

Beyond the Breakthrough: The Role of kōan in Post-Awakening Cultivation

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Abstract

The Chan (Zen) gong'an (gong'an 公案; Jpn. kōan) has been understood in literature and practice as a didactic device for inducing primary awakening or jianxing (見性; Jpn. kenshō) (Heine 121-40). However, this view overlooks the full scope and sophistication of the kōan system. While breakthrough is central, it occurs within "post-awakening cultivation" (wuhou baoren, 悟後保任). Employing textual-historical and doctrinal analysis, this study traces Guifeng Zongmi's (圭峰宗密) "sudden enlightenment, gradual cultivation" theory, contextualizes Dahui Zonggao's (大慧宗杲) Kanhua Chan (看話禪, "observing the phrase" Chan) in the Song dynasty, and analyzes Linji/Rinzai pedagogical techniques including verificatory kōans (kanyan, 勘驗), "checking questions" (Jpn. sasshō, 拶所), and "capping phrases" (Jpn. jakugō, 着語) to establish the kōan as essential for

verifying awakening authenticity, deepening insight, refining karmic habits, and integrating enlightenment into daily life. This fills gaps in post-awakening Chan (Zen) knowledge, reframing the kōan as a comprehensive pathway from "sudden enlightenment" to perfected cultivation and Buddhahood. The paper's original contribution is reconceptualizing the kōan beyond a mere breakthrough trigger into a lifelong soteriological system, bridging doctrinal foundations with practical pedagogy in contemporary Chan (Zen) studies.

Keywords: *kōan, Gong'an (公案), Post-Awakening Cultivation, Wuhou Baoren (悟後保任), Kanhua Chan (看話禪), Sudden Enlightenment and Gradual Cultivation, Dunwu Jianxiu (頓悟漸修), Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲), Guifeng Zongmi (圭峰宗密)*

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Introduction: Reframing the "Critical Moment"

The place of the kōan in Chan (Zen) Buddhist study and practice is central yet enigmatic. In both popular imagination and a significant portion of scholarly narrative, the kōan is frequently depicted as a paradox designed to exhaust logical thought, serving as a catalyst to precipitate a singular breakthrough known as jianxing (見性, jiànxing; Jpn. kenshō) or enlightenment (Suzuki 241; Wright 34). This "breakthrough model" suggests that the primary, if not sole, function of the kōan is to trigger this initial awakening (Schlütter 104). However, this view risks being misleading, as it obscures the more profound and enduring value of the kōan's pedagogical system. The true innovation and vitality of the kōan system lie precisely in its systematic application during the post-awakening stages. Enlightenment is not the terminus of Chan (Zen) practice but the starting point of a more arduous and subtle spiritual journey. The breakthrough model gained its current popularity in the West largely due to early popularizers such as D.T. Suzuki. While the dramatic kenshō (Jpn. 見性) experience is very useful for making Chan (Zen) attractive to a wider global audience, to his own admission it came at the neglect of an equally important aspect the systematic, lifelong cultivation central to the tradition's pedagogy (D. T. Suzuki: *Ideas and Influences*). This study therefore proposes that rather than being just a hammer that breaks open some ephemeral "gateless gate," kōan actually constitute a full set of precision instruments over very long periods for "spiritual polishing" as described by Heine in *Understanding Buddhist kōans*. One has to keep on verifying (kanyan) one's awakening through "thousandfold forging and hundredfold refining" (Ch. qian duan bai lian 千鍛百煉) of insight (Chen 297-320) in order to bring non-dual wisdom into every concrete situation.

Literature Review

Exploring Doctrinal and Historical Backgrounds

Before examining the particular application of the kōan at the post-awakening stages, strong theoretical and historical backgrounds should be set. Why is post-awakening cultivation necessary? This necessity is not arbitrary but deeply rooted in the core doctrines of Chan (Zen). And how did the kōan evolve from early records of 'encounter dialogues' to be used as a highly developed technology for sustained practice? The answer lies very much with the rather unique social, economic, and institutional conditions which Chan (Zen) Buddhism happened to meet during the Song dynasty period (Schlütter 55-60; Welter 18). This section will thereby introduce both of what makes Wuhou Baoren (悟後保任) doctrinally required and historically catalyzed, while clearly distinguishing the paper's novel systematic framing of post-awakening kōan pedagogy from syntheses in prior scholarship.

