

Koans

Imagine you were a Buddhist disciple sitting for a final exam given by your professor. Before you start the exam, you are likely to hear the following.

Write down your name on the first page of the exam paper. The duration of the exam will be three hours. By the end of the exam, tear off the answer sheet and hand in only the answer sheet. Let me know now if you have any questions.

Now, as a student, there are already a bunch of ways you can respond to these sentences and show your teacher your understanding of the great, great, magnificent true dharma...

1. Write down your name on the first page of the exam paper.

Just don't write anything.

This demonstrates no-self. There's no you. There's no name. So just don't write anything on the exam paper otherwise you acknowledge there is you, and there is atman in you.

This is the sramana's approach, not the Buddhist approach.

2. The duration of the exam will be three hours.

Submit the paper immediately after he says this.

The interdependence of time. Either you finish the exam at this very moment, or you'll never finish it. You have to be a Buddha right at this moment. If you can't finish the paper right at this moment, you can't finish it three hours later either. Because the "you" after three hours is already another you. The person who finishes the exam paper three hours later is no longer you.

3. By the end of the exam, tear off the answer sheet and hand in only the answer sheet.

Don't tear it off! Instead, scrunch up the exam paper and the answer sheet into a ball and give it to the professor.

Non-duality. If you tear off the paper, you acknowledge the duality of the exam paper and answer sheet, whereas they should have been seen as a whole. So don't tear it off. Just scrunch it up into a ball. A ball, is a perfect geometric object that can be used to demonstrate non-duality because from whatever perspective, it is a sphere, a ball.

4. Do you have any questions?

Slap the professor.

The two truths. Even though you have questions, don't ask! Language is only the provisional truth. You'll never be able to really "ask" the question using languages.

According to Chan, your question can only be performed. So go and slap the professor. If he understands true dharma, he shouldn't be mad at you. He should probably slap you back to give you the answer...

5. Your teacher gives you candy after taking the exam.

Eat the candy.

Note that your teacher is giving you a koan, so you'll have to decipher it first. What does it mean to give you candy? What does candy mean? Well, if you think about it, it's the same thing as the udumbara flower. It's right there. You just need to eat it to taste the sweetness. Yes, yes...it means enlightenment. Your teacher is passing enlightenment to you through the lineage. Eat the candy and you'll attain awakening!