

The Double Bind and Koan Zen

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Double bind epistemology is applied to a beneficent double bind situation—the practice of Koan Zen. The successful resolution of the double bind in Koan Zen occurs within a context created by the interaction of several key factors: a competent teacher, the attitudes of the Zen student toward Zen training, and the support of a strong community of Zen practitioners.

The literature on the double bind has primarily focused upon the pathogenic context of double binds, particularly the context evoking schizophrenia. Little attention, however, has been given to the possible beneficent contexts of the double bind, although the original double bind paper by Bateson, Jackson, Haley, and Weakland (1972) alluded to the therapy of Freida Fromm-Reichmann and to the training of Zen monks by Zen masters as examples of beneficent contexts.

At a conference on the double bind held in 1977, Bateson (1978) presented a paper entitled "The Birth of a Matrix or Double Bind and Epistemology" which stressed the importance of studying the "therapeutic double bind" (p. 58). In this paper, Bateson asked:

Why does the Zen monk sit through hours of agony in the lotus position, his legs getting more and more paralyzed and his head getting more and more addled? And while he does this, why does he contemplate or wrestle with a koan, a traditional paradox, a sort of a conceptual double bind?

In this region, there are answers which are certainly "beyond the double bind" and yet equally certainly the answers will be related to double bind theory. (p. 64)

Following Bateson's lead, we will examine the "region" of Koan Zen practice from the epistemological standpoint of double bind theory. An examination of Koan Zen in terms of double bind theory reveals specific factors that play a role in producing benevolent double bind contexts. We will describe how

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Koan Zen creates a beneficent double bind context through the interaction of several factors: the competence of a Zen teacher, the attitudes of the student toward Zen training, and the support of a strong community of Zen practitioners. An understanding of the beneficent context of the double bind in Koan Zen may also stimulate the search for ways to transform pathogenic double binds into beneficent ones.

Paradox and Double Binds

To understand how the double bind relates to Koan Zen practice, let us review some basic ideas of double bind theory, beginning with the nature of paradox. Paradox, according to Whitehead and Russell (1910), results when a class and its member are equated. If, for example, we consider the class of concepts, we see that this class is itself a concept, i.e., a class which is equated with, or is, a member of itself. The class of frogs, on the other hand, is not itself a frog; this is an example of a class which is not a member of itself. Paradox develops thus: If we form a Class composed of classes which are *not* members of themselves, and then examine whether this Class of classes is or is not a member of itself, we find that: (a) if this Class of classes is a member of itself, then it cannot be a member of itself, because this class is composed of classes which are not members of themselves; and (b) if this Class of classes is not a member of itself, then it must be a member of itself, since this Class is composed of classes which are not members of themselves.

A double bind, or a paradoxical injunction, is a paradox with emotional and behavioral implications for a class of behaviors. Like other paradoxes, double binds arise when a class and its member are equated. Probably the most frequently occurring kind of double bind is composed of injunctions which demand spontaneous actions or a class of behaviors which are non-demand compliant (Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson, 1967). For example, if someone says to you, "be spontaneous," can you behave spontaneously? If you obey this injunction, then you are complying with a demand, and are therefore demand-compliant or non-spontaneous. If you do not follow the injunction, however, you are then free from the demand and are therefore spontaneous. To obey is thus to disobey, and to disobey is to obey. Examined logically, the injunction "be spontaneous," a demand for non-compliant behaviors, implies that compliance with any and all demands is unacceptable. But, this demand, which is about (the class of) all demands, is itself a demand. A class and its member is, thus, equated with itself, and a paradox results. Other examples of such spontaneity demanding double binds are:

- (a) "You ought to love me."
 - (b) "I want you to dominate me." (Request of a wife to her passive husband.)
 - (c) "You should enjoy playing with the children, like other fathers."
 - (d) "Don't be so obedient." (Request of parent to their child whom they consider too dependent on them.)
- (Watzlawick et al., 1967, p. 200)

In each of these examples, spontaneous behavior, which cannot be produced upon demand, is demanded, and is thus precluded from arising spontaneously.

The Double Bind in Koan Zen

With this brief discussion of double binds and paradoxes, we can now proceed to examine double binds in Koan Zen. Koan Zen is a form of Zen practice which requires a deep-rooted personal understanding or resolution of koans—recorded sayings or actions of Zen teachers—to precipitate, clarify, and deepen the enlightenment experience. An example of a koan is the following statement by the 14th century Zen teacher Bassui (Kapleau, 1965):

Were someone to ask, "What does one's Buddha-mind look like?" [i.e., "What is enlightenment?"]. I would answer: "In the trees fish play, in the deep sea birds are flying." (p. 173)

Koans are resolved when students can correctly demonstrate with confidence their understanding of how enlightenment—in Zen, known as the identity of form (phenomenal existence) and emptiness (essential existence)—is expressed in the koan.