Doctrinal and Historical Gaps

The literature review is rich and up to date: it engages major scholars such as Heine, Schlütter, Buswell, Hori, Gregory, Welter, Nešković, and others, and situates the present study within debates over sudden enlightenment/gradual cultivation, Kanhua Chan (Zen), and Rinzai curricula. It convincingly identifies a gap between existing doctrinal-historical work and a more systematic framing of kōan pedagogy in the post-awakening phase. For instance, while Buswell (1991) and Gregory (1991) provide foundational analyses of Zongmi's paradigm, they do not fully extend it to the pedagogical specifics of Linji kōan practice. Similarly, Schlütter (2008) and Welter (2008) contextualize Song dynasty developments, but overlook the lifelong cultivation aspects emphasized in Rinzai curricula (Hori 1987; Nešković 2022). This paper's genuine novelty lies in synthesizing these sources to reconceptualize the kōan as a comprehensive post-awakening system, rather than a mere historical artifact.

From Doctrinal Necessity to Historical Application: Zongmi and Dahui

The necessity of continued practice after enlightenment was most systematically and authoritatively articulated in Chan (Zen) history by the Tang-dynasty master Guifeng Zongmi (圭峰宗密, 780-841). His framework of “sudden enlightenment, gradual cultivation” (頓悟漸修) not only integrated differing views within the Chan (Zen) school of his time but also provided the classic doctrinal justification for the post-awakening cultivation (悟後保任 wuhou baoren) of later generations (Buswell 12-17; Yang 101-40; Sheng Yen 55).

If Zongmi’s teaching explains why post-awakening cultivation is necessary, the historical moment of the Song dynasty (960-1279) shows how the kōan became its core technology. During this period, Chan (Zen) became an elite, state-recognized form of Buddhism, which created a demand for standardized and verifiable practice methods.

It was against this backdrop that the Linji master Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲, 1089-1163) launched his critique of what he termed “heretical silent-illumination Chan” (Ch. Mozhao xiechan 默照邪禪), a practice he argued led to a quiescent state incapable of producing dynamic wisdom (Schlüter 104-21; Dahui Zonggao 55). As an alternative, Dahui vigorously promoted Kanhua Chan (看話禪). He instructed students to focus on the “critical phrase” Huatou (Ch. 話頭, huàtóu) of a kōan, such as the word “No” (無 wu; Jpn. Mu), to generate a “great doubt” Da yiqing (Ch. 大疑情, dà yíqíng) that eventually shatters the conceptual mind (Schlüter 104, Dahui Zonggao 60; Heine 112-15).

For those already-awakened or for lay practitioners, the huatou’s function shifted. Dahui instructed them to “raise” the huatou amidst their daily affairs, turning it into a portable “mental anchor” to maintain non-dual awareness in the midst of worldly dust (qtd. in Buswell 27). He explicitly stated that “the effort made in the midst of activity is a hundred, a thousand, a million times superior to that made in quietude” (Jiang 19). This turned the kōan into an instrument for a “worldly soteriology,” a practical application of Zongmi’s lishi wu’ai (理事無礙) principle.

The Metaphysical Framework of Huayan

Zongmi’s theory does not represent any pragmatic compromise but is rather deeply rooted in the sophisticated metaphysical system of *Huayan* (Ch. Huáyán 華嚴; Jpn. Kegon; Skt. Avatamsaka “Flower Garland”). He himself considered it to be the highest teaching of Buddhism (Vorenkamp 88-95).

Lishi Wu’ai (理事無礙, *lishì wú’ài*): Central to its worldview is the ‘non-obstruction between principle and phenomena’. Ultimate reality (理 li) and all ephemeral phenomena (事 shì) are not two separate realms, but rather perfectly interpenetrating and mutually non-obstructing (Wong 15; Gregory 16). After one has ‘suddenly realized’ the ‘principle’ one must engage in the ‘gradual cultivation’ of ‘phenomena.’ This doctrine offers a formula for post-enlightenment practice in the world: daily life does not stand as an obstacle to enlightenment but is, rather, the sole arena wherein enlightenment may manifest itself and be tested and developed.

