

The Hua Tou practice: perspectives and examples of an ancient and potent Chinese Chan practice

by Stuart Lachs, May 2011

Introduction by Chuan Zhi

Stuart Lachs is widely known for his contemporary contributions to Zen/Chan through his commentaries and Dharma discourses. Mr. Lachs has practiced Zen for over 40 years under the canopies of many prominent Zen teachers including Walter Norwick, Sheng-yen, Morinaga roshi, and others. While his most influential writings have focused on many of the problems encountered with contemporary western Buddhist groups and teachers, here he writes candidly and lucidly about a Zen practice that was most influential and helpful to him during his years of Zen training: the hua-tou practice. Hua-tou practice was resurrected in China during the last century predominantly by the famous Zen master, Hsu Yun. While this is not a very popular practice in Western Zen, likely because of its difficulty and the sparsity of those who know it, it is slowly growing in popularity. If you've never heard of a hua-tou before, sit back and read Mr. Lach's engaging account of this important Zen practice technique as offered at a recent interview with Non Duality Magazine (NDM), reprinted here with permission from the author and Non Duality Magazine.



NDM: Can you please tell me about your Hua Tou practice. What this is exactly? How you do this? Is it some kind of meditation?

Stuart Lachs: Hua-tou is a Chinese term that can be translated as “critical phrase”. In Korean, hua-tou is pronounced hwadu and in Japanese as wato. I mention this in case some one has read or heard the term in a Korean or a Japanese context to know we are discussing the same subject.

Yes, hua-tou is a kind of meditation though one should not think it is limited to seated meditation. Hua-tou meditation first became widespread among followers of the important Lin-chi sect Chinese Chan master Ta-hui who was born in 1089 and died in 1163; this period in China is part of the Sung Dynasty (960 – 1280). Ta-hui was a disciple of Yuan-wu who compiled the famous collection of koans titled the Blue Cliff Record which has one hundred cases along with a rather involved commentary on each case. Ta-hui strongly opposed the style of commentary in the Blue Cliff Record as being overly poetic and intellectual. It is in this context of an overly poetic/intellectual literary tradition of comments on koans that Ta-hui promulgated hua-tou meditation. There is a story that Ta-hui was so opposed to this refined discursive style of commentary on koans that he burned his copy or his teacher’s copy of the Blue Cliff Record.

Hua-tou meditation is a simple method of meditation. Though I say it is simple, there are many variations on the method. Being said to be simple does not mean it is easy. Though these variations in method may at times seem minor, I think in reality they can make a big difference in how the method

works for a given person. Above we said that hua-tou means critical phrase. By that I mean it is a short phrase on which to meditate. The hua-tou or critical phrase may have been part of a larger or more involved koan. Hua-tou also means the head of the word or word head. By this is meant the state of mind before the word is spoken, before a thought has arisen.

Without getting into the many meanings of the word koan, let us just take the word as it is understood today. That is, a supposed story taken from Zen literature, often from the collected sayings of a given master, mostly of an interaction between a Zen master and a disciple or more generally another person. The koan supposedly expresses through words or actions the enlightened state of mind of someone who has attained awakening through Zen practice, almost always a Zen master. However, the enlightened state of mind manifested is not immediately discernible by the action or by the semantic content of the words, but rather, we know they are enlightened actions and words, because they were acted or spoken by a Zen master.

What are we talking about? Let us look at a few examples of well known hua-tou:

1. "What is it?"— which is popular with Korean teachers. It supposedly comes from an interaction between the Sixth Patriarch of Chan, Hui-neng (638 – 713) and a disciple. It should also be noted that though Seung Sahn Sunim who was the most well known Korean Zen teacher in America, probably the entire West, actually taught a variation of Japanese Rinzai Zen koan study that his western followers expected. He did not teach-[change teach to emphasize] hwadu practice which is standard in Korean Zen (Son).

Stuart Lachs was born in 1940 and raised in Brooklyn, NY. He attended Brooklyn College, part of the NYC college system, where he received a B.A. and M.S., majoring in mathematics. He worked at Bell Labs in the mathematical physics department for a year and afterward, in the ship design industry for a few years.

He started Zen practice in 1967 in NYC. That Spring he went to San Francisco because he had heard that the San Francisco Zen Center was opening the first American Zen monastery. With luck and the generosity of the Center, he was accepted and attended the first training period of Tassajara, their new monastery.