Form, the phenomenal perspective of the world, is the everyday world of dualistic conceptual distinctions. Thus, in form, there exists cause and effect, life and death, male and female, self and others, and so on. Form is what Bateson called "news of difference" (1978, p. 50) or mental "transforms" (1972, p. 271). Form, therefore, also includes visual, auditory, olfactory, and tactile sense perceptions, as well as thoughts, feelings, images, dreams, and so forth. Fundamentally, in the world of form, all things are unique and separate.

Emptiness, or the essential world, on the other hand, is the realm free of dualistic distinctions. From this perspective on the world, there is no causation, no life or death, no self and others, and so forth. All things are completely devoid of any conceptual, solid, and abiding existence; so, there is no color, no sound, no smell, no taste, no touch, nor an object of thought (Aitken, 1982). In the world of emptiness, all things are absolutely the same, and from this sameness the entire phenomenal world arises: "From it [emptiness] everything appears" (Suzuki, 1976, p. 109). Of course, from this description it is impossible to imagine what emptiness is, since it is beyond conceptualizing. Emptiness is, rather, a purely experiential understanding of reality.

Enlightenment is the incessant experiential realization of "form as emptiness and emptiness as form" (Aitken, 1982, p. 110). This is a conceptual paradox, since we have just been saying that emptiness is that which has no distinctions, whereas form is that which comprises distinction. The experiential truth according to Zen, however, is that both the empty world and the

phenomenal world are one. Emptiness is simply one perspective of reality, and form, another. Both viewpoints reflect the same reality, seen from different perspectives.

In Koan Zen, it is essential that students become enlightened, i.e., they must first experientially realize the identity of form and emptiness, and then assiduously deepen and clarify this experience through further practice. However, in this process of becoming enlightened, students become entangled within a double bind. To see how this is so, let us first reconceptualize the foregoing in the language of double bind theory.

For conceptual clarity, we can diagram the relationship between form, emptiness, and enlightenment in the following way:

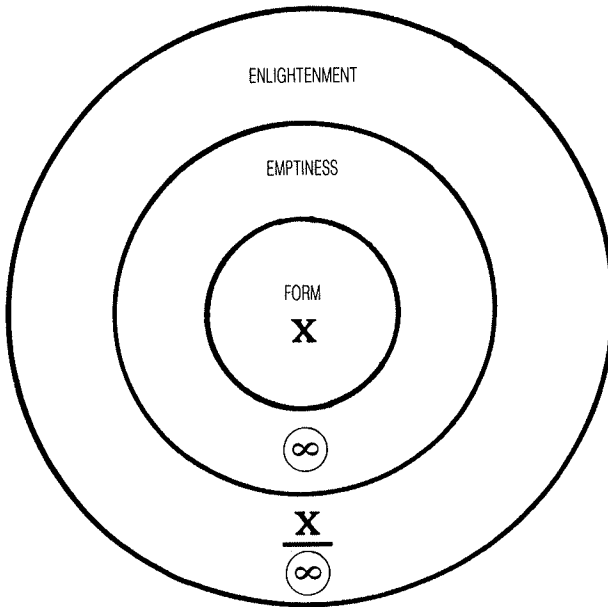


Figure 1: Form, emptiness, and enlightenment.

Form, symbolized as “x,” is the phenomenal world, the world of conceptual dualistic distinctions. Emptiness, symbolized as “(∞),” is the realm of non-dualism or oneness (Yamada, 1979, pp. 50-51). As mentioned earlier, emptiness involves (the class of) all things—the entire phenomenal world arises from emptiness. So, in our diagram, emptiness is drawn as the class which includes form.

Enlightenment is the world in which form and emptiness are equated. Enlightenment is the “experiential” class beyond both emptiness and form.

Within this class, reality is seen as both empty, that is, devoid of conceptual distinctions, yet not empty, that is, as containing distinctions. All things are just as they are—completely separate, yet one with everything. Enlightenment is symbolized as “ $\frac{X}{\infty}$,” a fraction with form as the numerator and emptiness as a common denominator (Yamada, 1979, p. 50). Underlying the world of form, is the world of emptiness, and with the experience of enlightenment, this becomes a clear realization.

