the koan is not about whether a dog does or does not have a Buddha-nature because everything is Buddha-nature, and either a positive or negative answer is absurd because there is no particular thing called Buddha-nature. Anything a person can imagine has Buddha-nature as its source and therefore cannot be Buddha-nature. Buddha-nature is beyond conceptualization because we are Buddha-nature, but we can still become aware of it and experience it according to Yasutani. Joshu is trying to get the monk to abandon his intellectual approach to Buddha-nature and to seek it through direct experience. The reader is encouraged to read the commentary by Yasutani (2000) for a more detailed explanation of the koan, but it is hoped that the reader has gained some sense of the character of the koan, Mu, and many koans like it. Koans are often intriguing intellectually and at the same time they are beyond rational analysis especially when the student is expected to give a physical presentation of his or her understanding of the koan to a Zen teacher.

There are more than 600 koans available for the teacher to assign to the student. A few other koans are listed here to provide more examples of koans. These examples will allow the reader to further consider the difficulty of understanding and presenting an understanding of the koans. It is not possible to simply say that a koan means this or that because most cannot be fully understood intellectually. These koans are from the first list of

200 miscellaneous that is sometimes called the *Dharmakaya* koans. Many of the koans in this list are from published books on koans including the *Gateless Gate* (Yamada, 1979) or the *Blue Cliff Record* (Cleary, T. & Cleary, J. C., 1977). The koans from the published lists tend to involve a short story or dialog like that in the koan, Mu. Some of the koans in the *Dharmakaya* are not from published lists, however, and these tend to be one-line koans. There are no written commentaries associated with these unpublished koans. The koans are simply listed on the page similar to the selected koans given below:

1. How do you stop the sound of a temple bell?
2. Show me an unmovable tree in a heavy wind!
3. Stop the fighting across the river.
4. Take out a five-storied pagoda from a teapot.
5. The bridge flows, the water does not.
6. Extinguish a candle light a thousand miles away

Previous studies have examined the experiences of meditators, but there are no studies of which this researcher is aware that have examined the phenomenology of koan meditation. Kornfield (1979) found that participants who practiced insight meditation, which involves awareness of breath and nearby events, reported a change in world view based upon mindfulness of the present moment and a sense of equanimity. Practicing mindfulness in Buddhism, according to Fischer-Schreiber, Ehrhard, and Diener (1991) means that all activities performed on a daily basis, including breathing, walking, etc., are attended to consciously and observed purely (i.e., without prejudice or bias). The intention of mindfulness practice is to learn to control the activities of the mind and bring it into a state of rest, which leads to a sense of equanimity. Pekala (1987) reviewed 21 phenomenological studies on medication including one with Zen practitioners. Pekala reported mixed findings for the experiences of participants ranging from difficulty concentrating to feelings of calmness. Experiences during deep states of meditation were studied by Gifford-May and Thompson (1994). They interviewed 10 participants with 3 to 25 years of practice including one who practiced koan meditation, and found that the experience of deep meditation produces a feeling of transcendence beyond the normal physical and mental boundaries of the self and positive emotions like calmness or energetic joy. While these studies have produced some

interesting results related to meditation, they have not examined the experiences of those who practice koan meditation. Koan meditation has two unique characteristics: (a) practitioners meditate on enigmatic phrases or stories and (b) the practitioners present understandings of these stories to their Zen teachers during one-to-one interviews.

Goals of the Present Research Project

It is the purpose of this study to explore the phenomenology of koan practice in Zen Buddhism. The specific goal of the study is to identify the structure of the experiences and essential themes of koan practice and to provide a description in psychological terms of the experiences that concretely manifest that structure. Participants who were currently working with koans were interviewed in order to obtain their experiences in narrative form. The description of the experiences expressed the behavioral, affective, and cognitive processes of the participants and identified explicit and implicit meanings in the various constituents of the narrative in relation to a sense of the whole experiential structure.

Method

Participants

The participants were adults recruited from Zen groups in Southern California. A request for volunteers was sent to the teachers of five different Zen groups, and the teachers either passed the request to members who then contacted me or, in the case of one group, the teacher sent a list of names of koan practitioners that I could contact directly. One Zen group teacher declined to have the members of the group participate in the project.

Persons who expressed an interest in the project were given a description of the research project, the proposed questions for the interview (see Appendix A), and a confidentiality agreement. This information was typically distributed by e-mail. The research project and the confidentiality agreement were approved by the university Institutional Review Board. The objective and methods in this study were fully disclosed to the par-

ticipants, and the volunteers were asked to sign the confidentiality agreement before participating in the study. The participants were not provided any financial reimbursement.

A total of nine participants were interviewed (see Table 1). The data from one participant was excluded, however. Although the participant claimed to use Zen koans in his spiritual practice, he was not a member of a Zen community and did not meet with a Zen teacher, which were defining characteristics of koan practice. Three women and five men remained in the study. The eight participants were active in four different Zen groups and worked directly with five different Zen teachers at the time they were recruited. The range of experience with Zen koans was less than two years for two participants and approximately 24 to 30 years for two other participants. The remaining four participants had between three and six years of experience.

The interview was recorded on both video and audiotape to ensure that none of the data were lost (Easton, McComish, & Greenberg, 2000). The interviews were conducted at a location convenient for the participant. Three of the interviews were conducted in the homes of participants, four were in participants' offices, and two of the interviews were in rooms available at two of the Zen centers. Each location was quiet and measures were taken to maintain confidentiality.

Procedure

The phenomenological method described by Churchill and Wertz (2001) was used as a general guide for the present research project. The description of the psychological method given by Churchill and Wertz follows the works of earlier authors, and many of these methods were also incorporated into the current study as noted in the following procedures (Churchill 2000, Colaizzi, 1973; Giorgi, 1975, 1997; Keen, 1975; Kruger, 1979; Pollio, Henley & Thompson, 1997; Trumbull, 2000; von Echartenberg, 1971). I prepared to conduct the interviews by identifying my preconceptions and bias concerning Zen Buddhism and koan study, and I attempted to set aside these ideas before meeting with participants or working with the narrative data. The participants were asked open-ended questions that solicited descriptions of the phenomena associated with koan study (see Appendix A), and the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Table 1. Participant Demographic Information

Item	Participants							
	Barbara	Don	Kathy	John	Rich	Roger	Steve	Sharon
Age	43	50	43	58	64	59	28	52
Gender	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male	Male	Male	Female
Religion	N/A	Buddhism	None	Buddhism	Protestant	Zen	Zen	Zen and Judaism
Koan* Practice	3 years	30 years	1.5 years	24 years	5 years	4 years	1 year	5 years
Health	Excellent		Good	Great	Excellent	Excellent	Good	Good
Race	Caucasian	Caucasian	Northern European	White Non-Hispanic	Caucasian	Anglo	Hispanic	Caucasian
Birth Place	United States	United States	Canada	United States	United States	United States	United States	United States
Years in U.S.	43	45	43	58	64	59	28	52
Education	Post Graduate	University Degree	Post Graduate	Post Graduate	University Degree and Professional School	Post Graduate	University Degree	Post Graduate
SES	Middle	Upper Middle	Middle	Lower Middle	Upper Middle	Upper Middle	Middle	Upper Middle

* Years of koan practice are approximate because many of the participants took breaks occasionally.