Shishi Wu’ai (事事無礙, *shìshì wú’ài*): The “non-obstruction among all phenomena” is the ultimate state, in which each phenomenon perfectly reflects and contains all other phenomena and even the entirety of reality (Wong 15-17). This provides the ontological guarantee for the advanced practitioner’s free and unimpeded functioning in the world, allowing them to see the absolute in every particular. The practice of “refining the mind through worldly affairs” (lishi lianxin, 歷事鍊心) is a direct expression of this principle (Chan 44).

What Zongmi did was not synthesis, he made Huayan metaphysics the dominant operating system for Chan's post-enlightenment cultivation. It is to Huayan that we turn for the "why" (because principle and phenomena are inherently integrated, the world is the Dōjō (道場, dào chǎng; Jpn. Dōjō); it is to Chan (Zen) that we turn for the "how" (the techniques themselves of meditation and conduct) (Welter 52-55). One must understand this need through the Huayan framework to know what unfolds as logical contradiction with sudden enlightenment: if all dharmas are inherently perfect why further practice? Perfection, for Huayan, lies precisely in interpenetration; thus practicing means living out this interpenetration not achieving some external goal. Zongmi's gift lays down a long road over which to travel after having glimpsed enlightenment by providing a theoretical basis and structural guide in presently building up systematically rigorous and philosophically coherent worldviews in terms of practice for Chan (Zen) (Vorenkamp 102-05). This interpenetration allows for the 'refining the mind through worldly affairs' (lishi lianxin, 歷事鍊心) as a direct expression (Chan 19-35).

Historical Catalyst: Dahui Zonggao and the Rise of Kanhua Chan

If Zongmi's teaching speaks to the reason for post-awakening cultivation, the historical moment of the Song dynasty (960-1279) articulates how kōan emerges as its core technology. Changes occurring in the social status, economic foundation, and institutional structure of Chan (Zen) Buddhism brought about deep transformations in this period. They were aggregated to constitute practice innovation through the emergence of a method known as Kanhua Chan (看話禪, kàn huà chán; "observing the phrase" Chan), brought into limelight by Dahui Zonggao (大慧宗杲, 1089-1163) (Schlüter 31-35; Welter 18-20; Foulk 125-28).

According to academician Morten Schlütter, in his paper *How Zen Became Zen*, during the Song dynasty, Chan (Zen) saw unprecedented growth becoming the main form of elite monastic Buddhism that acquired official state recognition (Schlüter, *How Zen Became Zen* 31-55). There was more government control over the monasteries and scholar-official class patronage became an important economic engine for the development of Chan (Zen). This led to a tendency toward institutionalization and practice at the higher end of society which created a market within the Chan (Zen) school for standardized, verifiable methods of practice and legitimation of dharma transmission (Schlüter 36-55).

It was against this backdrop that the eminent Linji master Dahui Zonggao launched a sharp critique of the prevailing meditation methods of his time. He vehemently attacked what he termed "heretical silent illumination Chan" (mozhaō xiēchán 默照邪禪), a practice associated with the rival Caodong school (Jpn. Sōtō). Dahui argued that this method was prone to leading practitioners into a state of quiescent emptiness, a "dead water" that fostered a type of "unverified enlightenment" and was incapable of producing true, dynamic wisdom (Schlüter 104-21; Dahui Zonggao 55).

As an alternative to "silent illumination," Dahui vigorously promoted Kanhua Chan. He instructed students to focus their entire energy on the "critical phrase" (Ch. 話頭, huàtóu huatou) of a kōan, such as the word "No" (無 wu; Jpn. mu) from Zhaozhou's famous response to the question of whether a dog has buddha-nature. Through sustained inquiry into this huatou, the practitioner generates a "great doubt" (Ch. 大疑情, dà yíqíng), which Dahui likened to a red-hot iron ball stuck in the throat impossible to swallow or spit out. This doubt eventually "shatters," utterly destroying the student's delusive, conceptual mind (Schlüter 104, Dahui Zonggao 60; Heine, 112-15).

Kanhua Chan: A Technology with a Dual Function

The "Kanhua Chan" (看話禪) of Dahui Zonggao was a response to the drift he saw in two styles within the Chan (Zen) world of his day - one being an overly intellectualized 'literary chan,' and the other, quietistic practice of 'silent illumination chan'(Kim 88).

Pre-Enlightenment Practice: For the beginner, the huatou (Ch.話頭, huàtóu,"critical phrase") such as "Does a dog have Buddha-natur ? Wu (No)!" serves as an existential bomb. One swings single-mindedly repeating the huatou until there is built up inside a strong doubtful feeling (yíqíng, 疑情) which blocks all thought and finally when the mass of doubt is shattered suddenly breaks through to enlightenment (112-15).

