

Zen Koans

&

the Practice of Recovery

Koans by ancient Zen Masters
Reflections by R. E. Warner

Zen Koans
&
the Practice
of Recovery

Koans by ancient Zen
Masters

Reflections by R. E. Warner

© 2025 R. E. Warner

All rights reserved. No one can copy this or memorize it and repeat it word for word to someone else, or ever, like do just anything they want with it. Definitely don't go use, like, a Xerox machine and copy this and then give it to a friend. And don't tell anybody that if they go to the web site below, practically the whole book is there for free anyway.
Seriously, you copying or not copying this book affects me very little as the author.

R. E. Warner
rwarner@troped.com
@belovedleader
theneverendingfictionmachine.com

Introduction

Where I am Coming From

What I want to say here in this introduction is simply what the title says: to let you know where I am coming from. The reason for that is twofold. I don't want to be construed as either an expert in recovery or zen. And I don't think my personal beliefs necessarily enter into why I think these reflections on these selected Zen koans are useful. I do have a Masters degree in Psychology, but it's in experimental psychology, not clinical psychology—the more applied branch of psychology. That's helpful, because this really is an experiment. If you choose to engage it, know that. I promise no results.

I hope to have written these thoughts and reflections from such a vantage point that it won't matter if you are just curious about Zen or a Zen master. It won't matter if you are in a recovery program or not. It won't matter if you believe in one god or many or none. I have found many

problems in many recovery programs that concern themselves with answers to questions—especially questions of why—and I find no need to have that question answered for myself. I am practicing recovery because I must. I had become very unhappy with my life and I wanted to change.

I have been told by people in recovery to “Take what you need, ignore the rest.” I’m not sure about this advice. It should begin with, “Listen to everything, keep what you need, discard the rest.” Maybe that’s what they meant to say. However, I found myself looking at Zen with renewed vigor because it had once brought me great calm, but I had walked away from it. I also found myself looking at recovery literature and finding no Zen in it. I felt a need to intertwine the two. I could see that elements like meditation benefited both. Both recovery and Zen do not offer answers. They offer methods.

What is Zen?

The rustling of the wind of thousands of leaves in hundreds of trees.

A bird's swooping shadow on still water.

The sound of your own footsteps as you walk away from the question.

Zen is this moment. The space between then and right now.

Are you here?

Ok, But Seriously, What is Zen and What's it Got to Do With Recovery?

The latter answer to the question "What is Zen?" is legitimate, but I can be more verbose (even though that's not very Zen of me).

Zen is a school of Mahayana Buddhism that emphasizes direct experience, meditation, and intuitive insight over intellectual analysis or scripture. The central practice of Zen is Zazen, or sitting meditation, which cultivates awareness and presence. Rather than relying on

texts or doctrines, Zen encourages practitioners to experience reality directly, transcending the limits of *conceptual* thinking. It also values simplicity and mindfulness, promoting a minimalist, present-focused way of life.

There. Now you know.

But do you?

One path to Zen is to meditate on koans. Zen teachings often incorporate koans, paradoxical parables or sayings like "What is the sound of one hand clapping?" designed to break conventional thinking and spark enlightenment.

Consider this simple koan:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near

bim. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

This is what it is to be in the moment. At its heart, Zen is about being fully present, letting go of attachment to concepts, and realizing one's true nature through direct experience rather than intellectual understanding.

Zen, as a philosophy, is attractive to me for many reasons, but as is shown in the first Koan in these reflections, enlightenment can be found in not knowing answers, in finding contentment in questions and seeking. I have a scientific mind, and while I desire physical proof of most matters, I still find that I do not require an answer many questions like:

Why are we here?

Why is anything here?

When is now?

What is right or just or good and why?

I love these questions, but I do not tend to settle on answers to them. I am content to sit with those questions and allow them to be unanswered.

Why are we here?

So that you could ask.