He returned to NYC and became a member of the Zen Studies Society. He remained a member for about two and a half years and then went to Maine to study with Walter Nowick at what became Moon Spring Hermitage. For many years, he was head monk, head of the Board of Directors, and in charge of new members, instructing them in meditation, zendo protocol, and the ways of the group.

After eleven years he left and returned to NYC. Shortly, he found the Chan Meditation Group under the leadership of Shifu Sheng-yen, a Chinese teacher from Taiwan. He did not become a member of the group at first, though after a few years he was given much responsibility, including the important task of giving private interviews during seven day retreats and running classes when Shifu returned to Taiwan, every other three month period. He eventually became a member. From 1982–1999, he traveled frequently, spending three months in a Korean Monastery (Songgwang Sa), some time in Japan at both a Rinzai and Soto temple, and two stays at Shifu's monastery in Taiwan. During one of the stays in Taiwan, he did a solitary thirty day retreat. He also visited the Diamond Sangha in Hawaii twice, and spent two months with the London Zen Group as a guest of Morinaga roshi, their Japanese teacher. He stayed at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas in Ukiah, Ca. twice for a few months at a time, as well as visiting other places.

In the early/mid 1990's he became interested in an academic look at Zen, which included institutional history, myth making, and the interaction of Zen and the state. It was an eye opener, as he had seen much over the years that bothered him and did not make sense, but he could not put it all together. He also became interested in the sociology of religion. His articles are the result of years of practicing with Zen groups combined with his academic studies of Chan/Zen as well as the sociology of religion and institutions. Since 1999 he has practiced with a few friends or on his own.

2. "Who is repeating the Buddha's name?" which is popular with Chinese people who often chant Amitabha Buddha's name.
3. "Who is dragging this corpse around?"
4. "Who am I?"
5. "What was my original face before my father and mother were born?" This hua-tou or critical phrase is taken from the words of the Sixth Patriarch, Hui-neng in the case known as "Not thinking of good or of evil." It is the 23rd case in the well known koan collection, the Mumonkan.
6. "What is Mu?" Mu is Japanese and Wu is the Chinese for no or not or nothing or empty. This is taken from perhaps the most famous koan case, known as Joshu's Mu. It goes as follows, "A monk asked Joshu, 'Does a dog have Buddha nature or not?' Joshu replied, 'Mu.'" Joshu is the Japanese name of Chao-chou who was a famous Chinese master. This case is often given as the first koan for people going through a Japanese style koan curriculum. This Mu/Wu is not the expected answer as according to Zen teaching all sentient beings have Buddha nature as the monk asking the question certainly would have known. This is the first case in the Mumonkan.

Perhaps the first aspect to be aware of is that we are the subject of the practice- this body-this mind, not some far away being.

The short answer to how one actually does hua-tou meditation is that one concentrates on the hua-tou by silently repeating it with a questioning or unknowing or investigating or enquiring mind. One focuses at first on the whole hua-tou but once the sense of it is established one concentrates on "Who" or "What" trying to bring the hua-tou to life, to generate doubt. That is the barest description of the method, or at least one way of doing the practice. Please keep in my there are a number of slightly different ways or methods of doing this practice depending on the teacher.

However, I think we have to back up a bit and place the practice in a larger context to actually understand how to do it in a way that can be meaningful and efficacious. I think to actually do the practice requires the practitioner to be familiar with what is sometimes called the Three Greats. That is, Great Faith, Great Determination, and Great Doubt.

Great Faith: one must believe that the practice can be efficacious. That is, this is a practice that many people have done in the past and that many people do in the present, that it has worked well for them, and that it can work well for me. So one must believe this is a valid and good practice. In this manner, one must also believe in oneself that one can actually do this practice just as others have done in the past and are doing in the present. One must also have faith in themselves and have a certain ego development and strength. If someone thinks that hua-tou was a terrific practice for great practitioners long ago or maybe some people today but I don't know about me, and I am not so good a practitioner like so and so and on like that, then this person will most likely have trouble here and not get very far into the method. Importantly, one should believe in their own Buddha nature and that awakening is a birth-right. Every person has/is Buddha nature and has the potential to awaken to it.

