

Aly Massof

Professor McMahan

RST376

14 December 2010

Verbal Dispute: Western Attempts to Rationalize the Kōan

The kōan has been established as one of the most recognizable aspects of Zen practice in the West. The combination of convoluted questions and shocking responses confuses and delights any lover of puzzles—it is the ultimate test of logic and rationality. Yet does it actually occupy the logical realm? Traditionally presented as absent of rational content, the kōan has become a challenge for new systems of logic that arise. Yet selecting one side of the argument will fail to examine the breadth of possibilities within the interpretation of the kōan. Because of the experiential component of Zen, it is not contradictory to assert that while the answers to the kōan do not bear relevance to logical inquiry, the kōan itself maintains semantic and pragmatic properties that render it compatible with truth-values. Therefore, in keeping with the principle of nonduality, the kōan must be analyzed in terms of both its instrumental and intrinsic value; to leave one examination out is to grasp an incomplete picture of the kōan's function in Zen.

In its initial exposure to the West, the kōan was depicted as the epitome of Zen psychology but completely absent of intellect. D.T. Suzuki, in his attempts to make sense of the kōan with respect to the academic fields in the West, denies the presence of any intellectual component to the kōan. He focuses on the kōan as a means to achieving pure consciousness. For Suzuki, the kōan serves as a window into the mind of the Zen master prescribing the puzzle. If a pupil manages to grasp the meaning of the kōan, he has

understood how the rōshi's mind operates. "The idea is to unfold the Zen psychology in the mind of the uninitiated, and to reproduce the state of consciousness, of which these statements are the expression."¹ His analysis turns on the concept of the kōan as providing a path to satori—it enables the pupil to subvert his typical intellectual process and grasp a new form of comprehension. Interestingly, for Suzuki, this entails that each kōan contains some fundamental truth. "The truth itself is beyond all description...but it is by words that the truth is manifested."² While the words themselves are empty outside of their instrumental function, the kōan, in guiding the novice to the proper form of thought, inherently possesses a truth that lies beyond the groupings of letters.

Yet Suzuki's interpretation, while focusing on the kōan as a manifestation of Zen consciousness, disregards and disparages any claims about the logical element of the kōan. He views the intellect as "the worst enemy of Zen experience,"³ classifying it as a barrier to the breakdown in distinction between subject and object. Suzuki also attacks the idea that the koan itself might contain some sort of intellectual content. "For a kōan is not a logical proposition but the expression of a certain mental state resulting from the Zen discipline."⁴ He defines the most successful answers as the most irrational, those that do not warrant any speculation. Those that can transcend furthest beyond the boundaries of the intellect demonstrate the most thorough understanding of the Zen consciousness.

Despite his shared attempt to demonstrate the illogical nature of the kōan, Henry Rosemont disputes Suzuki's approach to understanding the function of the kōan and points out the multiple contradictions Suzuki's analysis contains. For Rosemont, the kōan serves solely as a pedagogical tool for the Zen master, a method to bring the pupil towards the proper way of understanding. Yet unlike Suzuki, Rosemont does not believe

the kōan contains any sort of fundamental Zen principle. “The notions of truth and falsity do not apply to these sentences; they are not intended to convey or request factual information.”⁵ For Rosemont, the suggestion that the kōan contains a fundamental principle of Zen and so represents the state of consciousness of the Zen master indicates that the Zen master operates in a state of irrationality. “...every speaker and writer has basic commitments to the rules of logic and language...the Zen master, then, must avoid the queerness which arises from the fact that if the statements of some of his views were literally true, he would not have been able to make them.”⁶ Yet Suzuki, Rosemont argues, depicts the Zen master as highly rational and intellectual. Therefore, Suzuki’s claims contradict each other. If truth and falsity are irrelevant to the kōan, then to argue that the kōan contains some deep truth representative of the inner state of a Zen master has two possible conclusions. Either the kōan contains no truth, or the Zen master is irrational, a statement to which Suzuki does not want to commit.

