

Analysis of paradoxical couplets of Kabir and Zen Koan

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Abstract- Couplets of Kabir and Zen sayings have many commonalities. Kabir uses paradox in his 'dohes' to express the truth of life. Similarly, Zen 'koan' uses the indirect method of expressing the truth, which seems abnormal in certain situations. The idea behind using the paradoxical method or indirect way of saying the truths of life is to shock the mind, which can help achieve a 'no-mind' state. This paper aims to critically analyse some of the paradoxical couplets of Kabir and Zen Koan, which have similarities and relevance in contemporary society.

Keywords paradoxical couplet, koan, no-mind, relevance

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1. Introduction

Zen originated from Mahayana Buddhism. In India, the word ‘meditation’ was called ‘dhyān.’. Later, when Bodhi Dharma (Daruma) introduced ‘dhyān’ to China in the sixth century, it became ‘Chan’. Finally, when it reached Japan, ‘Chan’ became ‘Zen’. *Zen* was introduced to Japan from China in the Asuka period (538 A.D – 710 A.D), but it became popular in Japan during the Kamakura period (1185 A.D. – 1333 A.D.). Eisai (1141 A.D. – 1215 A.D.) is credited as the actual founder of the Japanese *Zen*. During his first visit to China (1168 A.D.), he was deeply impressed by the spirit of *Zen*. Returning to Japan, Eisai built the first temple of the Rinzai sect in Japan, Shofukuji, at Hakata in Kyushu.

In the Muromachi period (1336 A.D. – 1573 A.D.), the Shogunate family, Ashikaga, protected the *Zen* schools. Muso Soseki, a priest known as an eminent garden designer, appeared on the scene and contributed to the culture of *Zen* Buddhism. *Zen* spread to the masses in the Tokugawa era (1600 A.D. – 1868 A.D.). In the age of civil wars, samurai such as Oda Nobunaga and Takeda Shingen trained themselves under *Zen*. In the Edo period (1600 A.D. – 1868 A.D.), the Rinzai School was reformed by Hakuin, who led people to *Zen*. Hakuin systematised *Zen* with Koans and educated many disciples.

The origin of *Zen*¹ in India before its introduction into China and Japan is mixed with legends and stories, and it is difficult to gather reliable facts. However, while trying to decipher the mysteries enveloping the origin of *Zen* in India, the development of Mahayana Buddhism² (first century C.E.) provides historical and reliable sources. The legendary story of the origin of *Zen* in India, narrated by Suzuki, D. T. (1949:167), runs as follows:

*Sakyamuni*³ was once engaged at the Mount of the Holy Vulture in preaching to a congregation of his disciples. He did not resort to any lengthy verbal discourse to explain his point but lifted a bouquet before the assemblage, which was presented to him by one of his lay disciples. Not a word came out of his mouth. Nobody understood the meaning of this

¹ Li, M., & Bray, M. (2007). Cross-border flows of students for higher education: Push–pull factors
Zen: In Sanskrit language, meaning of Zen is Dhyana. When Zen reached to China, it became ‘Chan’. And when it reached to Japan it became ‘Zen’.

² Mahayana Buddhism (also known as the Great Vehicle) is a form of Buddhism, which is prominent in North Asia, including China, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia etc. and is considered as the more authentic version of the Buddha’s teachings.

³ Sakyamuni is the synonym of Gautama Buddha.

except the old, venerable *Mahakasyapa*⁴, who quietly smiled at the master as if he fully comprehended the purport of the Enlightened One. The latter, perceiving this, opened his gold-tongued mouth and proclaimed solemnly, 'I have the most precious spiritual and transcendental treasure, which I hand over to you this moment, O venerable *Mahakasyapa*. This was the origin of *Zen*.

The history of *Zen* dates back to the coming of the Bodhi-dharma from India to China and later Japan. He came to China with a special message, which is summed up by Suzuki, D.T. (1949:176) in the following given lines:

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 Buddhahood.

There are three sects of *Zen* Buddhism in Japan: Rinzai-sect, Soto-sect and Obaku-sect. Rinzai-sect and Soto-sect were established during the Kamakura period (1185 A.D. -1333 A.D.) by *Zen* master *Eisai* (1141A.D. – 1215 A.D.) and by *Zen* master *Dogen* (1200 A.D. -1253 A.D.) respectively. Later, the Obaku sect was established during the Edo period (1600 A.D. -1868 A.D.) by the Chinese *Zen* master *Ingen* (1592 A.D. -1673 A.D.). While the Obaku sect was strongly influenced by Chinese culture and tradition, the Rinzai sect and Soto sect were influenced by native Japanese culture. In Rinzai-sect, mainly '*Zazen*'⁵ and '*Koan*'⁶ are practiced. The Soto-sect, in contrast, relies solely on *Zazen*. However, this research will focus on *Rinzai Zen*.

