

Clap Your Hand: The Zen Koan Hoax



by [Robert Lewis](#) (March 2022)

When in my early 20s – code for young and foolish – it was very trendy to take an interest in Zen Buddhism. Both the mercurial curious and blinkered zealous were lured by the promise of enlightenment (satori) – being at one with the universe.

Among the doctrinal methods and means employed to achieve enlightenment, the Zen Koans held a particular fascination, since the answering of them, especially the difficult ones, promised instant enlightenment – not to be confused with instant Karma.

Of the 1,700 Koans, the most difficult and most widely known is “what is the sound of one hand clapping?”

Despite my one-and-twenty status and hard-wired idealism, it

struck me as incredible that answering a single question correctly could result in enlightenment. If I was ever tempted to dedicate my life to Zen in hot pursuit of satori (bra size 36), that corny question and its outrageous promise quickly disabused me of all things Zen: such as, “for the arrow to hit the target,” Zen master says to bewildered student, “become the arrow.” That dollop of wisdom put an end to both my archery career and the hospitalized instructor for whom there was no n-arrow escaping. And in consideration of my then rabid hormone count, hitting the target (any vagina) by becoming my penis turned out to be a meditation in futility. In point of fact, until I turned 30 I was never anything but my penis.

Notwithstanding major objections from friends and the unpremeditated wrath from the meditation crowd, I regarded the Koan and the society it engendered as a ploy of the con-man, and its misfit-devotees the raw material cults prey on. That on Monday, I’m a nostril excavating, cannabis wrecked hippie devoted to the path of least resistance, and the next day an enlightened Buddha, registered as incredible as Corpus Christi rising from the dead. On top of which I had come to know several enlightenment chasers whose motives were highly suspect on the way to their tryst with satori: one took to the ashram circuit for free room and board and to prey on vulnerable women. Closer to home, Montreal, one [master](#) required unconditional surrender from students who were obliged to turn over their entire weekly salaries while the female contingent were repurposed as sex slaves. Other masters were outright sado-masochists, obliging their disciples to submit to (in order to transcend) extreme physical pain: whipping and caning.

I quickly came to regard the Zen enterprise as nothing more than an excuse for the smart and strong to exploit and abuse the dumb and the weak, and the widespread practice of ‘oming” as merely the means to the end of securing a consenting master-slave relationship.

WHAT IS OM?

Om is a mystic syllable that is repeated (as in a mantra) by someone who is meditating = oming. An omer (not to be confused with Homer) is one who oms.

A serious omer aspires to the state of satori, or enlightenment, or higher being, or Zen's no-mind, or oneness with the universe. Whatever we might say about omers, they are not lacking in ambition – of a different (metaphysical) sort.

As for the promise of transcending duality via oming, I offer the following contrarian view.

Om is a vegetative state raised to the highest eminence, om is lobotomy, om is non-being, om is anti-being, om is dereliction, om is abdication, om is inauthentic, om is dumbness, om is rap, om is Indian drone, om is minimalism, om is drug addiction, om is sports addiction, om is games addiction, om is danger addiction . . . om is any activity that (by design) keeps you imprisoned in the present where there is no past, no future, no self-consciousness, no judgment. Omers are cowards and like Nietzsche's Christians and priests, they are the antithesis of life, of the will to power. Om is pure cop-out, and the gurus and Zen masters are the great escape artists. Taking liberties with the Beatles lyric, yes indeed "living is easy with eyes closed oming all you see." When an evolved omer claims his eyes are wide open but he sees nothing because he is not separate from the world, he has willed himself to occupy the lowest rung on the chain of being, which is a mere syllable away from non-being. Behind every om ever uttered lurks a closet suicide looking to out himself on the end of threadbare hope.

Why would anyone who doesn't harbour a death wish want to transcend duality? I love duality. I love -25 Celsius because it enables me to appreciate +25. If there were always and only 25 Celsius, the very concept of temperature would disappear,

along with the four seasons. Viewed from afar, all human endeavour – doctrinally frowned upon by the oming fraternity – implicitly aims at cultivating an appreciation of duality: we work hard to play hard, we travel far to better appreciate what is near.

The difference between metaphysics and the philosophy of oming is that the former encourages us to dwell in the sacred nexus between being and nothingness while the latter is a death wish.

And if I grant that my somewhat jaundiced view of Zen and beggar-cup carrying saffron-robed monks hasn't changed since those heady days of my youth, I have to confess that I have never been able to totally disentangle myself from Zen doctrine, in particular the Koan that asks: what is the sound of one hand clapping?

WHAT IS A ZEN KOAN?

A Koan is a puzzle, or riddle, or paradox Zen masters employ to help initiates unravel the great truths about themselves and the world. They are encouraged to “abandon ultimate dependence on reason” which facilitates sudden intuitive enlightenment. The Zen master knows the meaning of all the Koans because he is enlightened.

Of the 1,700 Koans, “what is the sound of one hand clapping” is regarded as the most difficult, and when answered, it results in enlightenment. To wit:

Master Hakuin (1686-1769) attained satori (enlightenment) with the answer “I have heard sound without sound!”

