

Paradoxes in Zen Buddhism and Zen Koan: Its Relevance and Spiritual Significance

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Abstract– Zen Buddhism has developed into a unique form of religion in Japan and has influenced its culture, people and society to a large extent. Rinzai Zen emphasises solving a Koan and practising Zazen under the guidance of a master for inner awakening, which helps to know the ultimate truth of life. Koan also helps solve the mysteries of life, which is full of paradoxes and unwanted happenings. This paper aims to analyse some of the Zen koans and stories, and an attempt is made to find out the hidden spiritual meanings, which may be helpful for people in modern times.

According to Suzuki, "when a disciple solves the given Koan, half of Zen is understood by him". A Zen master helps the disciple by giving him first-hand experience of life by creating various unavoidable situations and using symbols, gestures or sometimes remaining silent. This paper highlights the importance of Zen meditation in our life, and a regular practice solves the paradoxes, conflict and suffering, which exist due to ignorance and exists not after knowing the ultimate truth, guiding us towards a stress-free successful life.

Keywords Koan · Zazen · Paradox · Intuitive knowledge · Spiritual meaning ·

1. Introduction

Zen Buddhism reached Japan in the Sixth century before travelling to China and India. The origin of *Zen* in India has the following story. Suzuki (1994, p. 167) explains that *Gautama Buddha* was preaching to his disciples. While explaining, he did not give a verbal discourse but lifted a bouquet before his disciples. Buddha did not utter a single word out of his mouth. Nobody understood the

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symbolic gesture of Buddha. However, *Mahakashyapa*, one of the disciples listening to the discourse, quietly smiled at the master as if he had fully comprehended the symbolic gesture of gifting flowers. At this, Buddha said, 'I hand over to you the most precious treasure, spiritual and transcendental, at this moment, O venerable *Mahakashyapa*.¹ It is said that this was the origin of *Zen*.

The paradox lies in the origin of Zen Buddhism because it originated in such a way that only Gautama Buddha and his disciple Mahakashyapa knew the meaning of the exchange of flowers between them. Others could not comprehend the message, and the hidden spiritual message was transferred symbolically.

After Mahakashyapa, it was *Bodhi-dharma* who went to China with a special message of Buddha. When Bodhidharma, a monk from the southern part of India, went to China, he remained silent for many years and finally conveyed that truth is beyond scriptures. However, he emphasised that Buddha-hood can be attained by experiencing truth while looking into nature. His message is summarised in the following given lines. Suzuki (1994, p. 176) explains that

*“A special transmission outside the scriptures;
No dependence upon words and letters;
Direct pointing at the soul of man;
Seeing into one's nature and the attainment of Buddha-hood.”²*

There are three sects of *Zen* Buddhism in Japan: Rinzai-sect, Soto-sect and Obaku-sect. In Rinzai-sect, mainly 'Zazen'³ and 'Koan'⁴ are practised. On the other hand, the Soto-sect relies solely on *Zazen*.

According to Suzuki, there are three kinds of knowledge. The first is gained from reading or listening to some sources. The bulk of our knowledge is of this kind wherein self-experience is not involved. The second kind of knowledge is gained from scientific observation and experiment, analysis and speculation. Here, personal experience is involved to some extent, and it has a strong foundation than the first knowledge. An intuitive mode of understanding attains the third kind of knowledge, which depends on personal experience.⁵

¹ Suzuki. D.T. *Essays in Zen Buddhism, First Series*. p. 167.

² Ibid. p. 176.

³ *Zazen* is a type of meditation during which a person sits cross-legged in the lotus posture to meditate quietly.

⁴ While *Koan* is a question / riddle used in order to test whether the disciple has reached the state of *Kensho* (i.e. to look into one's original nature) or not?

⁵ Suzuki. D. T. *Zen and Japanese culture*. p. 22.

A koan is a riddle that is nearly impossible to solve. The formation of a Koan is done to make it challenging to solve. There are symbols and gestures which produces the same result as a Koan. It can be wind passing through the trees, or it can be the chirping sound of a bird. It can happen in a single moment, but it requires a great understanding.