Great Determination: one must be determined to see or awaken to their true nature. One must feel it is important and should feel this as a pressing and constant need to solve this problem. Above we said that each person has Buddha nature, that each person is enlightened only we have not realized it ourselves. That we have not awakened to this is our own doing. So this could/should make us angry or unsettled with ourselves for not realizing our birth-right. We haven't realized this because we have been distracted by all manner of things in the world: pleasures, career, money, travel, family, sex, fame,...This dissatisfaction with our own state of not knowing can be a force or engine driving our determination and doubt about who we are.

We must be willing to spend time and energy in answering or solving this problem of who we really are- what is our true nature. If one thinks "oh well it would be nice to awaken but if I don't, well that is OK too" then this is not the best attitude for attempting this method of practice. Or if one sits back and waits thinking, "Maybe one day I will be awakened" this too is not the best attitude for hua-tou practice. You have to want to see, be determined to realize your true nature! Now it is also true that this determination often grows as one practices more. As the practice deepens and as one feels closer to tasting awakening yet it is still a step or two ahead of you, and you still don't know, determination often grows. As determination grows and the practice deepens, at times bodily unease, irritation or even anger enters the process. There is not only an intellectual state of not knowing but bodily sensations also arise. This irritation or even anger can be a driving force to escape from this intellectual state of unknowing. It is important for the practitioner not to be afraid of these states or to stop or pull back. In fact, the practitioner at some point must become ferocious in his determination and cut off all distracting thoughts and keep digging into the hua-tou. There is a strange feeling that can grow of almost being in a trap; one can not stop and back out yet going ahead seems difficult and blocked.

Great Doubt: cultivating doubt is the main and key component of the practice. Doubt is the beginning and end of hua-tou practice. Hua-tou meditation is entirely based on generating doubt. Though one should have great faith in having Buddha nature, in the belief that there is nothing to gain, that one is really complete, this belief is instrumental in generating doubt because one does not truly know this. Without generating doubt, one is said to be meditating on "dead words" as opposed to meditating on "live words" as when the "doubt sensation" truly arises. As the doubt rises it has the feeling of literally coming alive, it takes on an energy and life of its own, it goes spontaneously while distracting thoughts lose their power and eventually completely disappear. As the doubt sensation grows and becomes more powerful it fills your total being until there is nothing in the world but great doubt accompanied by great energy. It becomes like a speeding locomotive racing down the tracks. If one can stay with this state of only doubt, in time this may break open into the world of Chan.

There is a saying about hua-tou meditation, "small doubt, small awakening, great doubt great awakening, no doubt, no awakening."

Please keep in mind this is only one method that is suited to some people. I in no way mean that this is a method for everyone or that it is the best method. There are other methods that are better suited to other people. Hopefully, people will find a way to practice that is suited to their disposition and mentality.

NDM: The number 4 hua-tou “Who am I?” sounds exactly like an ancient Indian method, atma vicara of Vedanta popularised by Sri Ramana Maharshi.

When one investigates this question, "Who Am I", does one use the process of neti neti, Sanskrit, for not this, not this. www.realization.org/page/topics/self_inquiry.htm

Stuart Lachs: The hua-tou “Who am I?” in name sounds exactly like the method popularized by Ramana Maharshi, but the method is really different. I am only saying this based solely on the method as described in the link you mention above.

The hua-tou method as explained in question 1 begins and ends with raising doubt. No where in the Maharshi method as described in the link above is there any mention of doubt and the cultivating of doubt. Yet, there are certain elements that do overlap.

I would also like to underline here that there are many different ways of working on a hua-tou, so I am giving only one way. So when I say “the hua-tou method” I mean one way of working with a hua-tou, not that this is “the only way.” However, common to every way I have ever heard of, raising or cultivating doubt, that is, raising and then cultivating doubt into great doubt is the key.

“He [Ramanha Maharshi] said that if one can keep one's attention on this inner feeling of 'I', and if one can exclude all other thoughts, then the 'I'-thought will start to subside into the Heart-centre.”