I read the transcribed documents over several times to get a global sense of the data, and then divided the descriptions into natural meaning units (NMU) (Kruger, 1979). A theme prepared for each NMU was a short, summary statement that conveyed the essential content of the NMU. After evaluating all of the interviews, I then returned each interview to the respective participants for comments on the meaning units and the associated themes. Participants were encouraged to correct errors that might have occurred during the transcription or to change what they had said in the interview if it did not truly convey their experience.

When the interviews were returned, I determined which themes were essential to the experience of koan practice. Essential themes were established for individual participants and for the general practice of koan meditation. This was accomplished using three criteria. One indication that a theme might be essential was its presence in the experiences of all the participants. A second important indication was whether a particular experience appeared necessary for the meaning of the whole experience in an analysis similar to the hermeneutic circle (Pollio, Henley, and Thompson, 1997). The final and most important criterion was the use of imaginative free variation, in which I considered various possible alterations of the experience in my imagination and determined those without which the koan practice would not be possible (Giorgi, 1997). The structure of the experiences of the participants was determined by grouping related essential themes in clusters. I organized the clusters for each participant into a coherent narrative and then wrote a description of the general structure of koan practice across the participants.

Background Knowledge and Beliefs of the Investigator

Before interviewing participants, I examined my prior experiences, knowledge, and beliefs that were relative to this research project. The analysis is a formal part of the phenomenological method to help the researcher achieve the phenomenological reduction, that is the suspension of preconceptions about the research topic so that a fresh understanding of the participants' experiences can be achieved. The following comments are provided for the reader to understand the context of the project for the researcher.

I grew up on the eastern plains of Colorado in a family that was not particularly religious. I left home to attend college right after graduating

from high school and took several philosophy courses in college as electives. I was introduced to Buddhism in two classes including Modern Religions and Mysticism East and West, but I did not pursue religion at that time. When I began having some dissatisfaction with my engineering job at about the age of 47, I resolved to quit engineering and began to study psychology. I thought that was a good combination of my skills in science and my interest in philosophy and religion. I decided to re-examine my interest in Buddhism and especially Zen Buddhism. This led me to develop a proposal to study Zen for my master's thesis in psychology. I had some idea that Zen was one possible way of reaching some deeper awareness of the way our lives are determined by socialization and conditioning.

These past experiences and beliefs provided the motivation for me to undertake this study of koan practice. The phenomenological method required that I set these beliefs aside as much as possible to analyze the narratives of the participants. By analyzing my beliefs and by checking my results with the participants and my academic associates, it was possible to be reasonably confident that I had put out of play or “bracketed” my beliefs and preconceptions when analyzing the data. The following section describes the findings from that analysis.

Findings

The study produced interesting results concerning the structure of the experiences and the effects of koan practice in Zen Buddhism. The structure of the experience of koan practice includes seven constituents identified by this researcher. Some of the experiences fit completely within the description of one structural constituent, while others fit into several categories. Despite this overlap, it is to be possible to differentiate various constituents within the whole experience of koan practice based upon a reading and analysis of the interviews. Table 2 provides brief descriptions of the structural constituents.

A Sense of the Whole

Koan practice is one method used to practice Zen Buddhism. Zen is an experience of transformation in the present moment. The practitioner places his or her attention on tasks in the present moment and obtains an

Table 2. Structural Constituents of the Experiences in Koan Practice.

Structural Constituent	Description
1. Motivation	Each of the participants describes his or her history with Zen, and through this autobiography, each participant reveals either explicitly or implicitly a motivation to pursue a spiritual practice.
2. Approach to working with koans	This section describes the physical and mental activities that each participant used to work with koans during meditation and during daily life.
3. Experiences while working with koans	General thoughts and feelings about koan practice and examples of experiences with particular koans are included here.
4. Experiences of insight	Insight was the most common method for understanding a koan cited by the participants. This section includes descriptions and examples of experiences of insight.
5. Experiences while working with a teacher	This section describes the guidance provided by Zen teacher and the students' reactions to this guidance.
6. Transformation	The transformations that participants describe include transformations in psychological outlook and transformations in worldview.

understanding of the flow of experience in Zen. In a sense, a single task such as striking the temple bell or sitting in zazen is a direct experience of the essence and whole of Zen. To experience a part is to experience the whole and to experience the whole is to experience a part. In this spirit, the next section examines the individual experiences of the participants in order to obtain a sense of the whole of koan meditation. The experiences of participants are discussed in detail within the overall structure.

Constituent 1: Motivation

The participants describe how they began their Zen practice that eventually incorporated koan meditation. Sometimes, a participant states explicitly

why he or she started Zen practice, and sometimes the motivation is implicit in the narrative. There are at least two common reasons that the participants begin Zen practice. One is a desire for transformation and the other is a trust in Zen methods. Trust in a particular teacher is often important in generating trust in the methods of Zen as opposed to other forms of spiritual practice.

The first and most fundamental motivation to practice Zen is the desire to improve one's self. This is essential to the practice of Zen, and by extension it is essential to the practice of koan meditation. The participants did not necessarily express dissatisfaction with their lives, but they directly express a need to make changes and indirectly express a desire to improve their lives. For example, Barbara indicates that after meditating on her own for about 20 years, she wanted to get some mentoring and group support from a Zen community for her spiritual practice, implying that she expected this change to strengthen her spiritual practice and transform her life for the better. Rich sought transformation too, or as he says, "I like to stir the pot." Within the context of his interview, stirring the pot for Rich meant that he is always challenging his own assumptions about how to interact with friends and clients, for example, and he believes that by challenging assumptions he will transform his understanding of others and his behavior toward them in a positive way. Kathy is drawn to Zen despite the frustrations and difficulties of the practice for her because she has some difficulty controlling her emotional reactions to adverse situations and felt that Zen could help her transform those unwanted and unproductive reactions. Don felt a need for personal growth and spiritual practice early in his life saying, "I got interested in Zen when I was a teenager and I decided . . . to go to Japan, and study Zen if I could." Don started his Zen practice in order to transform his understanding of life and answer spiritual questions such as "Who am I? Where do we come from? Where am I going? What is life? What is death? Where will I go after I die?" This desire for transformation by the participants is an essential motivation for beginning Zen practice.