Post-Enlightenment Function: Dahui's letters provide insight into a pivotal practical shift of the huatou for those who have achieved awakening or are lay practitioners. After Enlightenment, the huatou is not discarded. His own teacher, Yuanwu Keqin, had already emphasized the importance of "moment-to-moment, continuous" awareness and the work of "preserv[ing] and nurtur[ing]" after enlightenment (Yuanwu 3, 26; Heine, 118). Dahui made this explicit by raising it in daily activities as instructed by his disciples to "raise" the huatou amidst their daily affairs. At this point, what it comes to be is a portable "mental anchor" for abiding by non-dual awareness to use so that Enlightenedness does not return to ordinaryness among all the "dusty affairs" in the world (qtd. in Buswell 27). He explicitly stated that "the effort made in the midst of activity is a hundred, a thousand, a million times superior to that made in quietude" (Jiang19).

The Danger of "Shallow Enlightenment"

Dahui issued a stark caution that it is "sharp-facultied people" who fall easy to the attainment of enlightenment in the end who are most liable to fall into complacency. If not for the continuous work of baoren, insight will be "snatched away by circumstances" and thus cannot truly subdue their afflictions and habitual tendencies (qtd. in Buswell 4; van der Braak 72). His own teacher warned him that having Chan (Zen) in master's quarters but losing it upon leaving was an unstable insight that had not yet merged with life and, therefore urgently needed nurturing afterward (Yuanwu 20).

What Dahui did with Kanhua Chan in lay practice guidance pushed even further the "secularization" of Chan (Zen) by turning kōan as an instrument for what might be bdescribed as a "worldly soteriology" a path to liberation that integrates, rather than separates, secular responsibilities(Liu 55). It is through scholar-officials who cannot retire into mountain retreats of twenty years that effective portable practices such as huatou were borne. Huatou is a short, nondiscursive point of focus that can work as a "background process" in one's mind while working on official documents or even fulfilling social obligations, constantly returning the person working toward fundamental awareness. Thus made liberation no domain exclusively of monastics. The kōan became a bridge permitting the "principle" (Ch. 理,li) of enlightenment to be constantly cultivated in the "phenomena" (Ch. 事,shi) of busy secular life. This is lishi wu'ai in practical concrete application that Zongmi had stated on the level of philosophy.

Statement of the Problem

Current scholarship and Western reception of Chan (Zen) have been dominated by the breakthrough model, largely popularized by early interpreters such as D.T. Suzuki. While effective for introducing Chan's non-rational aspects to a global audience, this model creates a critical gap in our understanding

of Chan (Zen) soteriology. It implies that enlightenment is a finality, neglecting the complex requirements of "post-awakening cultivation" (wuhou baoren). Consequently, the specific mechanisms by which kōans are used to verify the authenticity of insight, remove subtle cognitive defilements, and enable the embodiment of wisdom in secular life remain under-researched. The central problem this study addresses is how the kōan system functions beyond the initial transformative experience to prevent the regression of insight and ensure its integration into phenomenal reality. Without understanding this post-awakening function, the rigorous decades-long training of historical Chan (Zen) masters appears redundant.

Objectives

The primary objective of this paper is to reframe the kōan as a tool for continuous spiritual cultivation rather than a mere trigger for awakening. Specifically, this study aims to:

1. Establish the doctrinal necessity of post-awakening practice through Guifeng Zongmi's theory of "sudden enlightenment, gradual cultivation."
2. Examine the historical evolution of Kanhua Chan under Dahui Zonggao as a method for integrating practice into daily activity.
3. Analyze the internal pedagogical structure of the Linji/Rinzai kōan curriculum including verification (sashō) and linguistic expression (jakugō) to demonstrate its role in the "thousandfold forging" of the practitioner's insight. These objectives extend beyond syntheses in Buswell (1991) and Schlütter (2008) by framing kōan as a lifelong system.

To guide this inquiry, the paper addresses the following research questions: (1) What doctrinal foundations necessitate post-awakening cultivation in Chan (Zen)? (2) How did historical developments in the Song dynasty transform the kōan into a tool for sustained practice? (3) What specific pedagogical techniques in the Linji curriculum facilitate verification, deepening and integration after initial awakening? These questions distinguish the paper's original synthesis and extension of existing scholarship on Zongmi, Dahui, and Rinzai pedagogy from prior doctrinal-historical studies.