Similarly with the hua-tou method, if one can stay focused on examining or looking into or investigating the hua-tou, thoughts will start to subside and lose their power to drag one along into their drama so to speak. All our thoughts have a sense of “me” as a basis – me thinking of the past or the future or some slight or some anticipated joy and so on. So in a sense though the method is different, as in many forms of meditation a focus on one point can quiet the mind. Though one does not use the process “neti neti” as such, one should focus on the “Who” with a questioning or unknowing mind and let the other thoughts drop away, but definitely do not follow the thoughts and get into the thought process and create a chain of thoughts and stories. If one does get caught in a chain of thoughts, when one realizes this they should gently drop them and come back to the hua-tou with a gentle and questioning mind. There is however some similarity to “neti neti” in that, especially early on in hua-tou meditation, answers will present themselves and these should all be rejected.

I think this may be a good place to mention that as the mind quiets and wandering thoughts become fewer and those thoughts have less power to gain our attention, we are also losing the sense of the world that we create in our minds and our place in it. That is, we construct the world with our thoughts and make our place in the world this way. So I can think that I will meet my friend next week and run an errand later tonight and go to work in the morning and talk to my wife and so on. This is pretty normal and is who we think we are. It is satisfying in a way as it lets us know in a way who and what we are in the world. It is not however completely satisfying as we are still uncertain of our essential nature and often leaves us with a nagging feeling of uncertainty and doubt of who we really are. It is this nagging undercurrent of doubt that is to be cultivated in the hua-tou method.

As the mind quiets and wondering thoughts cease or lose their power to attract, this can be scary, depending on how strong a sense of self we have and how much the hua-tou has become alive and thoughts have dropped away. This happens at different places in the process with different people. Some people it happens with so quickly that the hua-tou method is not suited to them. It seems these people become too rattled before the doubt has any real power. Others, it happens only well along in the process, but it is some thing that most/many people will have to deal with. We enter a situation where the wondering thoughts have lost their power or ceased, the hua-tou becomes alive and is going by itself, the doubt is rising maybe even rising quickly but we now no longer have the markers mentioned above telling us of our place in the world. All the planning for tomorrow and what we did last week, our ordinary thinking and so on are gone. Our ordinary ideas of who and what we are – are no longer present or there only in a very faint form. This can be quite scary- the feeling being that you will just go ZAPP!- drop into a black hole and be no more- never to return. It is common I think for most people to stop the process at some point because they are scared. There are many ways to do this: just raising a thought with the idea that you are taking a short break and will continue shortly, or laughing, or thinking some very compassionate thought, or some thought of gratefulness towards some one or situation, or crying for whatever reason and so on. Often these thoughts will be or sound elevated, but in the end their purpose is to stop the fright. Unfortunately it always works, that is, it brings back a sense of the self. However, it is rare if one will immediately be able to return to the concentrated state they were in when the fright got the best of them.

Another possibility is as the mind quiets down and thoughts lose their power to attract and pretty much stop, then one can enter very pleasurable states, states of calm and a sense of purity or even slip into samadhi. Though often one hears that in Buddhist meditation samadhi is a desired state and pleasurable states are desired, in the context of hua-tou practice we should not let ourselves be side tracked by these pleasures. These pleasurable states and samadhi states can be very enjoyable and captivating. Though these states show that the mind has settled and is stable, we must not forget that the hua-tou method is based on doubt. Resting in pleasurable or pure and samadhi states are not a condition of doubt, so they must be avoided.

Another point worth mentioning here is that from moment to moment we do not know what will be next. I think it is important to be comfortable with that thought. When meditating, if things are not going well, or if you feel tired or agitated or whatever, you should not think this is a waste of time, maybe I'll stop now and try again later or tomorrow. Just come back to the method, whatever the method. In a flash, that state can change. It is impossible to know what the next moment will be! One can begin being tired or foggy or agitated or feeling sick or ordinary and a moment later the mind will be focused and clear and vice versa.

Though one looks at the "Who" with a questioning mind, one should also want to know- be determined to know, you should be looking for an answer. It is not to know as in $XY + Y = 124$ if $Y=6$ what is X , that it can be figured out by the rational mind. Early in the process, rational appearing answers will often appear, but they must be rejected. Nevertheless, this is a question that can be resolved and that it is important to solve it. You may even think that it is the hua-tou that will answer you, not you it. You just keep probing deeper and deeper, asking and asking and do not be satisfied until the doubt grows into

great doubt and until that doubt consumes all of you until there is nothing but doubt. Ta-hui says, "all at once, annihilate every splendid [Ta added] thing." If one can stay with this great doubt in time it may finally break open and collapse and open to the world of Chan.