Washing his master's feet with one hand resulted in enlightenment for Wang Xiang in the early 19th century.

A student allegedly thrust out his one hand and attained enlightenment (became a Buddha).

Since there is no single answer to a Koan, each student will find his way to the answer according to his nature and the unique circumstances of his life.

And that is where I begin, with the here and now, and this small essay, whose sole mandate is to revisit, without pride and prejudice, the one-hand-clapping Koan with one goal in mind: to exorcise my remaining Zen demons. As for transcending duality, that is a non-starter or the unique dispensation of all non-living matter, vegetable and non-sentient life.

My method will be straight forward: with one arm pry open the question, that is rip it out of its mystical underpinnings and expose its bogus indices and outright silliness (measured by frittered away time).

To the question at hand, the obvious first answer is that one hand can't clap, that is make a sound, but since that response doesn't result in satori, we have to grant the question its specific gravity, which means the student must address the key word in the question, which is sound, or the absence of sound, which is a duality that has to be transcended. In my circumstance, since there is no short answer to the Koan, the question suggests a method, or process or gradual unveiling which might require a lifetime before it yields its fruits. Again, it depends on the person. Einstein reports that he understood relativity in a flash; for most everyone else, a lifetime isn't time enough. If the proper measure of a good question is its ability to endure over time, the hand-clapping Koan deserves top ranking since it hasn't disappeared into oblivion.

Another possible answer is that there is no answer, which could very well be the correct answer especially (presumptively) since there is no such thing as enlightenment or higher being or being at one with the universe. Master T. S. Eliot concluded: "We shall not cease from exploration. And the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we

started. And know the place for the first time.”

Concerning dedicated students who have sacrificed their selfhood to a ‘presumed’ higher being, to finally recognize that the Koan is an exercise in futility, or someone’s sorry pretext to exercise absolute command and control, must surely constitute an epiphany of sorts. While Zen initiates sign up of their own free will, once enrolled they are anything but free: body and soul belong to the institution, its masters, directors and financial planners.

Another possible approach to the question is through the method outlined in Martin Heidegger’s *What Is Called Thinking?* Since one hand clapping cannot yield an actual sound, silence becomes the necessary condition for thinking to assert itself and ask what in life asks most to be thought about – which of course will result in the immediate dismissal of the clapping Koan and others like it (Where is the pulse located in a petrified tree?).

How long can a thinking person defend the one-hand-clapping proposition against philosophy’s timeless queries: Why is there something instead of nothing? What constitutes a meaningful life? Is there a God?

Perhaps the key to objectively determining the appropriate status of the question, that is situating it taxonomically in relation to all other questions, is to “*reculer pour mieux sauter*” (step back in order to better advance), or to examine and interrogate the Koan from outside the box.

With this long view in mind, what can we say about the question and its world? After all, the question didn’t arise in a vacuum, and has been around for more than 300 years, which speaks more to the kind of species we are than the question proper. From time immemorial man has shown himself to be [incurably vulnerable to almost any idea](#) – no matter how far-fetched (aggrieved party avenges wrong by sticking pin

into doll).

We know that someone, presumably a Zen master, is asking the question. We also assume that since he is asking the question, he knows the answer even though the answer will be unlike his own. Secondly, the question is being directed to someone or a group. Today, 300 years later, with the aid of satellite and fibre optic communication technology, the question is now being asked simultaneously everywhere, addressing anyone who encounters it. At a very basic level, the question implies a relationship between the one posing the question and those endeavouring to answer it.

The question implicates a teacher-student relationship, or bond, or nexus, which wouldn't exist if one or the other didn't participate. In other words, prior to the content of any Koan, 'the other' is implied. Without the other there is no world, which speaks to the rationale or *telos* activating the question whose first purpose is to serve as a bonding mechanism that allows for the exchange of ideas. That there must be 'the other' is the non-negotiable, the *sine qua non* of the human condition, and the Zen Koan is one of the many means employed to satisfy that set-in-stone *desideratum*. And whether he is cognizant of it or not, the student engages the question in order to satisfy the primordial need to be in community with others. The French philosopher Merleau-Ponty, from "Man and Adversity," observes how words "suddenly swell with meaning which overflows into the other person when the act of speaking binds them up into a single whole." And from that same extraordinary 1951 essay, he writes: "Sometimes one starts to dream about what culture, literary life, and teaching could be if all those who participate would give themselves up to the happiness of reflecting together." To finally seize upon that insight and its philosophical implications is to invest a previously dark area with radiant light.

So we again ask: "what is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The short and long is: You and I, or existentially (ontologically) being-in-the-world-with-others.

Satori.

Master Lewis wishes to announce that he is now accepting students for meditation classes. Prior to arrival, all initiates will be required to visit the Lewis Enlightenment Foundation for the orderly disburdening of all material entanglements.

[Table of Contents](#)

Robert Lewis was born in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan. He has been published in *The Spectator*. He is also a guitarist who composes in the Alt-Classical style. You can listen [here](#).

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)