



Koan Practice and the 6th and 7th Precepts

SENSEI SEVAN ROSS

Years ago, when I began my long and involved journey through the inner landscape of koan work, someone I knew well told me that koans are irrelevant to the contemporary world, and as such they might best be ignored. But, through my own koan practice I discovered that he was wrong. Koans are character builders as well as character destroyers. They both strengthen us and they reduce and humble us at the same time, all through their difficulty—their constant, rather idiopathic, undermining of our personal daily life of fiction, our carefully constructed and maintained personage.

We have a set of images of ourselves and of the universe that is a fabrication, a fiction, all sewn together and glued up with belief, fear, projection, and built out of random scraps of assumptions for which we have no verification, and to which we become increasingly enslaved. Part of the slavery of our personality is a requirement

for its very existence: It must re-establish itself continually by giving itself discrete features. It must set itself apart as a unique and precious entity. One of the tools it uses to do this is the continual comparison of itself to others. 'I am _____ and I know this because others are _____ in comparison to me.' Others become our benchmark. The more we can see ourselves as surpassing others, the better, since this reinforces our perceived uniqueness and does it while showing us in a quite favorable light.

Basically, we want to be winners and we want everyone else to be losers. And, it is not enough for us to only imagine that reality is as such (although some of us who are dreamers can be satisfied with this). Indeed, usually we quietly work to undermine the position of the other as well as to elevate our own. We speak ill of others either directly to them, or (more likely) to third parties when they are not around. We also praise

Britta Brückner

ourselves, even if this is usually done with some delicacy. Our personage is elevated by stepping over the personages of others. It's like turtles in a little pond, all crawling over each other to get the sunshine.

The set of images of ourselves and of the universe with which we support our personage usually needs to be quite regularly confirmed—this is not an occasional thing. Pretty much, every day the beast needs to be fed. To do this, we need sympathetic ears. We need a cadre of other similar personages out there who can and will agree with our self-praise, or at least tolerate it to the point where we believe they agree. These others must be sympathetic reflections of our own little ego trip.

Of course, the problem here is that the ground is always shifting, and this means that today's supporters and fans are tomorrow's enemies. So, each day we seek out others who will allow us to praise ourselves and disparage others. And we usually find these people. We find them because of the barter of self—I'll gossip to you if you gossip back. We both have our egos stroked—it's a self-fest!

Onto this scene comes koan work. The simplest way koan practice helps us confront our habit of continually fortifying the personage is that it engages us—it engages us in work which requires so much energy that we have precious little left for the ego-fortification project. Koan practice requires absorption, and when we are deeply focused on our koan, we discover that we have less energy for gossip. Moreover, koans require the deeper absorption of forgetting that there is a self at all. We cannot become one with a koan if we are supporting the self. Many, if not most, practitioners discover over years of practice and sesshins that becoming MU means just that: when you commit to the battle you cannot leave any reserves behind, not even some lonely officer with a pair of field glasses, no recorder, no observer, no historian, nobody. It is hard to gossip and pump up the ego when there is simply nobody there to do it. Still, the reality of this situation is that these benefits of koan work are confined to the mat. What about daily life?

What about the life of exchange with others—the very others whom we are belittling or gossiping to?

Working with a koan for an intense and extended period will almost certainly expose all that makes one human. Up to the surface come all the elements of personage. This is the fabricated, incomplete, contradictory, loosely connected ego that we take for granted when it remains tightly bound up and supported by our day-to-day activities and interactions.

Koan practice teaches us about our deep attachment to this personage, and indeed to each element of the personage. The practice can teach us about our deeply ironic habits—how we act repeatedly in ways that produce pain for both ourselves and others. When we engage in koan work, we enter into a kind of silent dialogue with our teacher. There is a sort of meta-communication that operates here that we rarely refer to directly. Sure, in a moment of anger or weakness, we may admit to the teacher in dokusan that we are miffed about how he or she treated us in the last dokusan, how our insights were ignored, how we were in pain and the teacher was not there to help us—to help prop up our personage, that is. But there is a lot more happening here. There is transference and counter-transference. There is the colorful world of fantasy that makes the student-teacher relationship a rich stew of misimpressions and misunderstandings. And there is the simple aspect of risk in the dokusan room.

To do any real koan work, one has to risk the personage, and one does this in a number of ways. Clearly, in subsequent koans, most particularly in the large formal collections, one must present the cases before the teacher, and generally this requires that one absorb and really become each of the 'characters' in the case. It is not enough to understand Ummon; you must abandon your personage and become Ummon. The self is at risk here in a very sophisticated way—any time spent being another is time free from being one's own self, and in this time (as well as in the wake of this experience) one has truly abandoned support of the personage, at

least for the moment. Most people find this very freeing. One comes not only to know the other, but actually exchanges the self and the welfare of the self for the other and the welfare of the other. The Dalai Lama has been heard to remark that spiritual growth can be measured by the degree one is able to regard the other as one once regarded one's own self.

But there is another aspect of koan-work risk: one may fail to demonstrate the spirit of the koan. When one fails, and especially when one fails repeatedly, one must come to terms with the question of the validity of the self that one spends so much effort reinforcing. Simply put, it is harder to brag about how cool we are the more we get tossed out of the dokusan room.

This is an advertisement for hard teachers. Teachers who pass their students too easily on koans actually reinforce bad habits, prideful thinking, and big ego. What a tragic loss! Without a Manjusri-like teacher who is willing to hold students' feet to the fire, the student is robbed of generous ego-reduction and the chance to reach greater insight. The ego gets beaten up and worn down by the very process of being put in the path of difficult koans by a strict teacher. Chances are, the more the student dislikes the treatment, the better it is for the student. Good medicine often tastes bitter.

I resolve not to speak of the faults of others, but to be understanding and sympathetic.

I resolve not to praise myself and disparage others, but to overcome my own shortcomings.

Tough koans in tough dokusans help us become sympathetic, and they help us not to praise ourselves. We keep failing. We keep

running into the same problems, the same traps. We do the same stupid things. And we keep being reminded of this by the process itself. We keep being repeatedly rung out of dokusan. The teacher makes the same remarks to us, again and again. We come to discover that we need to change some things in us. We may even come to discover that we need to support our self less, and possibly not at all. We bring the results of our practice to the teacher over a very long time and under extremely difficult and threatening conditions, only to have the teacher simply sit there, say or do or be something seemingly totally unhelpful, or reject us outright. While we continue in this process through years of koan practice, we see the entire emotional, attachment, and defilement spectrum play out in an ever-changing and ever-disturbing kaleidoscope on the wall of our mind.

Finally, as a result of this personage-damaging process, we may even come to be timid in some ways, less likely to make judgments of others whom we are unsure of. We may come to the conclusion that the simplification of the self, the reduction of the superstructure of the personage, may be central to the work of awakening instead of some sideshow.

In the end, if real work is done, we simply care less and less about the personage that was once the center of our actions, and we learn to watch what we say, to whom, and about whom.

Sensei Sevan Ross is the spiritual director of the Chicago Zen Center. This article appeared in the following issue of Zen Bow: 'The Critical Mind: Precepts 6 & 7', Vol. 30, No. 1 & 2, 2007. For permission to reprint, please contact the Rochester Zen Center.