To conceptualize the foregoing in double bind terms, recall that a double bind is commonly a paradoxical injunction demanding a class of spontaneous action. Like all other paradoxes, it has the formal structure of paradox, i.e., the equation of a class with a member of the class. Emptiness, the class that contains form, is equated with form, and thus a paradox results: Form is emptiness, and emptiness is form. In terms of formal logic, this is an inadmissible proposition since something cannot simultaneously be and not be: “A” cannot also be “not A.” The double bind in Zen practice consists of the injunction “become enlightened,” or some variation of this injunction, such as: “Realize how form is emptiness, and emptiness is form” or “Listen to the sound of the single hand!” (Miura and Sasaki, 1965, p. 44). The double bind arises and recurs in Zen practice because enlightenment cannot be attained and deepened upon demand. Enlightenment is a spontaneous experience, and the very preoccupation with eliciting enlightenment, and with deepening it, is what obstructs it. A Zen story puts it this way:

Young Zen student Joshu asked Zen teacher Nansen, “What is the Way?” and when Nansen replied, “The Ordinary mind is the way,” Joshu asked, “Should I direct myself toward it or not?” Nansen said, “If you try to turn toward it, you go against it.” (Yamada, 1979, p. 100)

Fortunately, a student practicing Koan Zen usually has a teacher who can guide him or her beyond the double bind and towards enlightenment. The way out is this: Although students’ primary purpose is to become enlightened, they are paradoxically instructed by the teacher to give up striving after enlightenment. Instead, they are instructed to just become completely absorbed in their koan or in whatever they are doing at the moment. They are told to forget themselves and to become one with the koan, or with the task at hand, whether it is fixing a car, raking a yard, talking to a friend, and so on. Then, when the time comes, when Zen students’ minds and practice are focused yet open, enlightenment occurs by a spontaneous accident, completely uncontrived. A story from the Zen literature may help to illustrate this process:

About two hundred years ago, there was a high ranked priest with a purple robe at a big temple called Daitsu-in in Niihashi, Japan. When he was over sixty years in age, he grieved that his spiritual eye was not open, and he decided to study under the famous Japanese Zen Master, Hakuin.

The elderly priest was rather busy taking care of his big temple, but his earnestness moved him to visit Hakuin everyday for several years. Still he could see nothing. One day, he came to Hakuin discouraged. "With such merciful instructions as yours, still I cannot see anything." Hakuin encouraged him saying, "Don't be discouraged so soon. Re-double your efforts and try for three more years. If at the end of the three years, you are still unable to arrive anywhere, cut my head off!" For three years he disciplined himself most assiduously, but could not get any solution. With might and main all exhausted, he appeared before Hakuin and said, "I cannot see anything."

"Can't you! It will be of no use even if you cut my head off. Try once and for all for three more months." So saying, Hakuin, with tears in his eyes, struck down the high ranked priest who was now nearly seventy years old.

The priest could still come to no realization at all in spite of his fervent application. He finally went to Hakuin in bitter tears, "You have given me such kind instructions, but still I cannot see anything due to my heavy karma [causal restrictions]." Hakuin cried back, "Nothing can be done now! No use for you to live any longer!" The priest then said, "Thank you indeed for your kind teaching for these years. With death I will atone for wasting it." Bidding his last farewell in tears, he left the master with a heavy heart.

The old priest passed through the mountain path of Satta. The view from the precipice was beautiful beyond description. He sat down on a roadside stone, and took a last long look at the view, lamenting over his fate. In so doing he did not realize that he was soon in a deep meditation, forgetting all about himself and the darkness approaching.

Hours passed and the first faint rays of dawn broke through the eastern sky. Absent-mindedly he stood up to cast himself down into the precipice. Just when he was about to step off the cliff, the sun shone out of the clouds. He felt as if electricity ran through his body, and the darkness in his mind all disappeared. Needless to say, he dashed like mad back to his teacher. (Shibayama, 1975, pp. 176-178)

There is a famous Zen saying, "When the mind ceases searching, everything manifests itself right there" (Maezumi and Glassman, 1978, p. 53). When the old priest stopped searching, when he gave up his preoccupation with the injunction to "become enlightened," then he became enlightened, spontaneously.

A System for Resolving Double Binds

In Koan Zen, the double bind ("become enlightened") is resolved within a system consisting of interpersonal and attitudinal components. This system consists of: (a) an enlightened Zen teacher; (b) a set of attitudes conducive to successful Zen practice; and (c) a supportive and active community of Zen practitioners. These three components are the minimal conditions necessary for the resolution of the double bind in Koan Zen practice. Except for a few exceptional individuals, students who lack these conditions are highly unlikely to resolve the double bind and to become enlightened. We can begin our examination of this system by considering the role and function of the Zen teacher.