With a Zen regard for recovery, it might be asked, *who* is addicted? Show me this self that clings. I will come to meditation in a little while, but one thing that meditation has shown me is that our notion of "I," though persistent, is very flimsy, perhaps even an illusion. With the benefit of knowledge of neuroscience (enough to be dangerous anyway) I have come to see my brain as quite fundamental to who I am. There is no metaphysical consciousness that I am aware of. Remove my vision system and I do not see. When I cannot see, I will become a different person, possessing different knowledge. Remove a veil from my eyes and I will become a different person or perhaps no one at all.

Living with pain has made me a different person. I have sought out different activities, made different purchases, paid attention to different matters, taken different or less risks.

Living with and without addiction has made me a different person.

So, who is this “I” that is addicted?

The river does not hold onto the water; yet it flows.

Addiction is attachment—grasping at something outside yourself, believing it will complete you or make you feel better. But Zen teaches that nothing is missing. The craving, the suffering—it is a cloud passing in the vast sky of your mind.

Sit with your craving. Do not fight it. Do not feed it. Just watch. What is it? Where does it come from?

Who is the one who suffers? The one watching?

Freedom is not found in escaping addiction but in seeing through it—realizing that there was never anything to hold onto in the first place.

The river does not hold onto the water; yet it flows.

For a time there was a benefit or we wouldn’t have engaged in using. That water has passed and we know it. It is time to become someone else.

But these are just magic words without...

Practice

So, when I say that recovery is a practice, and that the why of it doesn’t matter, I look to my other practices for guidance.

One is my writing. I write every day. At some point in my life, there may have been a reason why, but that reason fell by the wayside some time ago. I write every day because I write every day. I am a writer. In fact, during periods when I am not writing, I often don’t feel that I am a writer.

I find that this happens with most practices. At first it takes effort and a goal or a vision. Then it takes grit and in many ways becomes an effort that enshrines the practice itself with no goal in mind. It becomes ritual, I suppose. Then, the practice is just part of you, maybe even comes to define you. I, in part, write every day these days because my day feels incomplete if I don’t. I write because *I am* a writer.

My other practice is (i.e. *needs to be*) healthy living. Three years ago I was diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, a disease of the immune system akin to diabetes or lupus. It has rendered my right index finger useless—a real hit for a writer who loves to write by hand. I wake up in pain most days when I am not taking care of myself. It’s particularly

at odds with sitting still and writing for long periods of time, because when I do finally move, it hurts! When my rheumatologist informed me of the diagnosis, he put it plainly, “I have bad news for you. You have an incurable disease. You’re likely going to have to deal with it for the rest of your life. The best way we know how to fight it is through diet and exercise.”

I was not a person who cared about diet and exercise. I still am not a person who just *does* diet and exercise. I’m not where I am in my writing practice as I should or could be with healthy living. I need to work harder. It needs to happen every day. I am, however, at a point where I enjoy my successes because I am not in pain! Living with pain every day has been a harsh reminder of the need to live healthy. Still, I have a ways to go before healthy living is second nature. I love candy.

Zen, as a practice for me, mostly occurs by seeking out the literature and then throughout my day, asking questions and not answering them. Maybe that sounds silly. I especially do it with emotions. I will feel an emotion rise up and I will ask, “Where is this coming from? What am I going to do about it?” And then oftentimes, I will do nothing about it.

Getting back briefly to the small matter of free will, once when I was backpacking, the first thing in the morning I would do was flip a quarter. If the quarter was heads up, I would spend the day believing I had free will. If

the quarter was tails, I spent the day believing that there was no such thing as free will.

Nothing really happened.

I could have sat down and not hiked for a day. There was one beautiful day by a river that I did exactly that. I don’t remember the result of the quarter flip that morning. Did I do it because I chose to or because since the beginning of the Universe I was always going to do that? It didn’t matter.

Of course, how delightful would it be to merely live out in the woods and do nothing.

There is a phrase from Zen that sticks with me on that matter, too.