It is well known that all mystics are fond of paradoxes to express their views. For example, God is real, yet its presence is like an infinite emptiness. He is at once all being and no-being. The divinity is outside in all forms of objects and also within us. This paradoxicality is found in nature itself. A great silence arises in us once we understand this paradoxicality, i.e. day and night, summer and winter, good and evil exist together. Zen says we are both – Good and bad together. Therefore, we must accept both. Acceptance helps in transformation. In this same acceptance, we are neither good nor bad.

Zen Koan and stories are designed so that it helps to develop intuitive knowledge in a disciple, which finally helps in the awakening of the mind leading to Satori. Zen aims to attain Satori. *Zen* masters teach their disciples through their experiences. *Koans* are challenging to understand logically. The whole purpose of the *Koan* is to help disciples to reach the state of no mind. *Koan* always contains contradictions to common knowledge.

There is a famous Haiku of Basho, which says:

The old pond
A frog jumps in
Plop

It is said that Basho was sitting by the side of an old pond, and with the sound of the frog jumping into the old pond, he became enlightened. The sound of "plop" was enough to make him awake. The modern mind finds it difficult to comprehend how one can become enlightened by listening only a few lines? While the master is speaking, the disciple is not only listening through his ears. However, the disciple is listening with his total being; every single unit is involved. The disciple listens with ears and is also listening with his eyes, looking at the master; he also feels the master. The moment one forgets himself and only pure and silent consciousness remains, one has reached the home. Enlightenment is such a thing, hidden within us, and it is an inner awakening. Reading, writing and studying Zen is different from experiencing Zen.

2. Literature review

The book titled "*Zen Dust. The history of the Koan and Koan Study in Rinzai (Lin-chi) Zen*"⁶ talked about the origin of *Koan*, its history and its usage in Rinzai tradition. Further, the author talks about the *Zen* master of Koonji, who discusses the system of *Koan* study in Rinzai *Zen*. Hakuin Ekaku popularised this *Koan* system to awaken reality among students leading to *Satori*⁷.

Suzuki says, "The development of *Koan* system is very special for *Zen* Buddhism, and is a unique contribution that *Zen* has made to the humankind. When the importance of the *Koan* is understood, we may say that more than half of *Zen* is understood." There are said to be at least 1700 *Koans*. However, according to Suzuki, "for all practical purposes, less than ten, or even less than five, or just one may be sufficient to open one's mind to realise the ultimate truth of *Zen*."⁸

Christmas Humphries rightly points out that the moment one knows the truth, all dualities disappear. The concept of 'I' or 'You' is because of our ignorance, and there is no distinction between 'I' and 'You'. The barrier is our ego.

Why do I not see it for myself?

Because of your egoist notion

"Do you see it?"

"So long as you have dualist views, saying 'I do not' and 'you do', and so on, your eyes are bedimmed by this relativity view."

"When there is neither 'I' nor 'you', can one see it?"

"When there is neither 'I' nor 'you', who wants to see?"⁹

Paradox will assume new meaning and be the intuition's language when the intellectual currency has failed. As Blyth points out, the use of paradox "does not spring from a desire to mystify the hearers or oneself, and it arises from the inability of language to say two things at once." Moreover, again, "paradoxes are the bright banners of the reality of the mind."¹⁰

⁶ Kitagawa. Joseph M. "*The Journal of Asian Studies*", Vol. 27, No. 1, (Nov., 1967), p. 150-151, accessed May 18, 2016.

⁷ 'Satori' means enlightenment. (Buddhist term) – Source: Online Japanese dictionary (Jsho).

⁸ Christmas Humphries. *Zen Buddhism*. p. 132

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 62

¹⁰ *Zen in English Literature*. p. 180, 193

3. Methodology

The paper interprets Zen Koan and stories to show elements of paradox and mysticism. Five examples of Zen koans and stories are selected and discussed for these purposes. The underlying spiritual meaning and relevance in the modern world are thoroughly discussed.

4. Discussion

Zen Koans have been discussed to show their relevance in modern times and their spiritual significance.

The first example is discussed below:

Does a Dog have the "mind of Buddha" or not?"

One of the famous *ZenKoans* states, "One day a priest asked master Joshuu: "Does a Dog have the "mind of Buddha" or not?"¹¹

Joshuu answered: "mu"¹².