The Zen Teacher

The 13th century Zen teacher Dogen said that a Zen teacher is:

One who regardless of his age or length of his religious career has awakened to the right Dharma [True reality] and has been approved by an authentic master. Without giving priority to scriptures and intellectual understanding, he has both extraordinary ability and aspiration. Without clinging to selfish views and without attaching to emotional perceptions, his practice and understanding are in complete accord. (Abe, 1976, p. 65)

The Zen teacher, in other words, has experienced enlightenment and personally embodies this experience. Based on his or her enlightenment, the teacher is able to guide students to their own experience of enlightenment. The Zen teacher is so important that Dogen said, "If you can't find an authentic master, you had better not practice Zen" (Abe, 1976, p. 65).

The Three Essential Attitudes of Koan Zen Practice

The second major component of the system involves attitudes known as the Three Essentials in Zen literature: Great Faith, Great Doubt, and Great Determination. These attitudes are important in Zen training although they are often downplayed or neglected. Such disregard may be because some Zen teachers feel that, like enlightenment itself, the Three Essentials are spontaneous phenomena that develop naturally in the process of Zen training. Self-consciously seeking to cultivate the Three Essentials is thus futile, for such cultivation may distract a student's attention away from realizing enlightenment itself. However, two highly esteemed modern Zen teachers, Hakuun Yasutani (1965) and Zenkai Shibayama (1975), both asserted that students must internalize the Three Essentials to some degree to progress in their Zen practice. Hakuun Yasutani (1965) went so far as to say that "so long as they [the Three Essentials] are simultaneously present, it is easier to miss the ground with the stamp of the foot than to miss attaining perfect enlightenment" (p. 60), and the Zen teacher Hakuin said, "A man who lacks any of these [Three Essentials] is like a three-legged kettle with one broken leg" (Miura and Sasaki, 1965, pp. 42-43). Thus, the Three Essentials will be considered next as necessary components of Koan Zen practice.

Great Faith. Great Faith is a student's deep belief in the possibility of experiencing enlightenment. At some point in Zen practice, students acquire a confidence in themselves as "agents of realization" (Aitken, 1982, p. 9)—as individuals who bring forth enlightenment in the everyday world. This self-confidence arises from faith in the process of Zen practice. Confidence in Zen practice results from practicing without any concern for gain or progress; improvement will come of itself, without self-consciousness. Faith also requires a deep belief in the teacher's competence in guidance.

Great Doubt. Great Doubt, the second essential of Koan Zen practice, is the intense and deep inquiry that arises when students' perceptions do not match their faith. For example, at times, the teacher may not appear compassionate, wise, or even moral; students may perceive themselves as insecure, incom-

plete, or insincere; or students may wonder why poverty and suffering exist in a world that is supposed to be complete and pure (empty). Such incongruities engage students' attentions and provide the prime motivation for their quest to become enlightened.

The Zen teacher uses students' doubts by focusing such doubts upon a koan. Students are told that only a true enlightenment experience can resolve their doubts, so, to become enlightened, they are instructed to concentrate all their natural energy or anxiety upon a koan, forgetting themselves in the act of becoming completely absorbed in the koan. Such absorption, called "making the whole body a solid lump of doubt" (Yamada, 1979, p. 14), can be very distressing. The teacher cuts away students' dichotomous, conceptual distinctions, and likewise, cuts away their preoccupations with emptiness. Eventually, students come to an impasse where the koan metaphorically becomes a "red hot iron ball, that you try to spit out, but cannot" (Yamada, 1979, p. 14). Students feel trapped, confronted with the following situation:

Standing will not do, nor will sitting,
Feeling will not do, nor will thinking,
Dying will not do, nor will living,
Then, what do I do? (Hisamatsu, 1975, p. 61)

This situation, also described by the Zen teacher Hakuin as "like sitting in an ice cave a million miles thick" (Shibayama, 1974, p. 28), seems similar to the schizophrenic's "untenable situation" described in the original double bind paper (Bateson et al., 1972). Unlike the schizophrenic who becomes psychologically disorganized, however, the Zen student pushes through this condition and becomes enlightened. As Yamada (1979) describes it, the Zen student will

feel as though the whole universe has totally collapsed. Strange as it may seem, this experience has the power to free you from the agonies of the world. It emancipates you from anxiety over all worldly suffering. You feel as though the heavy burdens you have been carrying in mind and body have suddenly fallen away. It is a great surprise. The joy and happiness at that time is beyond all words, and there are no philosophies or theories attached to it. (p. 17)

Great Determination. Great Determination, the third essential attitude of Zen training, is the calm, steadfast resolve to persist until enlightenment is realized. Since Great Doubt can only be dispelled with a true enlightenment experience, the student is told to "exert yourself to the utmost" (Kapleau, 1965, p. 164) and to "persevere until you attain it" (Yamada, 1979, p. 16).