The second common motivation for practicing Zen is that participants expressed a faith or trust in this particular method of spiritual practice. The trust appears to be a result of an intellectual investigation, mentoring and modeling by a teacher, or direct experience of the effects of Zen practice. John described his intellectual journey to the discovery of Zen. He took

classes in social sciences at several universities where he realized that most of what he learned as a child about the world was the result of socialization and conditioning, which might or might not be true to his own experience. John was later introduced to Zen in a philosophy class and found that Zen prescribes a method to obtain direct experiences of the world. John feels that practicing Zen is "... a way to step outside of my culture and to experience reality directly, whatever that truth was, to experience it as directly as I was able apart from all of the cultural conditioning, the psychological filters, and all this stuff." John trusts Zen to transform and correct misconceptions in his view of the world.

A trust in Zen philosophy per se is not essential to motivation, however, as illustrated by those participants who place their trust in a teacher rather than in an intellectual understanding of Zen. Kathy indicates that her trust in Zen practice came from her trust in her teacher, "And I do koan practice probably in large degree because I trust [my teacher]..." The importance of trust in a teacher will be explored further in a constituent described below, but the point here is that the motivation of trust may concern the teacher and not only the philosophy.

Another way that the motivation of trust in Zen comes to pass is that over time participants had positive experiences in their practice. While these positive experiences are not essential to begin Zen practice, the experiences are essential for individuals to maintain the motivation to continue with Zen practice for extended periods (e.g., decades). This is only implicit in the narratives that deal with each participant's history with Zen, but it is a very important motivation. For example, John and Don practiced Zen off and on for 24 and 30 years respectively. It is unlikely that some intellectual curiosity could maintain motivation over this long of a period. They had each worked with several teachers, and that made it unlikely that trust in a particular charismatic teacher was their sole motivation. Instead, trust in the practice comes from personal experiences with positive transformations. Here, the desire for additional transformation and trust in the process become intertwined as the essential constituent of the motivation in the structure of koan practice.

The essential aspects of this structural constituent defining the experience of Zen Buddhism in general and koan meditation in particular include the desire for personal growth and a trust in Zen practice. Trust in Zen practice might initially be influenced by an intellectual interest in Zen or

by a particular teacher, but continuation of Zen practice in the longer term requires trust in the practice of Zen. This structural constituent supports and is supported by other structural constituents. Motivation is needed to expend the time and effort required by this practice making this constituent key to the overall structure. However, the experiences that a participant has with each Zen teacher with whom they may practice throughout their career in Zen typically affects the participant's trust in the practice. In addition, the positive experiences found in the structural constituent of transformation certainly provide positive feedback for a trust in the structure.

Constituent 2: Approach to Working with Koans

The participants describe several ways that they work with koans in order to obtain an insight into the koan. Many of them indicate that they had to determine a way to work with koans on their own at first, and this is an essential theme. Sharon said, "A teacher will not tell you how to meditate on a koan, or how to sit with a koan. You've really got to figure that out." Sometimes a teacher provides suggestions on how to approach a koan (see various comments below), but each participant develops a method that works based largely upon his or her experience. This is an essential theme because koan practice requires students to have direct experience of insights into the koans. The teacher provides some guidance, but the each student must ultimately find his or her own way.

All of the participants performed sitting zazen or meditation practice with a koan. It should be noted that zazen was considered by the participants to be the fundamental practice in Zen where koan study was one valuable tool within the practice of zazen. Most of the participants followed a procedure similar to the one Barbara describes:

I just sit with it [the koan]. And what that means for me was sit in my meditation position on my meditation cushion and just kind of internally repeat the koan to myself over and over again. I'll take some breaks and just maybe follow my breath or do what they call *Shikantaza*, just sitting with choice-less awareness. And then I come back to the koan and repeat it to myself again and again and then take breaks. That's basically the process.

Meditating on koans during zazen is not essential to koan practice, however, because several of the participants indicate that they work on koans during normal, daily activities. They repeat the koan internally from time

to time even when they are not sitting in meditation. Steve and Roger work on their assigned koans at all times. Roger describes his experience of koan practice as being a part of his normal daily activities:

My experience has been that when I am working on a koan I'm working on it all the time. So I may be doing a seminar for 40 people. And when they're working on something, the koan kind of floats up. And I think, looking at what I'm doing now, how does this fit with facilitating a seminar? Or, when I'm doing work with the team, I've actually gotten koans during those processes or something will happen with that team and I'll go, "Whoa, that's it."

The participants have access to some sources for help with koans outside of the teacher-student relationship. Many of the first 200 miscellaneous koans in the Dharmakaya set do not have commentaries, but the koans in the *Gateless Gate* (Yamada, 1979) and later sets do have commentaries written typically by the Zen master that prepared the collection. None of the participants said that the commentaries would help obtain an insight into the koan or decide how to present the koan to the teacher, but the commentaries provide some historical context, and define foreign language terms.

Participants felt that talking with another person about a particular koan is not useful. The journey is a personal one as described by Rich:

Yeah, I have no idea what other people are working on. And they don't know what I'm working on. It's really a very private thing. I mean it's not private because it's, it's nothing to be worried about, or to be ashamed about or anything. It just was private, that's all. It doesn't really matter what anybody else was doing.

Participants said that they cannot successfully work on a koan using logic, and this seemed to be an essential theme for working with koans. John tried to stop his mind from trying to solve the koan and just sat for periods of time in meditation without any conscious thoughts about the koan:

So for me, it's just a matter of learning to sit with it, to just stay in it, you know. And not try to figure it out. My logical and analytical mind always wants to figure something out. So learning to just let go of that and just sit with it, to just allow myself to be in that state of not-knowing.

Barbara describes how she tries to solve a koan such as, “Bring me an immovable tree in a violent storm,” conceptually at first and how useless it is to do that:

I began to see my tendency to go into that cognitive or reasoning mode. I watched my mind go through these conceptual categories like a rat going through a maze and hitting all these dead ends as it worked on this koan. That was a wonderful experience for me because it made this tendency to figure things out in a rational way really very vivid, very present. I also saw how it doesn't help most of the time with most of these koans. So now, I can spot that pretty fast, and intentionally say [to myself], “No, don't go into that mode.” Then I just go back to repeating the koan.

This idea that using logic cannot solve koans will be addressed again in later sections. It is related to the frustration of working with koans, to the insight into koans, and to transformations. The essential themes for this constituent, however, include learning on one's own how to work on koans and that logic cannot be used to understand a koan.

Constituent 3: Experiences while Working with Koans

The experiences described in this section include items discussed by the participants related to their daily experiences with koans. Two essential themes in this constituent include initial confusion about the meaning of a koan and frustration during the process of working on a koan.