The approach of *Zen* towards life is very different. If it can be compared to anything, it would be perfectly correct to compare *Zen* with a mirror, which reflects life as it is. *Zen* emphasises that whatsoever is reflected in a particular moment (in the mirror) is the truth. There is nothing to choose between the two because the moment we try to choose, it becomes false, and an illusion appears. *Zen* is paradoxical because our life itself is full of paradoxical elements.

Zen allows us to live moment to moment rather than thinking about the past or future. The development of *Koan* was done for this purpose only: to bring our consciousness to the present. Once we are in the present, the possibility of solving

⁴ Mahakasyapa is one of the disciples of Gautam Buddha.

⁵ Zazen is a type of meditation during which a person sits cross-legged in the lotus posture to meditate quietly.

⁶ While Koan is a question / riddle used to test whether the disciple has reached the state of Kensho (i.e. to look into one's original nature) or not?

a Koan increases.

Kabir was born in 1456 A.D. and died in 1575 A.D. This is widely accepted. However, there are differences of opinion among scholars regarding the birth and death of Kabir. He was a weaver from Banaras. He was born in a Hindu Brahmin family but raised in a Muslim family (*Julaha*). He is known for his critical approach to the rituals of Hindus and Muslims, leading to superstitions. It is also important to emphasise here that he was against the rituals (that follow superstitions) of other religions as well. His spiritual master was a famous saint from south India named *Guru Ramananda*. Besides this, Kabir also learned from *Nath Panthis*, *Vaishnav Sadhus*, etc. But he did not follow them blindly.

2. Literature review

Blyth, R. H. (1942: 44) talks about *Zen* and further comments:

Tokusan (Zen monk) says, "*Zen* is wordless, and it is not something. *Zen* may be words. All living poetical words are *Zen*. *Zen* is not, however, the meaning of words. It is the words themselves, with their meaning not perceived separately from the words. *Zen* also is not something which can be given or received. Love is the same. We cannot give love to God; God cannot give it to us. God is love. When we really know, with our mind-body, that there is nothing we can get or bestow, borrow, or lend, hold, or lose, that we cannot forgive or be forgiven, save or be saved (think of The Man Who Died), we know *Zen*, but we do not know what it is, because it is not a what."

Kabir's teachings have been recorded in *Bijak*, which is comprised of *shabd*s, *sakhis*, and others. Apart from purely literary or philosophical considerations, Kabir's real importance rests on his influence on the religious thinking of commoners. His teaching is based on his own original thinking. Kabir realised that to reach the mass of the population, it was essential to deliver his message in popular dialects.

Kabir's forceful and fearless language had a significant impact on people. Kabir could see the problems and challenges in Hindu and Muslim rituals. He started criticising them in a challenging and controversial way so that these ordinary people could realise their false notions. He challenged the priests and Maulvis through his contrary sayings (*ulatbansi*). He was against all kinds of hypocrisy and caste distinctions.

In his influential book '*Kabir the Great Mystic*,' Isaac Ezekiel (1978:62-64) writes:

Kabir's songs seek nobody's approbation. They seek no sanction, ask for no approval, search for no popularity, invite no commendation, and crave no compliment. They stand independent of these considerations and

constitute the most uninhibited literature, the freest free writing ever produced by a saint...Banter, ridicule, sarcasm, wit and humour- these weapons he wields! Nor does he hesitate to hit straight from- the shoulder, hitting hard, ceaselessly and without stop, till the face of false pity and hypocrisy is battered out of shape and exposed to the view of the public for general laughter.

3. Methodology

Two Zen Koans and two Kabir couplets have been selected. This paper applies a comparative study as a methodological approach since the research compares the philosophy of Rinzai Zen and Kabir through Koans and Kabir's paradoxical couplets. The inductive method is used to draw references and conclusions.

4. Findings and Analysis

Example 1:

One day, a priest asked Master Joshu, "Does a Dog have the mind of Buddha?"

Joshu answered: "mu"⁷ This is the most well-known *Koan*, given to the disciple who practices *Zazen* for the first time.

(Explanation):

The master did not give any explanation or a direct answer but said, 'mu.' This does not mean that the master is not aware of the answer. The master is simply trying to provoke his disciple to search for the answer on his own by not giving any explanation. This is because certain things cannot be taught but can be learned through one's own experiences.

