

About Koans

Excerpts from “Bring Me the Rhinoceros: And Other Zen Koans That Will Save Your Life”

By John Tarrant

The goal of the Zen koan is enlightenment, which is a profound change of heart. This change of heart makes the world seem like a different place; with it comes a freedom of mind and an awareness of the joy and kindness underlying daily life.

Koans offer an unusual path into happiness. They don't encourage you to strive for things or manipulate people or change yourself into an improved, more polished version of you. Instead, they suggest a way to approach happiness indirectly by unbuilding, unmaking, tossing overboard, and generally subverting unhappiness. And even this indirect approach is not based on a plan. It's hard to plan for something that takes you beyond what you can imagine, which is what the koan method is designed to do.

Koans are not intended to prescribe a particular kind of happiness or right way to live. They don't teach you to assemble or make something that didn't exist before. Many psychological and spiritual approaches rely on an engineering metaphor and hope to make your mind more predictable and controllable. Koans go the other way. They encourage you to make an ally of the unpredictability of the mind and to approach your life more as a work of art. The surprise they offer is the one that art offers: inside unpredictability you will find not chaos, but beauty. Koans light up a life that may have been dormant in you; they hold out the possibility of transformation even if you are trying to address unclear or apparently insoluble problems.

Here are seven things to notice about koans:

Koans show you that you can depend on creative moves. What if happiness were a creative activity, like writing a poem? You cannot know where the next line of a poem will come from and you can't force it, yet there is a discipline that helps. When you attend in the right way, the poem's next line really does arrive out of nowhere. In the same way, through a koan, happiness can arrive out of nowhere.

Koans encourage doubt and curiosity. They don't take away painful beliefs and put positive beliefs in their place. They just take away the painful beliefs and so provide freedom. What you do with that freedom is up to you.

Koans rely on uncertainty as a path to happiness. They don't support the interior decoration project; they demolish the walls.

Koans will undermine your reasons and your explanations. If you have a reason for happiness, then that happiness can be taken away. Koans open a happiness that comes for no good reason. That happiness exists before reasons have appeared in the universe.

Koans lead you to see life as funny rather than tragic. Well, which would you rather?

Koans will change your idea of who you are, and this will require courage. Happiness is not an add-on to what you already are; it requires you to become a different person from the one who set off seeking it.

Koans uncover a hidden kindness in life. They show a path in which kindness is part of the foundation of the mind; not one of its accoutrements, nor something to be cultivated. If it were an attainment, kindness could be taken away or lost. When you unpack all your motives and other people's motives and get to the bottom of things, you find love.

Most of the time there is a gap between the life we know is possible and the one we live. That gap appears as restlessness, pain, longing, fear, irredeemable loneliness, your skin crawling – some uncomfortable state. The koan's job is to take you across any gap between yourself and your life. It's not something to make sense of, any more than a poem or a piece of music would be. You can't set out to get a song, nevertheless a song might come to you.

Koans unravel the world that we have thought up, and it is this unraveling that makes it possible for a different world to appear. It's fine if you forget the song that was given to you. You will remember it the next night, and if not the next night, then the next, and if not then, well, eventually. Error might not be a mistake, the song might even be improving while you forget it. The world's generosity is robust and persistent.