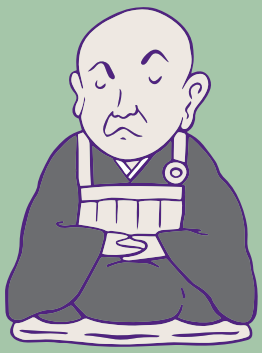
Eiyū Murakoshi



Now and Zen

Notes from a Buddhist Monastery

with Illustrations

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Eiyū Murakoshi is chief priest of the Rinzai temple Ryūunji and the author of numerous books on Zen.

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Preface

In Japan we have an expression, 'Float like cloud, flow like water'. It means to live free and unconstrained, like a floating cloud or flowing water. The Japanese word *unsui*, literally 'cloud and water', comes from this expression. The word originally referred to a monk who freely wanders the land in search of spiritual teachers. '*Unsui*' is now used specifically to refer to a monk of the Zen sect, but it's rare for *unsui* these days to wander the land searching for teachers. Nowadays a monk usually spends years in one place of training or *dōjō*, practising under a single teacher.

I too spent many years in a *dōjō* of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism. My teacher was the late *rōshi* (Zen teacher) Suzuki Sochū, but Nakagawa Sōun, who was Suzuki's teacher, was still alive then, and I had the good fortune to indirectly receive his teachings too. I was lucky to be able to do this simultaneously at the same *dōjō* – usually monks have to move to a different place to receive the teachings of another Zen teacher.

These two teachers were complete opposites.

There was no mistaking the strictness of the man who was my direct teacher, Sōchū Rōshi. The mere sight of him was enough to tell you. Sōun Rōshi, on the other hand, emanated the tenderness of a grandfather fondly watching over his grandchildren. Nevertheless, Sōchū taught me gently and carefully the correct meditation posture and method of breathing, while old Sōun would simply come out with mild remarks like, 'Oh, just spend some time looking at the plum blossoms,' a casual suggestion tossed your way which in fact hid an incredibly deep and rigorous teaching.

What they both had in common was kindness in their teaching of what is termed 'the Law' (*hō*), the Buddhist doctrine. Needless to say, this didn't apply only to myself – they were equally benign to all the novice monks who had gathered there under their guidance.

This book about the Zen teachings and monastic life is based on my experience of the teachings of these two *rōshi*.

Of course, I myself am still lacking in my practice, so I'm far from confident that I can properly convey the truth about Zen. But my plan is to try to make this book enjoyable to read and easy to understand, weaving in illustrations as I go along. Please keep me company on the journey, and perhaps when you finish reading you might find yourself thinking, 'Why don't I go along to a bookshop and find something that will teach me a bit more about Zen?', or perhaps, 'Why don't I try joining a *zazen* meditation group?' It would make me happy to think that this book might be the means by which you come in contact with the Buddhist teachings.

Eiyū Murakoshi

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What is the Collection of Secret *Kōans*?

How *Kōans* Work

The Relationship between Kōans *and Maths Questions*

When I came to write this book I spent some time wondering how best to begin, and I decided to start with the *kōan*, the meditation method that typifies the Rinzai school of Zen that I belong to.

So just what is a *kōan*?

Here's the dictionary definition:

> A question given to the Zen practitioner for contemplation, as a means to his or her enlightenment. *Kōans* are derived from the words and deeds of eminent practitioners, and lead one to a realm that transcends the world of everyday thought.

So *kōans* are a kind of manual to lead the Zen practitioner to enlightenment.

The practitioner in the *dōjō*, or place of practice, is given a *kōan* by the teacher and ponders it while sitting *zazen*, bringing an answer to the teacher in a one-on-one interview several times a day. The conversation between teacher and student during this interview is known in Zen as a *mondō*, or 'question-and-answer'. There's a common belief that a *mondō* is some special and incomprehensible exchange that transcends ordinary understanding, but this isn't so.

A *kōan* is . . . well, you could say it's a bit like a maths problem.