Chop wood, carry water.

You need to chop wood for a fire to purify the water that you need. If this is *all* that you do, you will survive for a while and not freeze or die of dehydration. Everything else his for living longer and *maybe* better. And all desire comes with a side of suffering.

In order to *accomplish* things (like writing this book) we must have desires and goals. Just know that you don’t *have* to. Desire leads to suffering. That’s not a bad thing. It just is. Choosing to imbibe a substance over and over again despite the fact that it is hurting you is not a bad thing. It

is what you are doing. You are hurting yourself and suffering more than you otherwise would. Somewhere in your brain, you know this. That is not a bad thing. It is a thing you are knowing. Should you wish to stop, consider what else you might rather do. What is the cost of your addiction? What opportunities are you robbing yourself of?

The practice of recovery is to not stop asking questions like the one above—to be present enough to ask the question. What will happen if I use this one time? If the response was, “It’ll be fine,” either you are lying to yourself or you have not yet paid a high enough price to want change. If you find yourself having the dichotomous thoughts of “I want to do this thing I always do, but it is bad for me and I want to change,” you are on the precipice of change. Now change. That is the practice.

The first time I or anyone I know tried to meditate, it seemed impossible. The goal is to sit and be quiet, pay attention to your breathing and have no thoughts in your head. Nearly immediately, you will find your head filled with one thought after another. You must excuse the thoughts as they arrive. Use this knowledge:

You are not your thoughts.

Don’t get angry or frustrated with the thoughts; let them go. Let them go like birds to the wind. Take joy in

letting them go. If they are important, they will return. After a time, if you meditate like this every day, you will find it easier and easier to sit with no thoughts, and easier to excuse them when they arrive.

Recovery is a practice in this same fashion. Impossible at first. The desire to use seems like waves. When the wave arrives, let it. Sit with it.

You are not your thoughts.

You are not your urges.

So, then what?

In recovery programs, a common refrain is “Do the next right thing.” That’s good advice especially since right is entirely up to you. Do you know what you mean when you say that something is right? Be rigorously honest with yourself and ask, what is the next right thing? Sometimes it’s not the same as what you want to do. I’m still pondering that one.

Sometimes when I am faced with the feeling of “I have so many things to do whatever shall I do?” I take a moment and think instead, “What if they come in a few minutes and take it all away?—what will I want to have done then?” I don’t know who “they” is, but for some

reason, when I have that second thought, it becomes clear to me what I should do next.

I think there is irony in the way that addiction can follow this same process: there is a reason why we do it (entertainment or self-medication), then we just do it, then it comes to defines us and drive us. It's odd, however, to think of an addiction as a practice. It seems so much like the opposite because we don't usually intend to get addicted to some substance or activity.

Still, it remains that a practice is we do it for a reason (to gain some benefit), we keep doing it with perseverance and passion until it comes easier and easier to us, we do it because we just do it. It comes to define and drive us.

Perhaps that's the difference between practice and addiction. Our new practice becomes easier and easier as we achieve greater and greater heights, while obtaining that first high only becomes ever more impossible.



Here are some pointers from a Zen master, as told in "Zen Flesh, Zen Bones" by Paul Reps and Nyogen Senzaki.

Soyen Shaku, the first Zen teacher to come to America, said:

"My heart burns like fire but my eyes are as cold as dead ashes." He made the following rules which he practiced every day of his life.

In the morning before dressing, light incense and meditate.

Retire at a regular hour. Partake of food at regular intervals. Eat with moderation and never to the point of satisfaction.

Receive a guest with the same attitude you have when alone. When alone, maintain the same attitude you have in receiving guests.

Watch what you say, and whatever you say, practice it.

When an opportunity comes do not let it pass by, yet always think twice before acting

Do not regret the past. Look to the future.

Have the fearless attitude of a hero and the loving heart of a child.

Upon retiring, sleep as if you had entered your last sleep.