Participants acknowledge that when they first receive a koan from a teacher, they experience some confusion or, more accurately, they lack any ideas about what the koan might mean. Sharon presents a koan and then expresses her confusion over that koan:

Hyakujo said to Goho, “How would you express your understanding with your mouth and lips closed?” Goho said, “Sir, should not your mouth and lips be closed?” And Hyakujo said, “In a place where no man is, I will put my hand to my forehead and will watch for you.”

Sometimes, the first time you read it [a koan] through, you think, What the heck was that? I mean, I am working on one now that the first time I read it through, I thought, What?

Steve talked about a similar experience with his second koan. The koan is presented first and then Steve's comments on the koan:

Gutei's one finger. Whatever he was asked about Zen, Master Gutei simply stuck up one finger. He had a boy attendant whom a visitor asked, "What kind of teaching does your master give?" The boy held up one finger, too. Hearing of this, Gutei cut off the boy's finger with a knife. As the boy ran away, screaming with pain, Gutei called to the boy. When the boy turned his head, Gutei stuck up one finger. The boy was suddenly enlightened.

When Gutei was about to die, he said to the assembled monks, "I received this one finger Zen from Tenryu. I used it all my life but have not exhausted it." Having said this, he entered nirvana.

Obviously at first I was, I had no idea what this was about. So, the last few weeks have been kind of, I started to work on it. It's obviously very different from my first koan.

The koan that Steve presents above should provide the reader with a sense of confusion similar to the one Steve felt. A person might ask any number of questions. What does the one finger symbolize? Did a Zen master, who is expected to teach compassion and non-violence, really cut off a boy's finger? How is the boy enlightened by seeing the one finger? Does one symbolically cut off a finger to demonstrate an understanding of the koan or simply hold up a finger?

Frustration, which is caused by the irrational nature of koans, is the second essential theme for this constituent of koan practice. Sharon took a break from koans because she became so frustrated by a particular koan even after she had completed several years of successful koan practice. Her teacher helped her through that koan, but Sharon stopped working with koans for over a year because of the frustration. First, the koan is presented below followed by her description of what happened.

Kyogen's Man Up a Tree. The priest Hsiang-yen said, "It is as though you were up in a tree, hanging from a branch with your teeth. Your hands and feet can't touch any branch. Someone appears beneath the tree and asks, "What is the meaning of Bodhidharma's coming from the West?" If you do not answer you evade your responsibility. If you do answer you lose your life. What do you do?"

I thought that this koan, Kyogen's Man Up a Tree, was really hurting my sense of equanimity, and peacefulness, and that is why I am doing Zen, and why I am doing zazen. So I thought, I'll just go in and tell her [my teacher] that let's just take a break from this; this just isn't working for me. So I went in, and she said, "No." And I said, "But all it's doing is upsetting me. I'm just not getting it." She said, "You've got to stick with it. I'm your teacher;

I have a responsibility to not let you off the hook on this because it is reflecting the place in your life where you are stuck.” I was furious. I was so mad. And she said to me, and I started crying. She said, “I trust you more than you trust yourself. You need to do this koan.” . . . And so, I stayed with it, and a couple of weeks later . . . I got it, and it was like (slap on the forehead), so obvious. And I just, you know, it’s so annoying too when it’s so obvious. I just can’t tell you. And, I did take a break. I took a break for a year or a year and a half.

Participants said that coming to an understanding of a koan can occur gradually over a period of time, or the understanding may occur suddenly. A sudden, complete understanding of a koan is not essential, therefore, to the experience of koan practice. The ease of understanding was related to whether a koan was difficult or easy for a particular participant and also because some koans are designed to produce different effects on the student. Don describes his experience with different kinds of koans:

You’ll kind of hit a point where you’ll go through five or six or seven or eight that are very, very similar in terms of the point they are trying to make. And then all of a sudden you’ll realize, “Oh, this one is different.” Okay, so now you’re looking at a different aspect of life, or practice, or understanding, or something.

In order to provide an example of what Don is describing, the following list of koans is taken from the Miscellaneous Koan Collection. As can be seen, the first four koans have a similar theme whereas the final koan presents a different kind of problem for the student.

- How do you stop the sound of the temple bell?
- How do you stop four different sounds?
- How do you stop the sailing boat?
- How do you stop a rowing boat?
- Draw Mt. Fuji from your bosom pocket.

This constituent addresses the general experiences that participants have when working with koans. The general experiences with koans include the essential themes of confusion and frustration when working with koans.

Constituent 4: Experiences of Insight

For most participants, the realization of a koan is not just a cognitive understanding, and this naturally follows from the essential theme cited earlier that logic cannot be used to understand a koan. The realization of a koan includes a somatic (non-verbal) constituent with variable levels of a cognition, and occasionally the understanding includes some emotional aspects. Although the realization includes one or more of these three constituents, no single one of the three is essential to the experience of insight. What is essential and what underlies each of the following examples, is an understanding of the koan that is meaningful to the practitioner. Each person has an understanding to a greater or lesser extent of a particular koan, but there is always a positive sense of accomplishment at completing the difficult task of penetrating an enigmatic koan. This sense of accomplishment would not occur if the insight is meaningless, and koan practice is unimaginable with meaningless insights. Sometimes practitioners express their understanding of the meaning of a koan and other times their understanding is ineffable or simply was not revealed during the interview. Being able to clearly express the new understanding obtained from an insight into a koan is not essential to the experience.

The following comments by Roger describe his experience with a sudden and rich insight into the koan, Mu, and he is clearly pleased with his accomplishment indicating that the insight was meaningful for him.

As I said on Mu I had gone off on so many different directions. All of them very clever and very intellectual. Some of them very funny. None of them right. So I had, I can't even remember what presentations had been just prior, but, I don't know if it had been something that I had said in those interviews because this was like the 3rd day of *sesshin* [retreat], or something that... [a teacher] had said, or a combination of that, or simply reviewing everything I had presented over the last year. And it came down to simply knowing. There was no question in my mind. I wasn't going in with a question; I knew that I finally had it. I knew what Mu was about. And it was overwhelming.

It was just the culmination of that year. And I knew it. And it was fun seeing... [my teacher's] response. But I knew it. It was more like a confirmation. And that one was fun. It was fun knowing I knew it. I almost didn't want to go on to the next one.