To cope with this paradox, Rosemont offers a different interpretation of the kōan’s function. As opposed to determining the presence of a truth-value, be it within the realm of logic or not, Rosemont suggests that the kōan exists as a perlocutionary speech act. That is, the content of the sentence itself is irrelevant—what matters is the intention behind the sentence. To Rosemont, it seems wholly obvious that the kōan is nothing more than a skillful means, one that has proven quite effective and so remains in use. Its function as a conveyor of truth is nonexistent, and its use as an example of Zen literature is simply a byproduct of becoming such an established teaching method. Therefore, despite his initial opening remarks that contradict Suzuki’s anti-intellectual position, Rosemont completely rejects the notion that the kōan possesses any inherent intellectual

qualities. He explicitly states that the kōan has “no cognitive answer whatsoever,”⁷ and that the kōan simply allows the student to expand his typical frame of reference. It enables him to escape his usual intellectual limitations and push his cognitive capabilities to the utmost extreme. Yet that does not entail that the student or the master delve into a state of irrationality. Rather, they stretch themselves beyond typical mental boundaries and explore a new form of rationality. Therefore, Rosemont has emphasized the instrumental purpose of the kōan with regards to satori.

Although the idea of the illogical kōan has become a common view among both scholars and practitioners, several have pointed out some flaws behind the adoption of such reasoning. Rosemont himself demonstrates the issue of discussing Zen as illogical and irrational because it leads to several trappings of language. He cites Suzuki’s statement, “Truth is inexpressible in words”, as a perfect example of the self-refutation that permeates such an understanding. That statement alone renders itself false; regardless of the truth-value of the content, the statement itself must be untrue. While the natural defense of the two truths might arise, it still presents the problem that a large component of Zen cannot be articulated.

In addition, James Sellmann identifies a semantic fallacy that has permeated the work of authors like Suzuki and creates a more plausible solution to the problem. “...describing Zen as illogical or irrational is a misunderstanding not of Zen, but of the nature of the illogical and irrational.”⁸ Sellmann argue that identifying Zen as illogical does not express its transcendence of the laws of logic and language, but its total opposition to these principles. This is wholly inconsistent with Suzuki’s acknowledgment of Zen logic and philosophy. Therefore, Sellmann concludes that we should be thinking

in terms of an *alogical* system. While the distinction is subtle, the change in prefix helps get Sellmann's position off the ground (to a degree). By defining the system as *alogical*, we understand Zen as a tradition without logic, but not necessarily opposed to logic. Therefore, the possibility for creating a form of metalogic, one that accounts for the alogical nature of Zen, remains theoretically open to us. This solution, however, does not resolve the problem. The absence of logic softens the claim that Zen has no room for logic, but it still does not afford the possibility of a logical explanation of the kōan.

Rosemont's position also presents something of a logical fallacy. While he demonstrates that perlocutionary acts do not hinge on the truth-value of their content, he fails to demonstrate that they do not contain a truth-value. In fact, all of the statements he employs do possess a truth-value. For instance, he suggests a situation in which a husband compliments his wife on how the color of her dress brings out her eyes in order to assuage her anxiety about running late. Now, while the intention behind the statement does not require any specific condition of truth, it does not mean that the dress fails to have any effect on her eye color. Regardless of what intention the speaker has, some independent truth about that statement does exist. The truth-value simply does not present itself as relevant to the speaker at the time. Therefore, while Rosemont's argument provides an excellent contribution to our understanding of the kōan's function, it does not prove that the kōan lacks any independent truth-value.

Apart from semantic distinctions, Victor Hori attacks the illogical position by honing in on the implications of a wholly irrational practice. Hori finds it obvious that a functional existence in reality requires the presence of rationality, logic, and distinction. To attain this state of pure consciousness that Suzuki and Rosemont advocate, one must

abandon these conventions. Yet Suzuki and Rosemont offer no return from such a state. "...a pure consciousness without concepts, if there could be such a thing, would be a booming, buzzing confusion, a sensory field of flashes of light...this is not the consciousness of the enlightened Zen master."⁹ This sort of pure consciousness is wholly incompatible with the assertion that Zen masters are capable of existing on a plane of rationality, regardless of the stance from which the kōan is examined. Therefore, Hori suggests a nondualistic approach that allows for a change in experience within the ordinary realm as a result of grappling with the kōan. "...one can see that [kenshō] marks not a breakthrough to a pure consciousness without cognitive content but instead a breakdown of subject and object within the cognitive complexity of ordinary experience."¹⁰ His objection to Suzuki and Rosemont ultimately leads to a more complex account of the kōan, which shall be addressed later.

