# The Koan of Humanity

by Renshin Barbara Verkuilen

Some time ago I read a book by Mark Epstein titled: *The Trauma of Everyday Life*. The book opens with Epstein considering the trauma the Buddha must have suffered over the death of his mother before he was a week old, the impact that had on the Buddha's life, and his quest for enlightenment.

This theme is then extended to the various degrees of trauma we all encounter. Unfortunately, we don't need to imagine everyday trauma in our current perfect storm of a continuing pandemic, disarrayed domestic politics, an economy in crises, worldwide protests for social justice, thousands of refugees seeking asylum, and all this topped off with climate change; recently upgraded in articles I've read to climate catastrophe. Any one of these developments would be difficult enough. Combined, the level of intensity and uncertainty are off the graph.

We might ask, in what ways can the dharma be of help? My answer is to ground myself in the Buddha's basic teachings, starting with the First Noble Truth, Life is Dukkha.

I learned something interesting about Dukkha I hadn't known before reading Epstein's book. He said dukkha, which is most often rendered as suffering, actually means "hard to face."

He then translated the compound meaning of the word. The prefix "du" means badness or difficulty, while the suffix "kha" can refer to the hole at the center of a wheel that holds the axle. So dukkha could be interpreted to mean "a bad fit making for a bumpy ride." I had to laugh reading that, as it pretty much sums up a lot of my experience.

Epstein also speculates that this is the origin of the phrase 'turning the wheel of dharma,' where the Buddha's intent was to offer a teaching for a smoother ride.

Does this, 'bad fit making for a bumpy ride,' assuage any discomforting feelings you might have had when you encountered the First Noble Truth as 'life is suffering?' I do find it disturbs many people when they initially hear that. It can seem all too pervading and pessimistic.

Reading Epstein's definition reminded me of a discussion, about the First Noble Truth, I had with my son, Peter, many years ago. He said he didn't think that 'life is suffering' was the best way to convey what the Buddha may have intended. I asked him what he thought might better serve? I've reflected on his astute answer many times over the years. He said, "life is confusion, and it's the confusion that is the source of suffering."

There is the famous story of Kisagotami – the grief-ridden mother who brings her deceased baby to the Buddha. This is after racing around the town asking everyone she met to please help bring her baby back.

Someone finally takes pity on her and brings her to the Buddha. The Buddha is purported to have told her, "I have medicine for this. But first, bring me some mustard seeds from a house where no one has died."

She runs off knocking door to door to do that. Considering her state of mind, I wouldn't venture to guess how long it might have taken, but eventually she understood there is no household that has not experienced death. She lets go of the unreasonable demand to bring her baby back to life, and returned to the Buddha's assembly.

I'm relieved the Buddha didn't tell her, "That's your karma. You must have done something wrong in a previous life." Wow, how brutal would that have been? The Buddha could have told Kisagotami, "It's tragic how young your child was, and I'm sorry for your loss, but surely you understand all beings die." But the Buddha was wiser and kinder than that. He recognized she was mad with grief, so he set up the circumstance whereby she would realize the truth for herself.

The Buddha said on many occasions that when people see how the world is that it 'gladdens the heart.' I find that interesting, 'it gladdens the heart.' And this is juxtaposed with, 'life is dukkha.'

Kisagotami's suffering was lightened by the acceptance of the death of her child. She received help in accepting the pain of that loss by encountering the universal truth of death. That, I believe, is what allowed her the space to accept the reality of her circumstance, begin to process her grief, and to face what is hard to face.

What is it that the Buddha is speaking of that 'gladdens the heart?' Is it not that we've somehow cleared a path through the 'confusion,' that we've come into proximity with the truth of our situation? Wasn't Kisagotami extremely confused by the death of her child? She lost all sense of reality when she asked people to help bring her baby back to life.

The Buddha's message is not pessimistic. It is quintessentially realistic. It assists us in our encounter with reality. Offering us the truth about the nature of reality is the Buddha's medicine. The Buddha is very clear about it. He states it simply and frequently. But that doesn't necessarily make it easy to grasp.

The Buddha's teaching directly addresses the heart of confusion. But the confusion of which he speaks is not our ordinary definition of confusion.

Problems like, is this a good time to look for another job? Or, my child seems so unhappy and anxious. How can I help him or her? Should I sell my house? How can I save enough money to retire? These, and other matters, are serious issues we must continually deal with in our lives. The indecision about how to respond to a particular situation requires consideration and information. Eventually we act, however uncertain we may be that it is the right course to pursue.

The confusion the Buddha addresses goes much deeper than the examples just stated from our everyday life. He is addressing the very nature of how we perceive our experience. I call this confusion the Fundamental Misperception. It is the inherent tendency of seeing ourselves as permanent, independent entities separate from the world. This sense of separateness is what I call the 'koan of humanity.'