The participants describe a range in the depth of an insight into koans. Roger described his dramatic insight above with the koan, Mu, but Don had a much more subtle and less complete insight into Mu. The insight into the koan was subtle for Don, but the insight carried enough meaning to change his views on the nature of enlightenment:

So, with Mu, for me, I thought that if I passed Mu, because I had read so much from *The Three Pillars of Zen* that I would have some blissful, ecstatic experience of enlightenment, at the passing [or having my presentation accepted by the teacher] of something like Mu. And, so it was quite a shock to me when I passed it. I was at a real desperate point of frustration at the time. . . . And I, finally out of frustration, did something, demonstrated something that he [the Zen teacher] accepted as an answer. . . . And I was shocked ‘cause I, I passed it? I said, “I don’t, what did I pass? I don’t see anything. I don’t understand anything.” So, I went back quite dejected. . . . But, it took me about a month to appreciate that what I had was an insight. It was sort of an unconscious insight. It took me about a month to appreciate it. . . . But I realized that I wasn’t enlightened in the way that I had predicted enlightenment would be. And it was very different, but I got an appreciation that got me going into Zen practice. And I started to see a little bit at a time.

Practitioners sometimes express the meaning that they gain from meditating on a koan. In the following two examples, participants describe how their insight helped them understand their emotional reactions. Don describes his insight into the cause of his frustration this way:

And it’s very frustrating because you want to answer it [a koan] because you think you know, but we finally realized that you are really doing it all to yourself, you know, [the frustration]. I remember that’s one of the things that I saw in this koan. I realized that [the teacher] he’s not telling me to go away and get mad. He’s just saying, “No, that’s not the answer.” That’s all he’s saying. I was doing it to myself. So, I realized, jeez, I do this with a lot of things, don’t I? I get frustrated, pissed off, and angry only because I want something. In this case, I wanted approval; I wanted him to say, “That’s right,” instead of saying, “No.” That’s certainly an [emotional] attachment [to a desired outcome].

And I realized in this case I was doing it to myself and because it was late in *sesshin* [retreat] at the time, I was able to let go of it. I still didn’t answer the koan at that particular *sesshin*, but I did answer it later on. So that was a big

[realization]. What happened with me is that there was frustration, and there was the relaxation of realizing that I was doing it to my self. And then, when I passed the koan, there was a little bit of contentment that I saw something very important about holding to understanding or holding to clarity, they'd call it.

Kathy comments on her insight into the koan "Stop the fighting across the river." The insight has meaning for her because it helps her control her anger.

This koan was very satisfying because it, that kind of fighting and killing has to do with anger like that. So I really liked it. In the end, I still feel a little satisfaction when I think of the demonstration of that koan. I like to think about it and do it in my head. You know I remember, and I can still get some satisfaction from that, and I think that's because it taps into that anger thing.

And so I used to be very embarrassed about people, about displaying my anger, you know. I'd explode, and then I would feel terribly embarrassed about it. . . . And so, I didn't want to be in that role, but instead of seeing anger as so negative, I thought, well you know there's my anger and I can choose, so it was that path that led me to dealing more effectively with it.

In the following text, Sharon describes an experience of insight that further demonstrates how meaningful to a participant the experience of penetrating a koan can be. Her terms mystical and magical express how new her experiences of insight are to her.

I ask other people and their first koan is not necessarily a big deal, but mine was. I was really working on it for a long time. I was working with Sensei [my teacher], and I remember being at a sesshin [retreat] working with it. I don't know if it was a 4-day or a 7-day sesshin. I was giving her these wonderful poems. I'm clueless; I don't know what doing a koan means. I don't know what showing your understanding means. And finally, [the koan] it's called the Oak Tree in the Garden, sometimes called the Cypress Tree in the Garden. It is kind of one of the standards. The koan, real quick is "What is the meaning of the Bodhidharma [name of the monk who brought Zen to China from India] coming from the west?" And, Joshu [name of a monk in the koan] says, "The oak tree in the garden." And so I wasn't getting it.

[We were at Zen Mountain Center, and] it's a gorgeous setting. And finally, she said when I started giving her another poem, "No more poems!" She

stood me up. She stood me in front of the window. She said, “What do you see? Do you see the oak tree?” I’m clueless and I said, “I’m not sure I know which ones are oaks.” She said, “Don’t you even see them?” or something like that. I’m not sure that I am quoting her right. She said, “Now show me your understanding.”

And all of a sudden, it was the most profound experience. I’ve never had an experience like it, like I got it. And I demonstrated my understanding. I cannot explain to you what I [felt]. It was almost a mystical feeling when I got it. It really was. By that, I mean just the experience of presenting it. I felt it in my entire body. We were in a little hut that is right next to the main Zendo. And it was just she and I in this, just this little space. And it was, just something happened between us, I think. And it was just, I don’t know how to describe it except that it was a really physical, engaging, incredible, you know, physical, emotional, psychological experience. It’s like, and I could have stayed with what I was presenting to her for several moments. I don’t even know how long. It was really timeless. I was really connected to the koan, to a, you know, to my teacher, to the moment. It was just really a wonderful experience.

It is not an intellectual experience. If you are going to try to work on it cognitively, forget it. So, if you are a person like me that is very logical and rational, then it doesn’t work. But, I don’t know where the answers [to koans] come from sometimes, or the understandings. It is not an answer usually; it’s an understanding. How do you demonstrate your understanding? . . . It’s just magic.

The experience of insight just provided by Sharon illustrates how influential a teacher can be in koan practice. This example complements earlier comments by practitioners that trust in a teacher is important for motivation to practice Zen. The interaction between student and teacher includes several aspects that will be discussed in the next section.

Constituent 5: Working with a Teacher

Trust in the teacher is essential to koan practice. This is seen in the fact that the participants rely upon the teacher to recommend or agree that the student begins koan practice. The teacher provides the koan to the student, reviews presentations of the koan by the student, and assigns the next koan when the student passes the koan. It is difficult to imagine how a person might effectively study koans without a mentor. Barbara describes the interaction this way:

[After I present to the teacher], I get some kind of feedback. Sometimes it's very minimal feedback like, "Nope," or, "That's the wrong direction." [It is usually] something very minimal. Sometimes she'll say something just a little more helpful. Usually a disguised hint or clue that only later do I realize was a hint or a clue after I've sat with it for a longer period.

The experience of trust and relationship with the teacher for these participants is primarily positive. Sharon and Kathy indicate that trust in their teacher was a fundamental aspect of their experience with Zen and koans. Sharon describes how important her relationship was as follows:

You develop a relationship with your teacher where you're basically willing to put anything out there. Most of the time, and every now and then, I feel uncomfortable, or about bringing something up or, you know, sharing something with her. But that's about me; that's not about her. You know, there's no reason that I feel that I couldn't trust her.

Sharon provides an example of a particular koan that is among the first few koans given to students. The text of the koan is, "How do you get out of a stone grave which is locked from the outside?" The koan requires students to make a dramatic physical presentation, and the teacher encourages the student to commit fully to the presentation. The primary objective for this koan is to break down inhibitions the student might have about making presentations to a teacher and to build trust between the student and teacher, which is essential to working on more enigmatic koans.