Upon awakening leave your bed behind you instantly as if you had cast away a pair of old shoes.”

This is also pretty good advice. It does not promise success. It's also quite a daunting list. It does offer practices. I have my own. Some are similar to this. Rituals like these are beneficial to recovery. Generally, with addiction, our schedules have been bent to the will of them. Establishing *one* new ritual is beneficial. Perhaps you could start with...

Meditation

Coincidentally, all of my practices (Writing, Recovery, Zen and Healthy Living) benefit from meditation. Even Science has a thing or two to say about meditation. Setting aside the more philosophical or mystical aspect of meditation, it has been shown to be beneficial to your ability to focus, to hold attention, to alleviate stress, and

lower blood pressure among other scientifically proven benefits.¹

¹ From ChatGPT via cambridge.org - “One of the most cited academic papers on the benefits of mindfulness meditation is “The Benefits of Mindfulness Meditation: Changes in Emotional States of Depression, Anxiety, and Stress” by M. J. Malcolm, published in Behaviour Change in 2008. This study investigated the effects of a 10-week mindfulness meditation program on the emotional states of depression, anxiety, and stress in 50 participants. The findings indicated significant reductions in these emotional states post-program, suggesting that mindfulness training can be beneficial in alleviating symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as reducing stress.”



The Professor and the Zen Master

Prepare Yourself

There was a professor who had heard about Zen and wanted to learn more. He had read many tomes and done much research but thought there could be no substitute for speaking with a master. He went to see a Zen master who was pleased to receive him. The Zen master made tea and began to pour the professor a cup of tea as the professor told him all of what he had learned so far about Zen. The master poured the tea until the cup was full. The professor continued to explain. The master continued to pour the

cup and flowed out over the rim and into the saucer. The master continued to pour.

The professor exclaimed, "You must stop pouring! The cup is full. The tea is going to run onto the table."

The Zen master stopped pouring and said, "It is the same with you. How can I teach you the mysteries of Zen when your mind is full of facts and concepts?"

"First you must empty your cup."



Many times in recovery, we think that we "have it". We see a cure in place of a practice. The confident addict says, "I got this. I know how to control this." They have not admitted that they are powerless over the substance they abuse; that their desire will yield great suffering no matter their attempts at control. Addictions only generate more desire, and so more suffering. If we have urges (which we will) and have no practice when we don't, then we will repeat our behavior. Recovery must be a practice because addiction is incurable. We must empty our cup of the notions of cure and control.



The Monks and the Beautiful Traveler

Our Burdens

Two monks were hiking a long road. They came to a muddy creek embankment. On the other side was a beautiful traveler clearly afraid to cross because of her beautiful silken dress. The first monk, with little hesitation, made his way across the embankment and offered to carry her back across. She accepted. Once back across, she offered to the first monk thanks and then money. He refused and the two monks went on their way.

The second monk was furious, for their order was forbidden from interacting with women. The two monks

continued walking for several miles until the second monk could contain his fury no longer. "How could you carry that woman across the creek bed? You *know* our order is forbidden from interacting with women!"

"Brother," said the first monk. "I carried her across the creek bed. You have been carrying her for miles."



We carry our addictions and they are heavy desires. Memories of our past substance use and abuse and daydreams about future use are our burdens. We must remember that we are not our thoughts and when we do so, we can set the thought or urge aside and return to the moment—the *now*. Release your memory or daydream like a dove to the wind and lighten your mind with what beauty you can find before you.



The Zen Master Does Not Command

Sit Down & Listen

The Zen master Bankei's talk were attended not only by students of Zen but by persons of interest of many persuasions, social ranks and sects. He never quoted sutras, nor indulged in scholastic dissertations. Instead, his words were spoken from the heart to the hearts of his listeners.