A koan is a problem that seems unanswerable yet demands resolution. Jiyu Kennett Roshi had the best description of a koan I've come across. She said, "a koan is like having a hot iron ball in your mouth, that you can neither swallow nor spit out."

If the source of the Buddha's definition of confusion goes that deep, and is that problematic, where do we get the information to counter it, if the way we perceive the world in the first place is the problem? That is exactly what the dharma offers.

The Buddha said, I teach only one thing. I teach dukkha and the cessation of dukkha. I teach the nature of suffering and the cessation of suffering. For our discussion, we might say, I teach the source of confusion and a path for clarity beyond it.

What makes the Buddha's teaching unique from other religions is the teaching of Shunyata [Sanskrit] usually translated as Emptiness.

'Emptiness' like 'suffering' can have a negative connotation. Sometimes it is translated more positively as openness, transparency, or boundlessness. But honestly, I don't find any of those terms more helpful. For myself, I have come to think of it as the principle of unlimited potentiality.

Master Hsing Yun states, "Emptiness is one of the deepest words in Buddhism. It comes as close to describing reality as any word can. … Understanding emptiness allows us to see beyond relativity, beyond duality, and beyond all phenomenal distinctions. Emptiness teaches us to see through ourselves." *Lotus in the Stream* Pg. 94

"The universe can only exist because all phenomena are empty. If phenomena were not empty, nothing could change or come into being. Being and emptiness are two sides of the same thing." *Lotus in the Stream* Pg. 100

Trying to understand emptiness is like trying to swallow an ocean in a single gulp. But the Buddha offers another way to approach it through careful observation of Dependent Origination.

Dependent Origination means that no being, thing, or phenomenon arises out of nothing. No being, thing, or phenomenon exists alone, by and of itself. Phenomena do not arise independently. They arise dependent on causes and conditions.

In Buddhism, in order for a thing to be considered as having a self, it must be permanent and independent. As nothing is, the Buddha taught the principle of "anatta" no-self. This teaching of no-self can add another whole layer of confusion. It can be seen as implying that nothing is real or exists. That is not what the dharma teaches.

It may help if we add another word to the principle of anatta, and that is no self-nature. Forms arise through causes and conditions [dependent origination], but they are empty of

self-nature, by the Buddhist definition of needing to be permanent and independent, because they arise contingently.

This is what is meant by 'selflessness' in the dharma.

The Dharma does not deny the sense of self we experience, just the existence of a self as we usually conceive of it, as a permanent, separate, and independent entity. How's that for a koan?

What I am calling confusion is what is usually referred to in Buddhism as ignorance, yet another word that can be laden with misunderstanding. I think we generally take it to mean unsophisticated or uneducated, and at worst, stupid. A better definition of ignorance for our discussion would simply be 'unaware of.'

Chandrakirti [600-650 CE] the 7th Century Indian Buddhist scholar defined ignorance as "a wrong conception diametrically opposed to the understanding of a person and other phenomena as selfless." *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*

The wrong conception of which he speaks is the result of the Fundamental Misperception that creates our sense of separateness.

It is important to say here that in Buddhism this is not a sin. We are not 'bad' because of it. There is no shame or blame about this 'wrong conception' or confusion. By the nature of the beings we are, we can't help but make this error. Although, if we look at the problems of our world, we will see the results of this 'wrong conception.'

Vasubanzu, [4th-5th Century CE] the 21st Indian ancestor in our lineage states, "confusion is that which conceals and prevents us from seeing the fundamental nature of phenomena [think no self-nature] and the connection between actions and their effects [think causes and conditions]." … "Ignorance can only be eliminated by understanding the fundamental nature of reality." *Atisha's Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* Pg. 45

The Universal koan of the Fundamental Misperception plays out idiosyncratically in each of us. The particular way it arises stems from our personal genetic and psychic inheritance, and all the experiences of our life.

From the personal perspective it can manifest as loneliness, unworthiness, insecurity, anxiety, the drive to be successful, depression, addiction, and numerous other formulations and any combination of them. It's a rollicking kaleidoscope of afflictive emotions that keep us enmeshed in the pain of separation.

We may try hard to find meaning in the values of our culture that are supposed to make us happy. When this doesn't bring the hoped-for results, we tend to believe that, somehow, we are not enough, or that there must be something wrong with us.

Even when we do succeed, it doesn't appease for long. The hunger that there must be something more still arises. We may experience a pernicious sense of lack, no matter how much we accomplish, that only feeds the conditioned states of loneliness, insecurity, anxiety, etc.

This very dynamic points to the depth of the confusion we need to excavate. What if, because of the Fundamental Misperception, we misperceive the problem. And it is not that we need to have something more, do something more, or be something more, but that we need to *understand* something more.

That pernicious sense of lack is calling us to something so much grander than the project of self-perfection.