Most importantly, you must put away any thought which waits for or anticipates awakening or a break through to occur. If you hold onto a thought that waits for an awakening, that awakening will never come. You need to put down all thoughts, all logical discriminations, all thoughts of good and evil, love and hate, liking life and fearing death, all thoughts of "I" no matter how subtle that thought may be, of understanding, of views, and of knowledge, all pleasure in stillness or clinging to purity or turning away from disturbance. Everything must be put away until only doubt remains.

NDM: Do you only ask this question, do this hua-tou when sitting in meditation or all the time?

Stuart Lachs: One should keep or examine the doubt going as much as is possible. But I would like to add a strong caveat with that as most of us live in cities with cars and traffic and other elements that call for alertness. This caveat cannot be stated too strongly. One should NOT investigate their hua-tou when driving a car, when walking in a busy traffic situation or when riding a bicycle or using a dangerous machine or anything like that. I know some one who did not take this caveat seriously and rode her bicycle into the side of a car while looking into her hua-tou. Luckily she did not get hurt too badly, but bad enough. In fact, this woman was lucky she did not get killed. Please- if anyone wants to do this practice- do it wisely.

So yes, if your environment allows it, we should keep investigating the hua-tou as constantly as our situation permits. I have found there is a certain power to the investigation when done during eating or going to the bathroom. Another time that is particularly strong is when going to sleep; to keep investigating the hua-tou while lying in bed going to sleep. It is not uncommon then to wake with the hua-tou running in your mind. At times this has made me feel uneasy, to wake in a state of doubt with the hua-tou running on its own.

NDM: In your case, when you were doing this hua tou, at some point did anger arise and if so, how did you deal with this anger?

Stuart Lachs: Yes, in my own case I can think of times of anger arising. One example in my own case was on a group retreat- probably the fifth night of a seven day retreat. At this place the teacher gave a talk each night for about 45 minutes. On this particular night in his talk he mentioned the word "ego" and then kept on talking. About fifteen or so minutes later we began to sit for the night period. As soon as I started to sit the word "ego" popped into my mind and I thought something like, "What a crock of shit that word is." It doesn't mean anything- I was literally furious at the word or idea and kept repeating it and silently screaming, "it is bullshit, it is bullshit." Somehow, I then switched to the hua-tou and all the energy and anger moved over to the hua-tou. I was totally concentrated and energized now on the hua tou- the anger and energy focused in the doubt. Immediately there was nothing but doubt – everything else fell away but this driving – forceful doubt. At some point it just broke open. I stayed in that state for

I don't know how long. At some point the thought appeared, "I have to leave this now." Just then the bell rang to end the last period of the night.

On another occasion, I was doing a seven day retreat alone in my apartment. During the afternoon sitting of the fifth or sixth day things seemed to be quite stable. About an hour or hour and a half into the afternoon some what quickly a driving anger arose into the hua-tou. It was anger at the doubt about the hua-tou. It got progressively stronger and energetic and driving. Everything but doubt was completely gone – there was only raging doubt. I don't know how long that lasted but some time late in the day it just exploded open.

NDM: What was the state like, that is, the first example above? How would you describe it?

Stuart Lachs: I will say a little, but this happened many years ago so I would not like to go into too much detail. In the Zen tradition these states are not described in detail and definitely not clung to. I've had experiences before this that are essentially completely forgotten. Clinging to the experience and remembering it is a form of living in the past instead of moving with life. One can also fall into trying to repeat the experience again, recreate it, but that also is trying to relive the past. Some of the experience remains though in most cases, in time it is not what it was. What seemed to remain the most in this case was a connection to the world - a sense of intimacy or being in the world. However, in some sense it becomes memory. This was a minor experience on the Zen path, though it is important to have direct experiences. Besides having a direct experience of what Zen is about, these experiences are important because they strengthen one's faith in the tradition- in the practice. After having direct experiences, it is no longer blind faith or faith based on something that seems correct or reasonable or the philosophy or the teachings and stories or something that touches a spot in your psyche, but rather, Chan is now digested some – it is in your bones – it has taken root- you know what it is talking about and pointing at is for real.