While Rosemont has moved closer to the logic-based analyses of the kōan than Suzuki, he still denies that the kōan possesses any independent truth-value or content-based significance. Yet several contemporary philosophers have attempted to reconcile the seemingly illogical kōan with various systems of logic. One of the primary examinations is that of the *catuskoti*, a Buddhist system of logic. Also known as the tetralemma, the *catuskoti* outlines four possible truth conditions. There are two different developments of the *catuskoti*:

Positive: "Everything is real and is not real/Both real and not real/Neither unreal nor real/That is the Buddha's teaching"¹¹

Negative: "We do not assert, 'empty'/We do not assert 'non-empty'/We neither assert both nor neither/They are asserted only for the purpose of designation"¹²

Despite the fact that Western philosophy generally operates within a system of purely dualistic logic and appears inherently incompatible with Zen philosophy, some logicians have worked to identify how Zen doctrines and the *catuskoti* can adapt to Western systems of logic. Predating the defining work on relevance logic, K.N. Jayatilleke's article on the *catuskoti* attempts to apply quantified Aristotelian logic to this four-valued system. Drawing off of Robinson's earlier work, he restates the 'four positions with regards to quantified logic: 1) All x is A; 2) No x is A; 3) Some x is A, and some x is not A; 4) No x is A, and no x is not A. While Robinson understands these to be exhaustive, Jayatilleke's article argues that the fourth lemma does not satisfy this condition and outlines a substitute disjunction: All x is A or no x is A or some x is A and some x is not A.¹³ He demonstrates that now the entire system is exhaustive—Buddhist logic has been fully explicated in the form of quantified logic.

Similarly, Jay Garfield and Graham Priest have worked to apply the four-valued relevance logic to Zen kōans and the *catuskoti*. Rather than exploring the combinations of quantified predicates, Garfield and Priest use semantics to represent four potential truth-values: true, false, both true and false, and neither true nor false (t, f, b, n). This step alone accounts for a much cleaner representation of the *catuskoti* in a Western frame of understanding, but they take it one step further. Whereas Jayatilleke's logic rejects the validity of a fifth condition—the rejection of all these principles—Garfield and Priest accept this “great negation” (represented as e for emptiness) as representative of attaining ultimate truth. By working with the Blue Cliff Record, they demonstrate how the progression from conventional understanding to awakening and back to conventional can be represented by a logical progression in which awakening introduces “the great

negation”. Therefore, we see that this particular system beautifully reflects potential logic behind the kōan.

Priest and Garfield also succeed in accounting for some phenomenological implications of relevance logic. They demonstrate that this particular explanation provides greater insight into understanding Dogen’s claim that awakening and practice are one and the same. “One has realized emptiness and reaffirmed the conventional truth. That conventional truth is not altered by one’s realization. It must hence be recognized to be empty once again, and that is practice, and that practice is awakened. But that practice is no different from the practice one initially undertook.”¹⁴ By offering such an interpretation, Garfield and Priest manage to make this logical analysis more than just an interesting puzzle; it offers an explanation for the Soto school’s approach to the kōan and enlightenment.

Despite Garfield and Priest’s commendable attempt to demonstrate otherwise, purely logical analysis still suffers from a detached perspective. There is an undeniable relationship between the kōan and the master-pupil interaction. While this component does not relate to the interests of the logicians, as it often deals with a form of nonverbal communication, it remains a crucial aspect of understanding the kōan. Therefore, the inability to explain or discuss the nonverbal and interpersonal relationships of the kōan harms the sufficiency of this logical interpretation.

The logical approach also experiences difficulty from being bound up in language of truth and falsity. Therefore, even in the context of four-valued logic, truth must be discussed in terms of dualistic logic. As Hori notes, these attempts constantly encounter these dualistic pitfalls. Jayatilleke’s system particularly suffers from a unique

complication: the distinction between the universal and the existential quantification. Both he and Robinson confirm that this application of Aristotelian logic only works when the claims have been interpreted in the existential, or individual, realm. They do not work when applied to the universal level. Yet this complication directly contradicts the doctrine of no-self. If such an application of truth only applies in terms of the individual, then it requires a clear distinction of subjects. Therefore, it cannot hope to successfully account for a reality-based understanding of ultimate truth. It will remain solely in the realm of conventional truth—a realm of dualism. Therefore, the whole system of Aristotelian logic proves futile in trying to understand the nature of the *catuskoti*.