This kind of statement runs the risk of getting me into hot water with my superiors – but please don't be angry! It's just that comparing *kōans* to maths problems seems to provide an easy way to explain their mechanism.

As to just how the two are similar, well for a start a maths problem has a Question part and an Answer part, right? A *kōan* is also made up of a Question part and an Answer part.

Think back to when you were in your early years at school. Remember those maths exercises you had to do for homework? You were only given the Questions part – the Answers page was removed, because of course if it was there kids would just copy the answer without working it out for themselves. Then back at school next day there would be an Answers session in class.

There is also an Answers session in the *dōjō*. It's known as *sanzen*.

A special small room, called a *sanzen* room, is set aside in the *dōjō* for the *sanzen*. Here the Zen teacher sits, quietly waiting for the practitioners to come.

From outside in the nearby corridor comes the slow striking of a little gong, rung by the monk who's been assigned this task. This is the sign that the *sanzen* period has begun.

When this gong is rung, the monks who have been meditating in the meditation hall come running out. Then, with a single stroke of the gong, a practitioner enters the *sanzen* room. When each *mondō* interview is finished, the teacher rings a little bell. On hearing this, the next practitioner strikes the gong then enters the *sanzen* room.

As for why there's this unseemly dash to *sanzen* in a place that's supposed to be strictly silent, this is apparently a hangover from the old days when there were great numbers of monks – unlike today – and it was simply a question of first come, first served.

These *sanzen* sessions occur either three times a day, morning noon and evening, or twice a day, morning and evening.

There is also sometimes a more formal event called a *sōsan*, in which all the monks must meet the teacher one by one in order of rank.

OK, let's get back to the comparison between *kōans* and maths exercises.

Another way in which the two are similar is that in both there's only one answer. Just as the exercise '1+1= ?' has the answer '2', there is a given answer equivalent to that '2' for each *kōan*.

Imagine, for example, that a certain *kōan* has the answer 'forest'. That is precisely what the answer must be. A similar answer such as 'trees' or 'woodland' would be incorrect. There is only one answer.

Also, just as the level of difficulty gets higher as you go through the pages of a maths book, the stages in Zen advance as you go further in *kōan* study. But please don't get me wrong – there's no guarantee that at a certain stage you will arrive at enlightenment.

OK, let's take an example from a work called *Mumonkan*, or *The Gateless Barrier*. This is a collection of forty-eight *kōans* written in Sung dynasty China by a monk called Mumon Ekai. Here's the first one, called 'Chao-chou's Dog'. It's actually written in Chinese, which might seem odd if you think of Zen as Japanese, but you have to remember that many Zen texts were originally written in China (where Zen is called Ch'an), and this *kōan* collection is one of them.

There's a bit that comes before, but the actual *kōan* part says:

> A monk asked Master Chao-chou, 'Does a dog have a buddha nature or not?'
>
> Chao-chou answered 'not' (*Mu*).

'What?' you'll probably say. 'Surely the answer's already given in the *kōan*! The dog doesn't have a buddha nature.' And yes, you might think that the monk's words are the *kōan* question and the master's words are its answer, like this:

> QUESTION: A monk asked Master Chao-chou, 'Does a dog have a buddha nature or not?'
> ANSWER: Chao-chou answered 'not' (*mu*).

And in that case you'd be right, of course – the answer is that a dog doesn't have buddha nature.

But unfortunately it doesn't work like that. This whole passage is actually the Question, the equivalent of the '1 + 1 = ?' part of a maths question.

Every book about *kōans* says that they are Zen questions, but the problem is that word 'question' – here we have an example that includes an answer. Please take good note of this, because it's important at this stage for an understanding of the nature of *kōans*.

If you sit before the teacher and say, 'The answer to the *kōan* about whether a dog has the Buddha nature or not is what Chao-chou said – not (*mu*),' the teacher will say, 'Go away and meditate on that word "*mu*".' The *sanzen* session will be over in thirty seconds flat, and you'll be out on your ear.

So now you have to find an answer equivalent to that 2 in 1 + 1 = ?.