[By non-verbal, I mean the understanding of a koan is] physical. It may be emotional. Sometimes there's really not a lot of emotion attached to it, but usually you actually need to get up off of your seat and do something to express your understanding. So, it is very often physical that way. In other words, there is something about the koan that describes a scene for instance, a scenario. And, so there is something about that scenario that that you need to actually demonstrate. And, you know, get into the scenario itself, and express the scenario.

The one koan that comes to mind is something about how would you get out of a stone coffin. That one you have to demonstrate physically. There's a coffin and there's you. How are you going to get out of it, if it is a heavy stone coffin? There are times when a koan literally asks how would you do that, you know, if the cover is on and everything else. So, sometimes it is very literal.

If you are a reserved kind of person and you do it quietly, [my teacher] she'll say, "Do it again. Really put yourself into it." It's hysterical, because when we are at... [a particular] Zen Center, the daisan room [a special private room used for the interviews]. We do everything we can to sort of sound proof it, but [you can still be heard in the main meditation room or] zendo. That's where we have been doing our sesshin [retreat]. And I actually enjoy the fact that I may be yelling, or screaming, or doing whatever, and the people out there have got to be going, "Is that Sharon?" You know, so it kind of cracks me up. But, that's what... [my teacher] wants to do is break those inhibitions down about what is the right way to do it, and how do I do this without looking ridiculous. Who cares? Just do it. So it's really a lot of fun, sometimes.

Another experience of working with the teacher that also demonstrates trust is a desire to obtain the respect of the teacher. This contributes to the motivation to work on koans especially early in the practice of koan meditation. Most participants expressed a desire to pass koans quickly and look smart for the teacher. Rich, Don, Sharon, and John all expressed the desire to look clever. John expressed it this way:

And if you have a guy that prides himself on being kind of bright and knowing a lot, and then he can't answer a stupid question, you know, a stupid koan. Then golly, what does that say? So, what kind of a bozo am I? So I can remember that being an issue. I used to agonize over, also I would often go in particularly with [one particular teacher], I would get a real anxiety about going in, almost like going in to face the lions or something, you know.

Practitioners's presentations of their understandings to the teacher is an essential experience in koan practice. This experience also reflects a trust in the teacher because the practitioner will accept the teacher's pass or fail ruling on the presentation without question. If the practitioner passes the koan, the teacher provides a new koan. If the practitioner does not pass, he or she returns to sitting with the koan. Sometimes the teacher gives a suggestion on how to approach the koan, but often the teacher simply rings a bell to signal the end of the interview. The participants do not know exactly how the teacher judged their understanding except by observing the content and attitude of their presentation. This does not concern the participants indicating, again, that they placed their full trust in the teacher to guide them through koan practice.

Constituent 6: Transformation

Participants discussed how they felt their lives were transformed as a result of koan study and Zen practice in general. Long-term transformations in the lives of the participants are related to the insights described above, but the transformations exhibit a qualitatively different type of experience from those of insights into koans. The momentary insights gained while working with individual koans are integrated into their approach to life. A typical example for many participants is that they are better able to be in the present moment and to focus on the events and sensations in the present moment, which is similar to maintaining an attitude of mindfulness. This focus on the present moment underlies the ability to regulate emotions and to concentrate on specific tasks. For example, someone who has trouble regulating emotion often ruminates on a particular event that caused embarrassment or anger, and this rumination prolongs and intensifies the emotion, sometimes resulting in inappropriate behavior. It is possible to halt this rumination on the past event, however, if a person is able to bring their focus back to events occurring in the present moment. A person is aware of emotions occurring in response to current events, but observes them as one might observe automobiles passing by a rest stop. Of course, some emotions require an immediate action such as the fear of being hit by a bus. It is not necessary to ruminate on that fear after the danger has passed, however, and returning to a focus on the present moment prevents additional stress on the body caused by repeatedly visualizing the speeding bus. A focus on the present and on what is actually happening can help determine when action is required and when it is best to let go of an emotion. Barbara said that koan practice allows her to control her emotions largely by maintaining a focus on the present moment and determining the best course of action in that moment:

One of the very first koans I did is still one of the most powerful ones because it's something I call on almost every day. That was the koan, "Bring me an immovable tree in a violent storm." For me, that koan translates into being able to be there in any situation, to be present to and attentive to what's happening in any situation and to what I am experiencing in any situation. It is the ability to be there without automatically putting up resistance.

The koan is like a little portable teaching device that I can bring with me anywhere. So, for example, I was out to dinner the other night with my husband . . . and two . . . [of his colleagues]. After dinner, the three of them started

talking... [about their work]. This went on for about two hours, and to be honest with you, this is a mildly unpleasant experience for me. There was a part of me that just wanted to put up some resistance and be uncomfortable and squirming the whole time, and maybe ask my husband if we can go back to the hotel because we were out-of-town. I was able to consciously bring up that koan to remind myself that I have another option. In that situation, I was able to say, “Okay, I’m just going to be here. They’re going to talk... [work] for two hours, and I’m not going to understand much, and I’m not going to contribute much, and I’m not even going to enjoy this that much, but I can do this. I can be here without hardening up. I can do this without generating a whole lot of resentment and negative feelings. I can do this without becoming miserable.” So that koan has been an incredible help to me.

In another example of using a focus on the present moment to regulate emotions, Steve talks about how he uses his insight into his first koan to deal with difficult emotions. Steve’s teacher suggested that Steve could use his first koan in daily life. The koan is provided below followed by Steve’s comments on his experiences. Steve’s comments are somewhat cryptic when he talks about suffering from anger as being a delusion. What he means is that from a Zen perspective and from what is suggested by the koan, naming an object such as the water bottle or, in Steve’s case, the self is creating a conceptual identity for an agglomeration of characteristics that does not have an independent existence (remember dependent origination from the introduction). It is a delusion for Steve to think that he has an independent self or that the self can be insulted by a co-worker’s comments. Once a person understands this, it becomes easier to let these imagined insults pass and return to a focus on the present moment.

Case 40 from the Gateless Gate. When Master Isan was under Hyakujo, he had the position of tenzo. Hyakujo wanted to choose a master for Mount Dai. He called the head monk and the rest of his disciples together to have them present their views and said that the outstanding person should be sent. Then he took a water jug, put it on the floor and said, “You may not call this a water jug. What will you call it?” The head monk said, “It cannot be called a wooden sandal.” Hyakujo then asked Isan. Isan immediately kicked over the water jug and left. Hyakujo laughed and said, “First monk, you have been defeated by Isan.” So he ordered Isan to found the new monastery.

Yeah, actually I do [still think about the first koan]. It’s just, after I was given my second koan, my teacher kind of told me some stuff. He said, well

it's kind of like, kind of like a tool that you can use during your day. . . . It's like you are at work or something and someone says something that really bugs you and all of a sudden you are angry or whatever. It's like you, you can always just kind of leap out of that sort of state of mind.