Koan is a unique method to Zen. One of the most significant contributions of Zen to the world is Koan. Different masters have used many different methods. For example, Vipassana is a method Gautama Buddha has contributed to the world. Similarly, whirling meditation is a method developed by Sufi mystics.

Sufi uses the word 'Hoo', which is just a sound with no meaning attached to it. In the same way, the Japanese Zen master uses the word "mu", which means nothing, and it is just a sound. So, what will happen if we start meditating on 'mu'? Nothing will happen because 'mu' means nothing. It is the secret of using this word. It takes us into the nothingness, which is the sole purpose behind the usage of such words. Therefore, it disappears when the mind gets fed up with the whole exercise of nonsense. Moreover, that is the moment of entering into reality.

The master did not directly explain the abovementioned story but said 'mu'. It does not mean that the master is not aware of the answer. By not giving any explanation, the master tries to provoke the disciple to search for the answer on his own. Certain things cannot be taught but can be learned through one's own experiences.

The second example is: One hand clapping.

¹¹ Mills, Elizabeth. 英語対訳で読む禅入門。p. 109

¹² 'Mu' 『無』 means nothing, naught, nil and zero.

A disciple has to meditate upon the sound of one hand clapping. Two hands will be needed to produce sound. Sound cannot be produced unless two things collide with each other. There cannot be any sound with one hand; it looks logically impossible. Now, that has to be meditated upon.

Disciples are asked to meditate on the koan "sound of one hand clapping". Now, one hand cannot clap. Logically it is not possible. It does not matter how long we try to solve it; we will not find the solution. It is not that we will solve if we think longer.

Moreover, the truth lies in the more we think, the more it will become difficult to solve. The Koan has been formulated so that our minds cannot think about the answer. However, we must think about the Koan to search for the answer, and it is a paradox.

Moreover, one day something unusual happened with the disciple. The disciple did not give any answer. Every day he had been replying to something and was being hit by the master— so it was rational to his mind. He had been thinking that whatever he was saying was wrong. That is why the master hit him. Today, he has not said anything; still, master hits him. It was irrational. Zen is beyond the comprehension of our logical mind.

The disciple knows it is impossible, but the master knows it is possible. The disciple meditates on the sound of one hand tirelessly. Moreover, he knows it is impossible, but the master says, "Go on meditating". However, one day the mind comes to its ultimate peak. Suddenly all is silence. The question has disappeared, the questioner has disappeared, the mind is no more there, no thought is there, and all is silence. The Koan is solved.

The Third example is:

Tozan asked, "How long have you been living on this mountain?"

Ryuzan said, "The passing of seasons and years cannot reach it."¹³

Tozan is asking a simple question. However, the master is always ready for the disciple and is not going to waste a single moment, which can be helpful for the disciple in the attainment of truth. The conversation between Tozan and Ryuzan seems challenging to comprehend. The master uses the opportunity to make the disciple understand that there is a place within ourselves, where no one can reach except the self. Usually, people who aim for spiritual growth find a place in the

¹³ Osho. Zen- the diamond thunderbolt. p. 254

mountains, where silence is easy to meditate. The master says, "Find a place where nothing can reach". It is a Koan.

The conversation seems to be going in a different direction. The answer does not match with the question asked. It is one of the methods to provoke a disciple to make things understand. The question asked belonged to worldly affairs. However, the master is taking this opportunity to signal the larger truths of life. Time is not a measurement for inner consciousness. Time is for outside measurement. In our deepest being, there is no time. We have always been here, and we will always remain here. We have never moved in our deepest core of being. Everything else moves around us except consciousness. It is beyond time, so the passing of years and seasons do not reach.

The Fourth Example is:

Asked Tozan, "What is the guest within the host?"
Ryuzan said, "White clouds cover the blue mountain."
Tozan then asked, "What is the host within the host?"
Ryuzan said, "He never goes out of the door."
Tozan then asked, "How far apart are the host and guest?"
Ryuzan said, "Waves on a river."¹⁴

The host and the guest are so close together that they cannot be separated. It seems to be separated, just like waves in the ocean. Waves and the ocean are not two separate things. It is one thing having two forms. The water quality in the waves and the ocean remains the same. Quality-wise, both are the same. This division is created by the mind, which separates things. The moment we use our "no-mind" state to seek the answer, things become clear. We must meditate over it. This contemplation helps us find the authentic "Buddha" available as a guest to be searched for. When we search it, we know that there are not two things, but only one. Finally, all the contradictions and paradoxes get solved.