While the other scholars have adopted a single-sided study of the *kōan*, Victor Hori attempts to demonstrate the presence of nonduality in the *koan*; it contains both conventional and ultimate truth. As in his criticism of Suzuki, Hori argues that to relegate the *kōan* to a particular kind of truth is to embrace the exact dualistic principles the *kōan* is intended to refute. He dislikes the idea of the *kōan* as an obstacle one must conquer. Rather, the *kōan* continually informs us about the nonduality of existence. “The entire *kōan* curriculum of the Rinzai monastery is designed to take the monk’s original insight into nonduality and generalize it into every facet of life...it leads to the insight that our daily dualistic distinctions hitherto thought to be absolute are not.”¹⁵ The *kōan* retains a highly experiential function without abandoning conceptualization and intellect.

Hori, however, expands his analysis of the *kōan* into logical questions as well. Again, he maintains that the *kōan* must function both intellectually and phenomenologically in order to escape the dualistic trap. Yet he does not analyze the *kōan* through a system of semantics. Rather, he argues for a nondualistic logic that

involves constant refutation. He too refers back to the Blue Cliff Record in analyzing the logical understanding of the kōan.

The first negation of the standpoint of duality (the first ‘mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers’ is simple nonduality (‘the mountains are not mountains and the rivers are not rivers’). But plain and simple nonduality is itself part of the dualism of dual and nondual. If one takes nonduality to its logical conclusion, one must negate even the standpoint of nonduality and move to a second-order nonduality, the nonduality of duality and nonduality.¹⁶

Hori’s nondualistic logic differs from the relevance logic in that it creates a sort of spiral in which the pupil, despite moving in a circular path, does not end up back in the same place as he began. Rather, his viewpoint has shifted outside of his original stance. He understands the world correctly without residing outside of conceptual consciousness. He has not surpassed, but sharpened his cognitive abilities. Thus, Hori’s account allows for a total experience of nonduality. He has created an explanation of the kōan that elegantly refutes and incorporates many of the preexisting theories.

While I feel like the positions discussed have their strengths and weaknesses, Hori’s approach to understanding the kōan appears the most promising due to its examination of multiple purposes. Suzuki and Rosemont’s positions, in attempting to deny the possibility of any intellectual understanding of the kōan, ignore the reality that the kōan does indeed occupy the space of language and so automatically reside, to a degree, within the realm of truth-values. The logicians (Priest and Garfield, and Jayatilleke), while acknowledging the instrumental purpose of the kōan, focus primarily on successfully applying Western logic systems to unearthing the logical value of the kōan—its role as an interactive proposition becomes lost. Hori embraces the possibility of both instrumental and intrinsic purpose in the kōan. This tactic is appealing because it

offers the chance to critically analyze the kōan, but it still retains the nondualistic quality that we so firmly associate with Zen thought. Understanding the kōan as a bridge between conventional and ultimate truth enables it to have both instrumental and intrinsic purpose, for it is not forced to occupy one realm over the other. Therefore, I propose that the kōan be analyzed in terms of both its semantic and pragmatic properties, and that these properties are indeed co-existent.

Let us first turn to the instrumental value of the kōan: its role as a pedagogical method. Both Suzuki and Rosemont argue for the kōan as a means for achieving satori. Its intention is to jolt or force the pupil out of his ordinary cognitive capabilities and allow him to transcend the conventional truths of logic and language. As Hori notes, this view is promising in many respects, particularly with Rosemont's performative approach. Not only does this explanation account for a more intuitive view of the kōan, but also it incorporates and explains the nonverbal answers that have become classic examples of successful realization. As demonstrated earlier, however, these instrumental purposes are not mutually exclusive with any sort of truth-value for the kōan itself. Yet where does this truth reside? It may be puzzling to wonder how the kōan could possess its own truth-value while maintaining the absence of a singular, definitive answer. But it still seems unlikely that all kōans are purely rhetorical questions with the sole aim of thwarting one's usual reasoning capabilities. Some, especially the earlier works, seem to reiterate a fundamental principle of the Zen tradition.

If we restructure the question into a biconditional declarative statement, then we see that many kōans, especially these older kōans, not only possess a truth-value, but also reflect essential concepts within Zen. While this might seem counterintuitive, the very

setup of the question entails the assumption of certain statements. I will look at three kōans to demonstrate the interesting nature of this structure.