That's kind of how I see it. Like now, like, just like you know, I mean there's plenty of ways you can look at the koan, metaphorically. It's like maybe, you can say like the water jug is delusions and Isan is just like kicking it. At any moment, you can do that. If you see yourself suffering in any way, you can immediately kind of just jump out of that. You know, you see that your suffering is just delusion.

Yeah, absolutely, you know, I think it's, what I learned about being sort of spontaneous, spontaneous and letting go at the same time, is important. [Letting go of] concepts, ideas, feelings, everything, so, just any moment of your day, you can do that. It's like oh yeah my co-worker did this. He's such a dick, you know. He's like, you know, why did he say this, and you know, you can go on and on, but instead of spending, you know, a day on it, you can just spend a minute and just say whatever.

I think that it [working with koans] sort of gave me practice at doing that. And sort of, and I, there's also like, koan practice was an opportunity to like kind of make that clear to myself, how important that was, how important it is to let go, and how it is actually possible.

Roger talks about how koans helped him focus better on the present moment and on the immediate tasks before him. He is able to concentrate on a particular task because he is able to focus on the present. His focus on the present is more than just concentration on a task, which implies that a focus on the present is a cognitively mediated process. As noted above, insights into koans include more than just a cognitive component, and it follows that a focus on the present moment includes more than cognitively-based concentration. Instead, a more general awareness of the mind, body, and environment is tuned to the present moment, which can set the conditions for concentration but is not the same thing as concentration. This understanding comes not just from Roger's comments but must be developed from a more general investigation of the experiences by all participants across the various constituents. Roger describes his experience this way:

But I definitely think, as many people say, Zen practice including koan study has certainly made my life more focused. In my work, I have adapted a saying

that has come out of my sitting; when things start getting fragmented, and I'll sit there and say to myself, "Do what's in front of you. Just do what's in front of you." And it brings me, coming back to the moment.

In the following comments, John talks about how he can recognize when his mind makes automatic associations or assigns attributions through prejudices and biases. By recognizing these associations or habitual responses when they start to occur, John says that he can set those associations aside while he determines what is really happening. It is the essential experience of being able to focus on the present moment that helps John become aware of the mental associations and to determine when they are distorting what is actually happening or what someone is actually saying. The ability to concentrate on what someone is saying, and to set aside personal biases, flows from an ability to focus on the present moment.

Also talk about conditioning; I spent probably 25 or 30 years of my professional life, work life trying to understand what goes on inside of human beings. And I think I have done a pretty adequate job of deconstructing this thing we call conditioning in Buddhism. And one of the things I've realized is very, very important, when I was doing a lot of leadership coaching and executive coaching, I tell them one of the things that is essential is to be able to distinguish between what actually happened and what you made up about it.

[It's] not easy, not easy. But what I found though, and again one of the things that my practice has helped me do, is to make that distinction that I can see what happened. I can watch myself make things up about it. Okay? And I can set that aside, and then try to deal directly with what happened, and to appreciate my ability to impute motive, and to ascribe meaning, and do all of those things that human beings want to do very, very quickly. And I would attribute to my ability to do that largely to my practice. And if you can't slow the mind down, if you can't quiet down internally, then there is no chance, you know, that someone can do that.

Yeah, I am pretty much able to see them [habitual responses] now and to recognize them for what they are and to recognize them, to watch how they function, to actually see them happening in real-time. Oh, that's interesting, I just made up something about you [as an interviewer], you know? I just interpreted what . . . [name of a Zen teacher] said as something that I don't think he meant that, I'd better check it out with him. [Name of the Zen teacher], is this what you meant when you said that? You know in other words, all these intra-personal kinds of dynamics. I just kind of observe them. And I mean, I

still get trapped once in a while, but not too often anymore. I maintain a pretty straightforward relationship to what's going on.

The following comments by Don indicate that koan practice transformed his life in a fundamental way. Unfortunately, his description is somewhat vague, and this is probably due to the ineffable nature of his experience. His comments are included because he is one of the more experienced students, and he describes a general transformation that is associated generally with koan meditation and Zen practice. When he began Zen practice, he had specific spiritual questions (see questions below) that he wanted to answer. He found out that by seeking the answers, he transformed his approach to life so that he was able to accept his spiritual doubts and questions and experience his life in a totally new way. It is possible to imagine that a focus on the present (and its associated acceptance of dependent origination) is important to accepting spiritual doubts but it is not completely clear that this is the case based upon Don's comments.

In general, koan practice, I was very gung ho to do koan practice when I started Zen because I had read this in books including *The Three Pillars of Zen* by Kapleau (2000). So I knew a lot about how koans generally worked and I was eager to try and do it. And so I really, that's been my major practice ever since. Overall how has it affected my life? All of the major questions I had as a young man, the spiritual doubts I had, and you could, they cover the range from such things as: Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? What is life? What is death? Where will I go after I die? All those types of: What is the soul? What is spirit? All these basic questions are answered in a long program of doing koan practice. There may not be, there are some specific koans such as, I don't know if there's one called who am I or not, I don't think there is. There is one, I think, about where you go after you die, I think that's one koan. But even though there's not specific koans that deal with these specific questions, over time they're all answered. If you go through a broad study of koan practice, you just realize one day that all of these questions are basically answered for you. So, basically what it has done is it solved my spiritual doubts, resolved my spiritual doubts.

I'm not saying that you don't have other spiritual questions or other doubts, but you accept them in a way that you did not see before. I'm not saying you don't have doubts. I'm saying there comes a point where you stop doubting your own doubts. As part of the Dharma, the way it is. And that's, for me, that's where there was a satisfaction, a satisfying, which never changed. That

doesn't mean that things are hunky dory and happy all the time. It doesn't mean that at all. It doesn't mean you are happy all [the time]. It doesn't mean you don't have doubts. It means you have a totally different relationship to what was your life all along.

In Zen we talk a lot about nonverbal, right? Understanding beyond the Scriptures. So there is someplace beyond the intellect that must be satisfied and addressed and reached that solves the spiritual doubts because spiritual doubts can never be resolved by someone getting a two plus two equals four answer. A plus B equals C. Well if that were good enough everyone would be happy because there's plenty of answers out there that you can read a book or that you can except on faith, if you're in a faith religion but Zen doesn't feel that these ever satisfy people because they are always looking.

The above comments by the participants on transformation are examples of those that occur during Zen practice. An essential theme is that koan meditation and the other practices associated with Zen develop the ability to focus on the present moment. Other themes may be essential but the vague nature of some the comments in this study limit more in depth analyses.