Methodology

This paper employs a textual-historical and hermeneutical methodology to reconceptualize the role of kōan in post-awakening cultivation. Drawing on primary sources such as Zongmi's writings, Dahui's letters and lectures, Hanyue Fazang's teachings, and Rinzai kōan curricula (e.g., sashō and jakugō practices), the analysis combines doctrinal interpretation of Huayan metaphysics and Chan (Zen) soteriology with historical contextualization of Song-dynasty institutional developments. Key figures and texts were selected based on their centrality to the Linji lineage's articulation of Kanhua Chan (Zen) as a post-enlightenment system: Zongmi for doctrinal foundations, Dahui for historical innovation, Hanyue for practical exemplification, and the Rinzai curriculum for pedagogical structure. This approach relies on close reading and comparative analysis to derive interpretive conclusions, without empirical data collection.

Delimitation

The scope of this research is delimited to the Linji (Rinzai) lineage, as it represents the most articulated system of kōan introspection. While acknowledging the Sōtō school's significant contributions to Chan (Zen) practice, this study focuses specifically on the Kanhua tradition where the post-awakening curriculum is most explicitly structured and textually documented.

Discussion and Analysis

With the doctrine and history of post-awakening cultivation already set, this section goes straight to the heart of the matter by analyzing specific textual records and pedagogical practices that give direct evidence for the role of kōan as a highly developed, organized, lifelong curriculum for wuhou baoren (悟後保任). In order to clearly show how the function of the kōan changed across different stages of practice, a functional typology is provided below.

Table 1: Functional Typology of kōan Practice

Stage of Practice	Representative Figure/Text	kōan Function/Methodology	Pedagogical Goal	Philosophical Principle
Pre-Enlightenment	Dahui Zonggao	Kanhua Chan: Focus on a huatou to generate "great doubt" (dayiqing).	Sudden Enlightenment: Shatter the conceptual mind to precipitate initial insight (jianxing).	Emptiness (Śūnyatā)
Post-Enlightenment (Integration)	Dahui Zonggao (Letters), Yuanwu Keqin	Continuous Kanhua (Baoren): Use the huatou as a mental anchor in daily life to maintain awareness.	Stabilization & Nurturing: Prevent the enlightened state from regressing; begin to eliminate habitual tendencies.	Non-obstruction between principle and phenomena (lishi wu'ai)
Post-Enlightenment (Verification)	Hanyue Fazang	Verification via "Essential Principles": Rigorously test a student's insight against the "essential principles of Linji."	Deepening & Authentication: Ascertain the depth of insight, remove subtle cognitive errors, and establish authentic transmission.	Precision of the essential principles

Post-Enlightenment (Expression)	Linji School (Victor Hori's Zen Sand)	Capping Phrases (Zhuoyu): Select "alternative phrases" from classical literature to express the essence of a kōan.	Perfected Embodiment: Demonstrate the seamless fusion of formless insight with cultural and linguistic forms.	Non-obstruction among all phenomena (shishi wu'ai)
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The functional typology of kōan practice is well attested by textual records. In the pre-enlightenment stage, as emphasized in the letters of Dahui Zonggao, kanhua Chan where in the huatou generates "great doubt" culminates eventually into sudden awakening (Schlütter 104-21; Dahui 55). In the integration stage, continuous usage of huatou was emphasized by Dahui and his teacher Yuanwu Keqin as a "mental anchor" that would help to stabilize realization (Yuanwu 26; Buswell 27). For verification, Hanyue Fazang's "essential principles" rigorously tested the depth of awakening (Chen 297-320) while it was finally expressed in the Linji school's development of capping phrases (Jpn. jakugo 着語) embodying insight in cultural and linguistic forms (Hori 55-57). This belongs to a larger Linji kōan pedagogy and illustrates what areas wuhou baoren is able to function; this will be more concretely established through further research in subsequent chapters.

A Case Study in "Thousandfold Forging": The Practice of Hanyue Fazang

Nothing more potently proves the post-awakening role of the kōan than does a master's own account of continued practice after enlightenment. The late-Ming/early-Qing Linji master Hanyue Fazang (汉月法藏, 1573-1635) begets this very fruit (Chen 297-320; Liu 58-60). Hanyue attained awakening at age forty but became perplexed as to why great master Gaofeng Yuanmiao (高峰原妙, 1238-1295) continued to investigate kōans after achieving his own great enlightenment.