The fifth example is:

A great Zen master, Sosan, was asked to explain the ultimate teaching of the Buddha.
He answered, "You won't understand it until you have it."¹⁵

¹⁴ Osho. *Zen - the diamond thunderbolt*. p. 262-63

¹⁵ Osho. *The path of Love: on the songs of the Indian mystic Kabir*. p. 182

It is a great statement. However, the paradox lies in the fact that what is the point in understanding it? When we have it, there is no need to understand it. When we do not have it, we cannot understand it, and the need exists to understand it. It is a paradox; we can understand it only when we have it. There is no way to understand it before this; only the experience will explain it.

5. Result and findings

The Zen master says, "Truth can be expressed without speaking and keeping silent."¹⁶ Now, this is impossible; this is contradictory. "Words can express truth", then it naturally means "Truth can be expressed by silence." However, the master says, "Words cannot express truth, and truth cannot be expressed by silence." Moreover, the master says, "Truth can be expressed by words too, and it can be expressed by silence too." Now it is confusing. Now it is illogical; it is absurd.

How can this be true that that truth can be expressed without speaking and without keeping silent? One can do only one; either one can speak it or keep silent. What the disciple is asking and the master is saying is not related at all, but in a non-mind way, and one has to meditate over it.

Master says, "When the spring came, how the birds sang among the blossoms." They were expressing truth, but they were silent when the spring was not there, and when the spring came, they sang, they celebrated. So, the first thing is "when the spring is there." He means when we have the spring in our heart when the proper maturity has happened when our fruit is ripe, that is what Satori is, the spring of inner heart. Birds do not go to school to learn how to sing. The spring has come. When the spring comes, the spring starts singing in them.

It can be said both in words and in silence. Whenever it is said, there is word and silence together. However, the word is not a mere word; the Zen master says it cannot be said through words. Moreover, the silence is not dead silence; that is why the master says it cannot be said through silence, either. The word speaks through silence, the silence speaks through the word; and when silence and word meet, there is a song. Then there is a celebration.

6. Conclusion

The whole existence is in great harmony. The birds are singing, and the trees are silent. However, there is no confusion. Everything seems to be intertwined and

¹⁶ Osho. *The first principle talks on Zen*. p. 164

interlinked. Birds cannot exist without trees, and the trees cannot exist without the birds, either. The birds sing for the trees, and the trees are silent for the birds, and they are connected. It is the first thing we must never forget that all divisions are false because existence is one.

Whenever we come across a contradiction, we must observe. There is bound to be something of great significance. We shall never avoid contradictions because life exists through the tension of contradiction. So, whenever we come across a contradiction, we are very close to the source of life. We must never forget it. Existence comprehends all contradictions. It is in such harmony that even contradictions do not contradict. The night and the day, the summer and the winter, and the life and death are contradictory. However, they co-exist. Somehow everything fits together. The absurdities bring more fun into life.

Zen says that there is no God, and there is nothing to search for. Friedrich Nietzsche also says, "there is no God, God is dead, and man is free". God is not separate from us, and it is our potentiality; therefore, it is part and parcel of our being.

The whole message of all these paradoxical statements is to "relax". There is no need to search, and there is no need to ask. How is it possible? However, it happens for sure. By just "relaxing", we reach our central being where deep silence prevails, and all contradictions disappear on their own. It is the defining moment of finding the truth, i.e. Satori.

Zen conveys meaning in an irrelevant manner. It is just like, if a person is sleeping and saying something nonsense, that person wakes up. It is how Zen functions. Zen has developed such methods, which are very helpful to wake up someone who has fallen asleep for a long time. Zen helps to provide awareness. Zen possesses elements of mystery and wonder.

The whole emphasis of Zen koan is to bring our consciousness to the present moment. It is done using various methods. Sometimes master gives a koan to solve, and sometimes the unpredictable behaviour of the master helps a disciple to reach the present moment. In the present moment, there is no thought, and there is no past or future. It is the moment when a disciple can take a courageous jump and reach the state of "no-mind".

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