- 1) What is the sound of one hand clapping? —One hand is clapping if and only if there is a sound.
- 2) What is the Buddha?—There is a Buddha if and only if there is.
- 3) What are your original features that you have even prior to your birth? — There is an original state if and only if there is a prior state.

By reforming these questions into biconditional statements, we see how the kōans contain not just a logical answer but also crucial principles of Zen. The biconditional works beautifully with regards to Zen principles because it expresses a relationship of interdependence. A requires the presence of B and B requires the presence of A. For instance, the first biconditional can be rewritten as such: If one hand is clapping then there is a sound & if there is a sound, then one hand is clapping. Here we see that both the idea of sound and of one hand clapping intertwine and rely on each other. The sound of one hand clapping is the sound of everything, so every sound reflects the sound of one hand clapping. By restructuring these questions in this manner, we see interdependence, buddha-nature, universality, and eternity bound up in “nonsense”.

Conveniently, these ideas have no answer, so the answer to the kōan can never be set. Because of the invariable number of answers, it seems impractical to provide a philosophical treatment of the kōan from the standpoint of a single case study. Therefore, I contend that viewing the kōan as both question and answer remains most relevant to the study of the kōan in a literary and historical function. The answers provide insight into the rōshi-pupil relationship, but not necessarily into the kōan itself. Therefore, these kōans remain relevant for eternity—the answers depend solely on the pupil’s understanding of the principles. By adopting this understanding of the kōan, we allow for

a harmonious union of the kōan as both skillful means and reflective of Zen principles. The intellectual understanding need not impede the experiential.

Now, this attempt at reconciling the views of instrumental and intrinsic approaches to the kōan does not cater to all kōans. It seems primarily relevant to those earlier kōans that take the form of a question. Several factors could account for this, one being the developing aesthetic of the kōan that began to emerge. As the kōan became an integral contribution to the body of Zen literature, its purpose shifted. But it makes sense that the kōans would have Zen principles embedded within their structures. If the kōan serves as a pedagogical tool, then the most successful would be those that ultimately lead to an understanding of Zen theories. Therefore, while the entire body of kōan literature remains incredibly diverse and probably contains a multitude of purposes, it seems that the original and most well known do explicitly convey these fundamental Zen principles.

In examining one end of the spectrum to the other, it becomes readily apparent how controversial the kōan has become in Western thought. Regardless of every academic attempt to demonstrate otherwise, the mystery surrounding both the inherent paradox of irrational linguistics and the nonverbal communication appears to render the kōan unsolvable. Yet the fascination and debate over its function and rationale remain fervent, and the challenge to conquer the intellectual hurdle of the kōan lives on.

¹ D.T. Suzuki, "The Reason of Unreason: the Kōan Exercise", *Zen Buddhism: Selected Writings of D.T. Suzuki*, ed. William Barrett, Random House Inc, 1996, p. 135

² Suzuki, 1996, p. 138

³ Suzuki, 1996, p. 136.

⁴ Suzuki, 1996, p. 137

⁵ Henry Rosemont Jr., "The Meaning is the Use: Kōan and Mondo as Linguistic Tools of the Zen Masters," *Philosophy East and West*. Volume 20, No. 2, University of Hawaii Press, 1970, p. 115.

⁶ Rosemont, 1970, p. 111.

⁷ Rosemont, 1970, p. 118

⁸ James Sellmann, "Comment and Discussion: A Belated Response to Hu Shih and D.T. Suzuki" *Philosophy East and West*. University of Hawaii Press, 19__ , p. 99.

⁹ Victor Hori, "Kōan and Kenshō in the Rinzai Zen Curriculum", *The Kōan*, ed. Steven Heine, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 284

¹⁰ Hori, 2000, p. 292.

¹¹ Jay L. Garfield and Graham Priest, "Mountains are Just Mountains," *Pointing at the Moon: Buddhism, Logic, Analytic Philosophy*, ed. Mario D'Amato, Jay L. Garfield, and Tom J.F. Tillemans. Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 71.

¹² Garfield and Priest, 2009, p. 72.

¹³ K.N. Jayatilleke, "The Logic of Four Alternatives." *Philosophy East and West*, Vol. 17, No. ¼, 1967, p. 76

¹⁴ Garfield and Priest, 2009, pp. 80-81.

¹⁵ Hori, 2000, p. 295.

¹⁶ Hori, 2000, p. 301

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