The question threw Hanyue right back into kōan practice, where he struggled for decades with difficult cases. To describe this process, he used the metaphors "thousandfold forging and hundredfold refining" (Ch. qian duan bai lian 千鍛百煉) and "re-examined and re-hammered" (Ch. zai kan zai chui 再堪再錘), emphasizing

that one must rely on the "pincers and hammer of a true master" until insight is irreversible (Nešković 44). This case also reveals the particularized nature of this process. When Hanyue was stymied by a kōan, he turned to a specific huatou about the "root of life" (Ch. Minggēn, 命根) to break through his impasse (Heine, *Zen kōans* 121-25). This shows that in the post-awakening stages of their students, masters use specific kōans to address particular issues.

The Architecture of Verification: The Rinzai kōan Curriculum

If Hanyue Fazang's individual journey shows the deep meaning of practice after enlightenment, the organized kōan lessons in the Japanese Rinzai path display its teaching range. This program is not a mix of random cases but a carefully planned structure for checking and building on the first moment of awakening by making it stronger, deeper, and fuller in understanding (Keyworth 2017). Its very setup strongly argues against the simple "breakthrough model" by showing that kenshō is not an end point but just the start of a long road of training.

A Graduated Path: Hosshin, Kikan, and Gonsen kōans

The Rinzai curriculum moves through defined stages, each set to break down a certain level of spiritual immaturity. This graded path reveals that the tradition saw initial insight as basically incomplete- needing years of verification, deepening, and integration.

Hosshin(Jpn. hosshin, 法身) (Dharma-body) kōans: The Opening Move, Not the Endgame. The hosshin curriculum kōans are first-the stage begins at this point most accurately corresponding to the popular notion that kōan practice is used for the attainment of initial awakening. "What is your original face before your parents were born?" or Zhaozhou's "Mu" throws more light on cases typically applied to break the conceptual mind and bring about opening experience of emptiness (Aitken 35-40; Bodiford 117-20). But clearly, in its design, it would put such an experience as the opening move-not the endgame.

Kikan (Jpn. kikan, 機關) (Dynamic Action) kōans: Testing Insight in the World of Ten Thousand Things. The very next moment after the student proves his genuine primary insight, he is met with kikan kōans. It is through these "dynamic action" cases that the realization of non-duality by the practitioner can be tested whether it functions well amidst this phenomenal world of distinctions. If hosshin would reveal the universal substance (tai), then kikan must bring forth its dynamic function (yū) (Bodiford 121-23). This much advanced stage itself throws a challenge to the breakthrough model: were an initial look into emptiness enough, why does tradition insist on an even higher level of training wherein it has to be applied in paradoxical real-world situations? For until verified, insight still remains passive, not ready for the spontaneous compassionate response that marks a true master.

Gonsen (Jpn. gonsen, 論) (Explication of Word) kōans: The Union of Wisdom and Language. At the final major stage, gonsen kōans require such mastery of language to express the ineffable, not getting trapped by words (Bodiford 123-25; Heine, *Zen kōans* 203-10). This confronts directly the overly romanticized view that Chan (Zen) is purely an anti-intellectual "no-words" tradition. Rather, it reveals how cultivation at its highest levels requires a perfect, non-dual union between formless wisdom and the highest forms of human culture and expression. One has to be beyond words and still a master of them.

The curriculum maps the spiral path of spiritual maturation: hosshin- seeing the substance; kikan-actualizing the function; and gonsen-speaking and acting both embodying seamlessly (Zhu). It is, in fact, this comprehensive, lifelong pedagogical structure that puts forth the real purpose of kōan not merely an act of breaking a gate but building a fully integrated and awakened human being.

The Mechanics of Polishing: Sassho and Jakugo

In every stage of the kōan curriculum, specific techniques at a more minor level are used by the Chan (Zen) master to test and polish the insight of the student. The most representative among these are "checking questions" (Jpn. sasshō, 拶所) and "capping phrases" (Jpn. jakugō, 着語). A deep understanding of these two techniques owes much particularly to the research of scholar-practitioner Victor Sogen Hori.