Discussion

The current study was successful at fulfilling the original research goal to identify the structure of the essential themes and experiences during koan practice and to provide a description in psychological terms of those experiences. The six constituents of koan practice include: (a) motivation, (b) approach to working with koans, (c) experiences while working with koans, (d) experiences of insight, (e) working with a teacher, and (f) transformation. The descriptions of the experiences exemplifying these constituents appear to cover the major behavioral, affective, and cognitive aspects of the psychology of koan practice. By examining these three aspects, we can attempt to answer the question of what is koan practice.

Behaviors identified in the description included reading commentaries on koans, sitting in meditation, and making physical presentations during meetings with the teacher. Verbal behavior was limited to repeating the koan silently during meditation or occasionally during the day. Overt verbal behavior was minimal. Talking with other students was discouraged, and the teacher provided only minimum verbal guidance. It appeared that

the objective was to discourage conceptual approaches to working with the koan by discouraging verbal analysis. The particular sitting position of *zazen* is commonly used during koan meditation. The organization of these behaviors was unique to this practice, and these behaviors appeared to promote attention to posture in meditation and an awareness of sensations in the body. Behaviors were certainly important to the overall experience of koan practice. The practice of sitting in meditation, for example, forces students to withdraw from their normal and often habitual activities including interpersonal interactions. By withdrawing to a secluded space, the students prepare themselves for contemplation on the koan and its references to awareness of reality that goes beyond verbal descriptions.

Affective experiences during koan practice range from emotions like frustration and anger to satisfaction and even ecstasy of insight. Koan practice helps students understand and accept the nature of frustration as an example of difficult emotions that most students wish to avoid. Emotions are observed by students within the general Zen practice of focusing on the present moment. The combination of these factors provides the students with the direct experience of the transient character of emotions. If the student understands the impermanent nature of emotions, the student neither identifies with his or her feelings, nor does the student seek to prolong or avoid a particular emotion like pleasure or frustration. The student is open to experience each emotion and is aware of the meaning of the emotion without ego attachment; that is the student does not become fixed on a particular event and the associated emotion as a defining characteristic of the self (e.g., playing the role of a victim of some perceived insult). In addition, emotion is a constituent of the overall structure of koan practice as seen in the essential theme of frustration during meditation on a koan and in the release of the frustration upon penetrating a koan, which generates a sense of accomplishment and renewal. Emotions, observation of those emotions, and transformation of emotion from frustration to satisfaction are key aspects of koan practice.

Cognitive aspects of koan practice include an awareness of the difficulty in penetrating a koan and then the sense of accomplishment when a koan is penetrated and the teacher passes a presentation on that koan. A student is consciously aware of these events and feelings although conscious deliberation and analysis of the meaning of a koan is generally reported to be unproductive. The insights that occur as a result of koan meditation may not be the direct result of rational thought processes, but students are

aware that the insights are meaningful and can have practical impact on problems occurring in their lives (e.g., controlling emotions and concentrating on tasks at hand). These effects experienced in koan practice contribute to the understanding and application of a focus on the present i.e., mindfulness) by students in their daily lives. Mindfulness allows students to recognize habitual or conditioned patterns of behavior which can be avoided or modified as required by a particular situation.

One of the constituents of the above structure highlights the interpersonal nature of koan practice. The experience of working with and especially trust in a teacher are essential to koan practice. Trust in the teacher motivates students to attempt koan practice, for it is the teacher who recommends that the student start working with koans, and then, the teacher guides the student through the process. Motivation may later come from experiences of insight and transformation, but the student must continue to trust the teacher for guidance through the extensive list of koans. While a relationship between the master and his students is fundamental to Zen, it is especially evident in koan practice.

Context and Limitations of the Present Study

The context for the present study might have provided certain limitations. An important consideration was the selection of participants. The persons interviewed for this study were volunteers who are currently in koan practice. Persons who are disappointed with koan practice or who have discontinued koan practice might have avoided the research project. The description of the study as a psychological investigation might have caused other persons to avoid the project because, for example, they may not trust psychologists to properly evaluate religious practices. Persons such as those who are disappointed with koan practice or distrustful of psychologists might relate a different set of experiences with koan practice than those who volunteered for this project. In addition, Zen students who practice koan meditation are discouraged from speaking about what happens during interviews with teachers and in particular about specific presentation that they make to teachers. This prevents less advanced students from copying the presentations of more advanced students. It is possible that some of the participants in this study felt constrained by this convention from speaking about certain experiences they had during koan practice.

The knowledge and experience of the researcher might have created two other possible limitations. First, the researcher has limited understanding of the direct experience of Zen. Since the teachings of Zen indicate that Zen is beyond words, the researcher was probably not fully prepared for the project just by reading Zen literature. Some discussions by the participants might have been outside of the researcher's area of potential understanding. The Buddhist concept of dependent origination was the most obvious example where this researcher has only a rudimentary understanding. Second, using interviews to access the experience and written text to report the results may have certain limitations in describing insights, which are often beyond words as indicated by some descriptions provided by the participants.

This research can be applied to a couple of concerns. First, the narratives of the students and the phenomenological analysis might provide Zen teachers with some greater understanding of the range of experiences of the students. Students in koan practice might also gain some conceptual knowledge of the process, but the important point for the student is to have the direct experience and not just read about it. A second possibility is to use this study as the basis for research into the experiences of teachers during the one-to-one interviews of students. It would be interesting to examine the experiences that teachers have when watching and judging a student's presentation. Finally, the current study and other related studies of meditation (e.g., Kornfield, 1979) have shown that koan meditation and meditation in general improve the regulation of emotions that can be a source of suffering. If possible, long term, quantitative studies of the relief of suffering through koan practice would be valuable along with a comparison to other forms of meditation, religious practice, and psychotherapy.

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Appendix A

Proposed Questions for the Research Interview on Zen Koans

1. Please tell me how long you have been practicing Zen and how long you have been working on koans. How many koans have you studied?
2. In general, how do you feel that the study of koans has affected your Zen practice and your life?
3. Are there one or more particular koans that are especially memorable for you that we may discuss? Which one would you like to discuss first?
4. What were your initial thoughts and feelings when you were first assigned this koan?
5. What activities did you undertake to study the koan such as reading, meditation, or talking with others?
6. What emotional feelings, bodily sensations, or thoughts did you experience while you were meditating on the koan?
7. Were you able to realize an understanding of the koan?
8. Did the realization occur at a particular moment or was it a gradual process of understanding?
9. If you did not understand the koan, describe your feelings and thoughts about the koan at the time you were working on it and at the present time.
10. If you did obtain an understanding of the koan, please describe, as much as possible, your experiences as you gained this insight and the nature of the insight. You may use metaphors, drawings, movements, or other forms of expression to convey the experiences.
11. Did the insight change the way you think, behave, or feel about yourself and the world?
12. How have your thoughts and insights about the koan changed over time?
13. Do you have any other thoughts that you want to share about your experience with Zen practice and koans?

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