One of Bankei's talks angered a local priest because his congregation had left him to hear the Zen master speak. The strong-headed priest also went to the talk determined to debate the master. While Bankei was speaking, the priest stood up from the crowd of listeners and shouted,

"Zen teacher! Whoever respects you will listen and obey you, but I do not respect you. Can you make me obey you?"

"I am not sure but if you come up beside me, I may try."

Proudly, the priest pushed his way through the crowd to the teacher.

Baker smiled. "I think you will be able to make your argument better on my right side. Come hover here."

The priest strode to Baker's right side and stood arms akimbo.

"No," said Bankei. "I was mistaken. My hearing on my right side is not as good. Come back to my left side so that I might hear you better."

The priest moved again.

"You see?" said Bankei. "You have obeyed me three times now. And I think you are a gentle person. Now sit down and listen."



Recovery can offer us wisdom that we are not prepared to hear because of our pride, inflated, at times, by our addiction. When we have a brain disorder that tells us we do not have a disorder, our addictions can move us without

our understanding of how. It is easier to deny the wisdom available from recovery and tell ourselves we do not need it. Perhaps we have successfully abstained in the past, but if we are rigorously honest with ourselves, we know that when we broke from abstinence, things went quickly out of control again because the addiction again began moving us.

It is not that we are transferring control from the addiction to recovery. We are opening our minds (which addiction has secretly been piloting) to the wisdom of those who have walked before us. We can only learn to change if we listen.



Three Monks and the Mind

The Subtlety of Perception

There were three monks out for a walk. One monk saw a banner flying and remarked on it. "Look at how much the banner is moving." The second monk said, "It is actually the wind, which cannot be seen, that is moving the banner." The third monk, the eldest, said, "While you are both correct, what you do not see is the motion of the banner and the wind is only inside your mind."



Our addictions are disorders of the brain. Brain imaging of sufferers of addiction show physical damage. The addiction changes the person's benefit calculus so that more of the substance can be obtained regardless of the physical, property or social damage occurring. Like thirst, the compulsion to obtain and use more of the addictive substance becomes impossible to ignore. If we can see that we are not our thoughts, our compulsions, we can separate the necessary from the pleasurable. We may begin to see that what once was pleasurable had become punishment. By making this new identification of the compulsion, we can begin to learn to disengage from it (them). In a sense, your addiction wants the substance but you know that using the substance can only cause you pain, misfortune and certain death.

The Great Teacher

Possessing Grit

Gudo was the emperor's teacher of his time. Nevertheless, he used to travel alone as a wandering mendicant. Once when he was on his way to Edo, the cultural and political center of the shogunate, he approached a little village named Takenaka. It was evening and a heavy rain was falling. Gudo was thoroughly wet. His straw sandals were in pieces. At a farmhouse near the village, he noticed four or five pairs of sandals in the window and decided to buy some dry ones.

The woman who offered him the sandals, seeing how wet he was, invited him in to remain for the night in her home. Gudo accepted, thanking her. He entered and recited a sutra before the family shrine. He was then introduced to the women's mother, and to her children. Observing that the entire family was depressed, Gudo asked what was wrong.

"My husband is a gambler and a drunkard," the housewife told him. "When he happens to win he drinks

and becomes abusive. When he loses he borrows money from others. Sometimes when he becomes thoroughly drunk he does not come home at all. What can I do?"

"I will help him," said Gudo. "Here is some money. Get me a gallon of fine wine and something good to eat. Then you may retire. I will meditate before the shrine."

When the man of the house returned about midnight, quite drunk, he bellowed: "Hey, wife, I am home. Have you something for me to eat?"

"I have something for you," said Gudo. "I happened to be caught in the rain and your wife kindly asked me to remain here for the night. In return I have bought some wine and fish, so you might as well have them."

The man was delighted. He drank the wine at once and laid himself down on the floor. Gudo sat in meditation beside him.

In the morning when the husband awoke he had forgotten about the previous night. "Who are you? Where do you come from?" he asked Gudo, who was still meditating.