Checking Questions (Sassho): Sassho is a set of challenges-or follow-up questions the teacher will ask after the student's first response-or demonstration to the kōan(Hori, *Zen Sand* 6; Bodiford 125-27). They are impromptu and hence can effectively test how deep, real, and supple a student related understanding is. They function in determining whether the experience has emanated from real life or

is just intellectual guesswork or even a momentary inspiration (Zhu). As Victor Sōgen Hori notes, a student may need to pass "dozens or even hundreds" of checking questions (sasho) for a single kōan before their understanding is considered complete (Hori, *Zen Sand* 6).

Capping Phrases (Jakugo): Jakugo is the last and most unusual step in working with a kōan, though it has become less common today. The student must choose one or more lines from classical Chinese poetry or literature that perfectly yet poetically express the true spirit of the kōan (Hori, *Zen Sand* 20 ; Zhu 2013). This task calls for both deep meditative insight and high levels of literary and cultural knowledge. Victor Sogen Hori's main work, *Zen Sand* offers an organized collection and review of this practice (Hori, *Zen Sand*).

Hori criticizes the "instrumentalist" use that treats the kōan as a mere, meaningless psychological tool and develops what he calls a "realizational model" arguing that the kōan itself contains profound meaning to be experienced and understood (Hori, "The Nature of the Rinzai kōan Practice" 91). Meaning fully or truly realized for integration into one's life-this is what post-kenshō practice is about; that is, more kōans to work through. (Hori, "The Nature of the Rinzai kōan Practice" 91-116)

The use of sasho combined with jakugo shows a subtler pedagogy that aims at the realization of "whole-person" enlightenment. Sasho throws light on whether the practitioner can spontaneously give a non-verbal, embodied intuitive response thereby verifying the "living" dimension of his or her awakening; while jakugo presents an opportunity for them to synthesize this very 'living' insight with all manners of accomplishments in human culture and intellect (Nešković). One must be adept at both skills that seem diametrically opposed to be beyond words and to be masterful with words to be polished, to be cultivated. The result should not become some mute recluse pulled away from humankind but rather what great praxis makes possible besides profound inner realization: movement inside the language and culture of the world of humans.

In this post-awakening phase, the kōan becomes. It is not just a hammer to break the wall but now becomes a mirror, capable of reflecting subtle reality of all phenomena. The practice that belongs here is to learn how to see and express what is reflected in this mirror, with ever-increasing degrees of clarity and freedom from obstruction.

Conclusion

Synthesizing those previous analyses of origin, evolution, and pedagogy, the central argument is that the Chan (Zen) kōan system must be viewed as a full soteriological program covering the entire range of experience in the practitioner's life. In its mature Linji school formulation, that has been reduced by the "breakthrough model" (Heine, *Zen kōans* 3-5) which has predominated not only in Western writing but also in much of modern East Asian writing about an extremely sophisticated practice to just that first breakthrough. To limit the function of the kōan to precipitating the initial breakthrough would have been analogous to saying that all there is in a symphony is its opening chord-everything else being ignored-the more complex and richer movements which follow.

The dominance of this reductionist model is neither accidental nor devoid of the particular historical and cultural encounters by which Chan (Zen) got across to the West. Interpreters in the early 20th century, most famously D.T. Suzuki in *Essays in Zen Buddhism*, articulated Zen as something unique and non-doctrinal against Western theistic traditions, quite justifiably placed more emphasis on the dramatic, non-rational moment of sudden awakening (satori)(Suzuki 36-42; McRae 15-20). It was very effective for its purpose as an introduction but it involuntarily detached kōan practice from a larger, lifelong

soteriological and ethical matrix. The innovation at stake here is not essentially textual or doctrinal it is rather in mounting a challenge, systematically if possible, to that received narrative; changing the vantage into an interiorized processual view of lifelong cultivation from an externalized exotic "event"(Sharf 5-10)

The Alchemy of Cultivation: The Indispensable Role of the kōan in Wuhou Baoren

The first stage of kōan work, that is, using a huatou to raise great doubt and consequently break through for an initial seeing into one's nature (hosshin), constitutes only a prologue. Wuhou Baoren, the care of the sacred embryo after realization, starts from this moment. It is in this long and subtle stage that reveals because here begins the complexity and efficacy of the four indispensable and interconnected functions addressed by the kōan system.