Remember Hakuin, the famous 18th century reviver of Japanese Rinzai Zen is said to have had 15 major experiences and something like 70 minor experience before he "put the rhinoceros to rest." The Chinese master Ta-hui who is credited with popularizing the hua-t'ou method in 12th century China also had many experiences and was asked to take over a monastery but refused because he still had some doubt about his practice. We should not make too much of small openings or even many openings. The important thing is how well the practice becomes integrated into one's life and becomes living Zen. All too often we have seen how that has not been the case with Zen in the West over the last 45 years.

The experience was of emptiness- emptiness of what or who I considered myself to be and emptiness of others and things. At some point it seemed very funny to have taken myself as all that I thought I was- the same was of others. It seemed completely ridiculous or comically foolish that I had done so. It was exactly as the Heart Sutra says, "form is emptiness and emptiness is form." It was also clear that there was nothing to attain, what was the big struggle? This also seemed amusing. It seemed like an ever abiding present- there was no time.

NDM: Also what happened to it then? Did you stay in this state after the bell rang or did you leave it?

Stuart Lachs: Yes- it did stay like that after the bell rang although I recognized people and the zendo (meditation hall). It was just that everything felt easy and appeared clear and also a bit funny or amusing. We then had a short closing service which is done at the end of each night. I went to Shifu Sheng Yen who was the teacher and told him I wanted to see him in private. We went into a separate room and he asked me what happened- I told him- he asked me a few questions which I don't remember now except that they were easy to answer. They were easy to answer because it was clear - there was no figuring – just answering. He confirmed my experience. This is called “seeing the nature” in Sheng Yen's tradition.

After this, the hua-t'ou lost all its power. It was impossible to raise any sense of doubt, so when I sat I did a kind of shikantaza (just sitting) for some time. I would try the hua-t'ou periodically but I think it was a week or two before any sense of the doubt sensation arose. I am pretty sure that after two weeks I was working on the same hua-t'ou again. I believe this is common in Chinese Chan and Korean Son to stay with the same hua-t'ou after having a Chan/Son experience. The hope is that one will have a deeper experience at a later date. From this perspective one hua-t'ou is as good as another. This is different from Japanese Rinzai Zen and the new Sanbokyodan Zen sect popular in the West where students go through a koan course or curriculum composed of maybe 200 or 300 or more koans as well as other material. However, going through a koan course does not mean some one actually has an awakening while working on each koan. That is definitely not the case.

I would like to add that in the 2nd example above, it was not so much a no-self experience though that was there, as seeing the world as a totally interconnected dynamic web. It was seeing the world of people and objects and emptiness as interconnected and interpenetrating each other. I also remember with this experience that physically much heat and sweat was generated.

NDM: So when Shifu Sheng Yen confirmed your experience. What would it mean when you have seen the nature so to speak? Or if you have this realization that “form is emptiness and emptiness is form.” That there was nothing to attain. Is this considered an awakening? "Enlightenment" in the Hua Tou Chan tradition?

Stuart Lachs: By “seen the nature” Shifu Sheng Yen meant that one had a “no-self” experience, which is the experience that I had talked about above. Instead of just saying that I described it in terms of seeing clearly that form is emptiness and so on. Those ideas came to me quickly after the bell. They seemed funny and amusing because it seemed so simple and very obvious. It also seemed amusing because I had realized that the Heart Sutra was describing things exactly as they appeared to me. It was a joy of recognizing some thing that had always been there but not seen quite so clearly. But to be clear, “seeing the nature” means a no self experience.

Interestingly, some people mistake a “oneness” experience for “seeing the nature.” This is a very big mistake though not uncommon. Oneness is actually a step away from no self, though it is a big step to take. In oneness there is a sense that you are one with the universe. However, no matter how subtle the self may be then, and that can be quite subtle, there is still a self and a universe to be one with. That next and important step of letting go of a subtle self can be very difficult.

NDM: So when you said earlier that these people go through this Zen course with koans. Do you mean to say they can go through this course and answer the questions and but still not be awakened at all?