Buddhism, especially Zen, emphasizes the transiency of life in order to deeply provoke the student's determination to become enlightened. In the words of the Diamond Sutra, life is "like a dream, a phantom, a bubble, a shadow, like dew or a flash of lightning" (Aitken, 1982, p. 41). The emphasis

upon the brief duration of life is intended to inspire students to practice diligently before the opportunity to become enlightened is gone.

Community

The final component involved in escaping the double bind in Koan Zen practice is the presence of a strong, active support community of fellow Zen practitioners. In this community, or "sangha," students practice Zen together, and find fellowship in the common work of realizing and deepening their enlightenment experiences in the context of everyday interactions with each other and with the world at large.

Enlightenment is a landmark experience, a kind of rite of passage in Koan Zen, attained through a process of becoming completely absorbed in a koan. This process, often excruciatingly painful, demands a quality of assiduous, single-minded attention that stretches the limits of a student's faith and determination. Recurrent failure is unavoidable in the process because a student's attention is constantly subject to being scattered and drawn away from the koan by random thoughts and self-centered preoccupations. Students are usually members of a community of other Zen students with different levels of understanding who can informally help give meaning and direction to the individual's experience, and act as a support group to help ease the emotional strain that accompanies becoming absorbed in the koan.

Fellow Zen students offer each other not only the companionship and encouragement to productively nurture each other's practice, but also provide role models of how to realize, embody, and integrate the enlightenment experience in everyday life. Role models are very important in koan practice because until the time when Zen students can affirm the value of Zen practice in their own lives, based on their own personal experience, fellow students and teachers, whose practices are stable and competent, provide the tangible proof that the hard work involved in koan practice has not been in vain.

Finally, fellow students and teachers provide the necessary correction that a Zen student needs to remove what some Zen teachers sometimes call the "stink of Zen," that is, the arrogance and hauteur that a Zen student may display after attaining an enlightenment experience. Such "Zen stink" often prevents a complete integration of the enlightenment experience into everyday life because it breeds a kind of insensitivity, a sense of separation from other people, that hinders the application of the practice within social relationships.

Conclusion

Our purpose in applying double bind epistemology to Koan Zen practice was to outline the minimal necessary dynamics involved in this beneficent

double bind context. This context consisted of an enlightened Zen teacher, a supportive community of Zen practitioners, and three essential attitudes: faith, doubt, and determination.

There are two particular issues we wish to point out that especially deserve further study. The first concerns schizophrenia. In the original double bind paper, Bateson (1972) and his colleagues mentioned that:

In the Eastern religion, Zen Buddhism, the goal is to achieve Enlightenment. The Zen Master attempts to bring about enlightenment in the pupil in various ways. One of the things he does is to hold a stick over the pupil's head and say fiercely, "If you say this stick is real, I will strike you with it. If you say this stick is not real, I will strike you with it. If you don't say anything, I will strike you with it." We feel that the schizophrenic finds himself continually in the same situation as the pupil, but he achieves something like disorientation rather than enlightenment. (p. 10)

An intriguing question therefore arises: If the schizophrenic and the Zen student are repeatedly subjected to a double bind situation, why is it that the one becomes schizophrenic, whereas the other becomes enlightened? A clearer understanding of this issue might emerge through studying in detail the familial environment of the schizophrenic in relation to the beneficent context of the Zen student.

A second topic for further study would be to examine whether the factors involved in creating a beneficent double bind context in Zen are idiosyncratic to Zen practice or can be identified in other beneficent double bind contexts. For example, in the psychotherapy of Carl Whitaker (Whitaker and Keith, 1981), and especially in the hypnotherapy of Milton Erickson (Rossi, 1973), therapeutic double binds are used freely to precipitate what Erickson called "a special psychological state in which the patient can reassociate and reorganize his inner psychological complexities . . ." (p. 19). This creative therapeutic experience, precipitated by a double bind communicated by a skillful therapist, may have parallels to the Zen enlightenment experience in terms of context, and perhaps even in terms of substance. Apart from the two specific issues mentioned, we hope that our analysis of the double bind situation in Koan Zen will also generally serve to stimulate others to explore how pathogenic double bind contexts might be transformed into more beneficent ones.

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