So, when a person starts meditating on 'mu', there is a possibility that nothing will happen. This is because 'mu' means nothing. This is the whole secret of using this keyword. It takes us into the world of nothingness, where nothing exists. Therefore, when the mind is tired of all kinds of nonsense, it disappears. And that is the precious moment of entering into reality.

In Buddhism, emptiness or nothingness is given importance. The *Zen* master, while aiming to make his disciples understand the concept of Buddhism, says 'mu', i.e. the truth lies in emptiness. Since emptiness cannot be explained in words, there is a need for stories or anecdotes closer to the truth.

The importance of a *koan* lies in its ability to help the disciple approach the truth. When a koan is solved, its meaning is revealed. The real meaning of *mu* is to attain silence. The truth of life is comprehended in silence when the body and mind are in deep harmony. Silence is how things can be spoken, which is beyond speech. Hence, there lies the paradox in *Zen*, i.e., conveying a message without using any

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

Gyananand Sadhavi (139) comments about Kabir in her couplets:

सुर नर मुनजिन पीर औलिया। जनि रे पया तनि जाना।

कहै कबीर गूगे की सक्खर। काकरकरै बखाना।

Divine persons, human beings, Hindu-saint, and Sufi saints (Pir and Auliya) experienced the divinity and knew the truth. The experience is of non-duality wherein the observer and the observed are the same. However, the moment one tries to explain to another, it becomes the subject of duality. Kabir further says the experience cannot be shared, as a dumb person cannot speak about the sugar he has tasted. Here, Saint Kabir emphasises that one who wants to know the truth must search for and experience it.

A person who attains the ultimate truth wants to share it with all. However, the greatest difficulty arises when he shares his experiences in words. Truth is attained in a state of no-mind. However, when it is shared with others, the mind is used. The mind creates duality. Therefore, people who know the secret of all things and have attained the ultimate truth find it difficult to narrate it to others.

Example 2:

In the Meiji Era, one scholar visited the *Hakusan* training hall in Tokyo to see the old master Nanin. Master Nanin, listening to the scholar, poured tea into a cup. He continued to pour even after the cup was full. The scholar said: “Master! The tea is overflowing.” The master answered: Yes, it is like you. Your mind is filled with information, and there is no room for what I tell you. This is *Zen*.

(Explanation):

Our minds are also filled with thoughts and ideas, like the scholar who visited the Zen master Nanin. The overflowing tea symbolises that the mind is full of thoughts and has no empty space. In such cases, the mind will not accept the master's teachings. Therefore, the master teaches his disciples that they should first empty their minds and then come for *Zen* learning.

Things that cannot be said in words might be grasped intuitively. The gesture of ‘overflowing tea’ signifies the mental state of common people, wherein it is very difficult to learn new things. Therefore, to grasp the meaning of a Zen koan, it is important to be empty from the inside, i.e. purification of body, mind, and sense organs.

Bhandari, N. Singh illustrates about Kabir in his couplet and further says:

मन के मते न चालयि, मन के मते अनेक

जो मन पर असबार है, सो साधू कोई एक

Here, Kabir wants to emphasise that you should not listen to your mind because it

is not constant and keeps jumping from one thought to another. The mind has several thoughts and ideas that are sometimes contradictory in nature. It is like a pendulum moving from one point to another. Whatever the mind says, the body reacts. Thus, physical activities are controlled by the mind only. It is the mind that moves. However, the person who controls his mind is not an ordinary person but an enlightened being.

In Rinzai *Zen*, disciples must practice *Zazen* daily and for long hours. It helps them get rid of their continuous thoughts. The mind is nothing but a series of thoughts. When thoughts control a person, the person is a true warrior. The next important thing for a disciple is to search for the meaning of the *Koan* given by the master.

The practice of *Zazen* and searching for the meaning of the given koan is critical in the world of *Zen*. *Zen* meditation emphasises just sitting and doing nothing.’ This means a disciple must concentrate on his mind without moving his body. Therefore, the mind-body relationship is vital to a disciple’s *Zen* practice.

5. Conclusion

Zen Koans and the sayings of Rinzai *Zen* are closely tied to Kabir's teachings and philosophies. Comprehending the teachings and philosophies of *Zen* and Kabir in the 21st century will be very helpful for a larger audience. Finally, this comparative study (*Zen* and Kabir) helps better understand the hearts and minds of Indian and Japanese people, strengthening the cultural bond between the two nations.

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