This is a good question but the answer is not simple. Most commonly in koan courses the first koan is Joshu's Mu, but it can be another koan as well. Each lineage has its own curriculum. If some one "passes" the first koan I assume it means or is supposed to mean "seeing the nature." This is usually followed by some checking koans or questions. Now it must be understood that a teacher passing a student on a koan is not like weighing a block of cement. If you weigh the block and I weigh the block and five other people weigh the block, everyone will get close to the same weight of course assuming we are using functioning scales. Now with koans, teachers can have a number of reasons to move some one along besides them having a no-self experience. Now I know of one case where I interviewed someone who was pretty much finished with his teacher's koan course but did not know the difference between oneness and no-self. He could talk well and was confident about being an "older student." So at least in this case I would say it is true.

Here is another story, this one about Genpo Merzel roshi years ago when he had a group in Bar Harbor, Maine; this was in the late 1980's. There was some unease in the group and tension among the members.

The woman instrumental in bringing Genpo to Bar Harbor who had also expressed concern to him about his reputation for womanizing before actually inviting him from California, went to speak with him. She said there was tension and unease in the group and asked, more or less, "what is going on?" Gempo replied to her that this tension was because he was not passing students so easily on their koans. Well, the real reason for the tension was that Genpo was having a few affairs with woman students, one being his favored student, who he later gave Dharma transmission, that is, made her an independent roshi. But that aside, the interesting point in terms of the question at hand is that at Gempo's total discretion he could pass people on their koans easily or with more difficulty. But this is not only Gempo's discretion; this is the discretion of every Zen teacher doing koans with their students. What "easily" means or on the contrary, with more difficulty means, no one can say. Were some people passed "easily" on their first koan and then moving along through the course? ---Added ?

Here is another example from the early 20th century in Japan. What I said above about koans is not some thing new, or created in the West. The following story was posted on Buddha-I, an academic online list for Buddhist scholars. The email was posted by Prof. Richard Hayes from the University of New Mexico, referencing a talk by Prof. John Maraldo.

"A letter from Nishida [Nishida Kitaro was the founder of the Kyoto School of philosophy] to an unknown recipient (perhaps D.T. Suzuki). [D.T. Suzuki, the popularizer of Zen in the West and Nishida Kitaro were close friends since high school days].

Forgive me for discussing such personal matters, but I think it is useless at present to visit Roshi and am now concentrating solely on the mu koan. Perhaps if I concentrate enough in my everyday life, I shall reach some enlightenment. What good is it if Roshi considers that I have passed a koan, if I myself am

dissatisfied? There are Zen scholars who pass one koan after another, thereby achieving seniority status. I am not, however, impressed with their behavior or with what they say. What is your opinion?

In another letter he mentions having an interview with Setsumon Roshi, who was satisfied that he had passed the koan mu, about which Nishida says "It does not delight me at all."

When asked about Nishida's dissatisfaction with passing the koan and his disappointment that his kensho was "not earth-shattering", D.T. Suzuki wrote: "Yes, that can happen to a man like Nishida, who has an intellectual and logical mind."

Professor Hayes added and I agree, "Thank heavens for intellectual and logical minds, say!" Essentially Nishida is saying that he did not see any change for the better in the behavior of people who had gone through a Rinzai koan curriculum course. He is raising the question of what meaning can be placed on being authenticated for going through the koan course if there is no noticeable change in behavior or what one says. It seems he himself did not feel any wiser or enlightened when his roshi was satisfied that he had passed the mu koan. One might say Nishida was disenchanted with at least his roshi when he said, "It does not delight me at all." D.T. Suzuki, ever the idealist, attempted to spin Nishida's remark away.

But I know for a fact that people have been told they have had a Zen experience (seen the nature) when they haven't. In two of these cases the people are official Zen teachers, that is Dharma transmitted teachers. There is no way of knowing how common this is. But this question only applies to groups or lineages that do koans or hua- t'ou practice. The Soto sect of Zen does not really do either koans or hua-tou at least as a main practice. Their main meditation practice is shikantaza (nothing but sitting or just sitting). So I would hazard a guess to say that there are teachers in Soto lineages with the title roshi/Zen master who have not awakened at least by Rinzai/Sanbokyodan Zen's understanding of the word. Please do not take this to be dismissive of these teachers; they may in fact be very good teachers and set high standards for their students while being exemplary role models. Whereas people with so called "awakening" may not have digested their experience(s) or the experience(s) may have gone to their heads and caused more problems than anything else.

Stuart Lachs can be reached at slachs@att.net.