"I am Gudo of Kyoto and I am going on to Edo," replied the Zen master.

The man was utterly ashamed. He apologized profusely to the teacher of his Emperor.

Gudo smiled. "Everything in this life is impermanent," he explained. "Life is very brief. If you keep on gambling

and drinking, you will have no time left to accomplish anything else, and you will cause your family to suffer too."

The perception of the husband awoke as if from a dream. "You are right," he declared. "How can I ever repay you for this wonderful teaching! Let me see you off and carry your things a little way."

"If you wish," assented Gudo.

The two started out. After they had gone three miles Gudo told him to return. "Just another five miles," he begged Gudo. They continued on.

"You may return now," suggested Gudo.

"After another ten miles," the man replied.

"Return now," said Gudo, when the ten miles had been passed.

"I am going to follow you all the rest of my life," declared the man.

Modern Zen teachings in Japan spring from the lineage of a famous master who was the successor of Gudo. His name was Mu-nan, the man who never turned back.



When we decide to take the path of recovery we should avail ourselves of two things: the wisdom available and discovering our grit. Gudo here, is the wisdom and the

shopkeeper's husband seeks wisdom with grit, which we can define as perseverance of recovery, the great Gudo is the wisdom generated from recovery programs, testimonials from those who have suffered from the same affliction, as well as reports of success from those ahead of us on the path. We may not even understand much of the wisdom that comes our way and to that end it is useful to possess grit.

Recovery is a practice, like learning to play piano or mastering a sport. To improve a practice, one must practice. To truly advance, we should practice every day. To thus end, we need grit, or the passion to pursue our practice in the long-term, even when there is no end in sight. With grit, we can follow the wisdom where it takes us and not turn back.

While some who read this may see a man that is a failure for leaving his family, the truth of addiction is that if left unchecked he would have lost them anyway and hurt them greatly in the process. They are liable to be happy without him as he was. The path to recovery sometimes has to be about oneself. At times we may have to leave people behind—even ones we love—because we have hurt them and they deserve peace. Some people we must leave because they may tempt us back to our addiction.

Finally, the shopkeeper's husband also carries the belongings of the teacher. This speaks to being of service while in recovery. Often times we feel the shame the man felt in front of Gudo. We can make ourselves whole again

and heal the pain of shame by being of service to others. When passion feels our grit, we may even find pleasure in good work, both because it will feel like progress and it will refill our reservoir of pride.

Is That So?

Acceptance

The Zen master Hakuin was praised by his neighbors as one living a pure life.

A beautiful Japanese girl whose parents owned a food store lived near him. Suddenly, without any warning, her parents discovered she was with child.

This made her parents very angry. She would not confess who the man was but after much harassment at last named Hakuin.

In great anger, the parents went to the master. "Is that so?" was all he would say.

After the child was born it was brought to Hakuin. By this time he had lost his reputation, which did not trouble him, but he took very good care of the child. He obtained milk from his neighbors and everything else the little one needed.

A year later the girl-mother could stand it no longer. She told her parents the truth – that the real father of the child was a young man who worked in the fishmarket.

The mother and father of the girl at once went to Hakuin to ask his forgiveness, to apologize at length, and to get the child back again.

Hakuin was willing. In yielding the child, all he said was: "Is that so?"



So many things and events will arrive at our doorstep that we do not choose and could not see coming. To fight in these matters can be a reasonable thing but for the addict, caution is required. Resistance will cause frustration and stress which can lead us back down the path of using. Avoidance only allows us to place consequences further away in time; they often arrive one way or another.

Acceptance is often taking the action of no action. This is what Hakuin is doing when he asks, "Is that so?" He merely accepts karma or destiny or the challenge the Universe hurls at us when we least expect it. In other words, shit happens.

If you believe in free will, know that the reed that does not bend is the one that most often breaks. If you believe in a deterministic Universe or preordination or god's plan,

then acceptance should com easily to you because it could have been no other way.