First, it serves to verify the authenticity of awakening. Beginners-or those who have grasped a principle without a thorough experiential shift-are prone to the easy mistake that intellectual understanding is genuine insight. The master's checking questions (sassho) and "testing barrier" (kikan) kōans function as an extremely effective diagnostic tool in eliminating false or shallow awakenings so as not to allow the practitioner to fall into self-deception.(Hori, Zen Sand 6-10; Bodiford 125-27).

Secondly, the practice aims at deepening insight (深化见地). Usually, in the initial awakening, there is a realization of 'noumenal unity' (li yixin, 理一心) one comprehends the empty, unborn nature of reality. However, this does not necessarily mean that the insight has sunk into the perception of the 'myriad phenomena' (纷纭万象). Sustained kōan inquiry gradually helps extend this understanding derived from noumenal comprehension to apply also to the phenomenal world as it develops toward an integrated state of 'non-obstruction between principle and phenomena, and non-obstruction between phenomena and phenomena' (lishi wu'ai, shishi wu'ai , 理事无碍、事事无碍).(Gregory 25-28; Chan 2005.19-22)

Third, kōan practice is highly effective in the refining karmic habits (磨练习气). As the ancient Masters noted, it is most common to fall back into ignorance and affliction even after breaking through the initial stages of awakening. The kōan serves as a "refining fire" (炼金之火) continually bringing to light more and more subtle levels of affliction and lay tendencies within the practitioner. Steven Heine aptly describes this process as 'spiritual polishing': To see and let go of these habits, purifying the mind until only its true nature remains (Heine, Zen kōans 210-15). Fourth, the practice facilitates integration into daily life. The ultimate goal of Chan (Zen) is not a transcendent state outside of the world but rather the realization that "ordinary mind is the Way" (平常心是道). Through gonsen (abstruse) kōans and composing capping phrases (jakugo), one develops the ability to speak wisdom and respond flexibly yet steadily to situations in life which would otherwise lead to the condition of "mute Chan (Zen)," responding awakened within concrete human relationships (Hori, Zen Sand 20-25; Bodiford 123-25).

The integration of practice into daily life can bring persistent karmic habits to the surface. These habits, in turn, reveal incomplete understandings of phenomena, requiring the master to re-test the authenticity of the practitioner's core insight. This establishes a continual loop of refinement, situating the process within life itself which ultimately becomes the living kōan (Sheng Yen 58-60; Heine, Zen kōans 210-15).

Creative Ideas and Real-World Applications:

The major novelty of this study is in a systematic way of shifting the scholarly focus from the ' critical

moment' of sudden enlightenment to a lifelong 'process' of cultivation, thus negating the reductionist breakthrough model. This helps fill another gap that exists between literature on post-awakening practice and understanding Chan (Zen) itself through more holistic and dynamic interpretive frameworks. For contemporary practitioners, it's an imperative correction to the very popular neglect whereby people run after peak experiences without realizing the long-term, patient work of wuhou baoren that has to be done for moral development, psychological integration, and social responsibility. Practically, this reframed understanding could influence teaching in modern meditation centers by emphasizing structured kōan curricula beyond initial kenshō, and inform comparative soteriological studies across Buddhist traditions. This loop is visually summarized in the functional typology (see Table 1, p.13)

Conclusion: From "Event" to "Process" in Chan (Zen) Cultivation

This paper proposes that the real function of the kōan is found in wuhou baoren preservation and nurturing of awakening and says that recognizing this function requires a revision at some very basic level of the normal understanding of Chan (Zen) soteriology. By tracking how the kōan transformed from simply an agent used to invoke enlightenment into a framework for post-awakening cultivation, this paper will demonstrate that its value exists long before any insight (wu) has taken place. The practice does not end at the gate of awakening; rather, it is constituted by a discipline, which though somewhat verifiable, helps weave that insight into daily life and thus give abiding substance to what would otherwise be fleeting. Practically, this could reform modern meditation centers by prioritizing post-kenshō curricula (Nešković 2021, 597).

This shift in focus from the paradigmatic event of awakening to the protracted process of cultivation that truly completes it is the principal innovation of this work, demonstrating that the culmination of Chan (Zen) practice is not some sudden leap into a mystical state but rather wisdom gradually manifesting in one's character and actions through a sustained process, guided and measured by the kōan system, thereby enabling an adequate appreciation of Chan (Zen) as a complete path of spiritual maturation beyond mere sudden enlightenment.

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