Please, note: I'm not saying there aren't many things that we can, and should do, to make changes in our selves, like correcting unhelpful attitudes and working with unhealthy habits. All I'm saying, here, is that perfecting the "self" as a project is not liberation.

The Dharma speaks of two truths, usually referred to as the Apparent and the Real or the Relative and the Absolute. As you know in our studies, we relate to them better as the Personal and Universal aspects of reality.

This is just a way of talking about something that really can't be divided, but thinking of it in these terms assists us in approaching a vaster view than the personal perspective alone can offer. There are not two realities, only a difference in how we perceive our experience.

Personal & Universal truths are two ways of knowing. Zen training is how we establish and refine a dialogue between them. Personal truth is cradled within the Universal. Our

Personal view is not lost in its relationship to Universal truth. Instead, a deeper understanding of reality refines the personal perspective in a harmonious interplay of the dual aspects of reality that make up our experience.

Personal truth is our ordinary experience, our relationship to conventional reality. It is the knowing that allows us to conduct our lives, how we know to meet on this Saturday morning. It is the common way of experiencing our circumstance, and it wields great sway as to how we perceive reality.

Universal truth relates to all the forces that impact all beings and phenomena equally, whether we are aware of them or not. Master Hsing Yun calls universal truths Dharma seals. Dharma seals are defined by four characteristics. They must be universal, necessary or inevitable, true in the past, and true in the future.

There are three dharma seals that are defined in a couple of ways in different texts. You may read of them as impermanence, no-self, and dukkha. Sometimes it is impermanence, no-self, and nirvana. Understanding what is meant by nirvana has always been problematic for me. I don't know how to relate to "the complete extinction of desire."

In my studies, I have come to think of the dharma seals as the three I's – Impermanence, Interdependence [which is just another way of saying no self-nature], and Intimacy.

Understanding the principles of Impermanence and Interdependence is gaining knowledge from the buddha's teaching. It is something we can work with, and it can initiate a shift in perspective. What I am calling Intimacy refers to an experiential recognition of thusness, a moment when we are released from the illusion of our separateness.

Personal truth is not wrong or bad. We need it to live our lives. The problem stems from the fact that it is just a limited and incomplete view. What we are being driven to understand is the Universal perspective, one that imbues a sense of connectedness and wholeness.

When we practice the dharma, we begin to find another way of seeing and being in the world. The importance of understanding, nurturing, and protecting the aspiration to awaken is a key aspect of Zen training.

Aspiration for enlightenment, in Japanese, is *hosshin*, "Way-seeking mind." The Way-seeking mind is what leads us beyond confusion. The arising of the Way-seeking mind is already an awakening. We are all here because that has already happened for us.

Enlightenment does not occur in a single instant. The Buddha, said to possess inborn knowledge, studied rigorously for six years, and almost died from his efforts. We all possess inborn knowledge. I am defining inborn knowledge as the inherent potential for awakening. If the potential for awakening did not exist, nothing we did could lead to liberation. However, inherent potential for awakening is not the same as realization of it.

This brings us to an essential question as Zen practitioners. How should we practice?

The first thing we need to do, and continue to do throughout our training, is value our own spiritual dilemmas, the deep questions of our life that must be answered through our own effort and direct experience. Metaphorically speaking, we need to wander door to door until we get it.

What does it mean to wander door to door until we understand?

Each moment of experience is a door that invites us to awaken by reflecting on what our relationship is to the world we inhabit. Are we apart from or a part of?
And just as the Buddha gave Kisogatami the right circumstance for her realization, each moment offers us the same chance.

The Buddha's spiritual dilemma was why is there suffering in the world? Zen Master Dogen's question was, if we are already Buddha, why do we need to practice?

Anything can serve as a question. Any issue arising in our lives that consistently limits the way we might want to respond to life can serve. I call these conditioned states, the Natural Koan. This is what I believe Master Dogen called the 'koan realized in life.'

When Master Dogen returned to Japan from China, he said he carried back 3 things with him. Myozen's ashes; Myozen was his Japanese teacher who accompanied him to China, and died there. He had a portrait of Ru Jing, the Chinese Master who authenticated his awakening. And the last thing he said he carried was, "the answer to the question of a

lifetime." That last statement never fails to move me, "the answer to the question of a lifetime."

What is the question of your lifetime? Can you articulate your Natural Koan?

What does it really mean to be a human being? Why am I so lonely, anxious, angry? Fill in the blank. What I am saying is that we must value our life's dilemmas because it is the resolution of them that will be our awakenings.
How else can awakening occur but through the clarification of our own confusion?

What happens to the existential pain of loneliness, anxiety, or whatever is our issue, when we hold it in light of the Fundamental Misperception? When we are released from the sense of separation, our perception of a situation is altered, a shift in perspective that can be liberating. Sometimes our whole life world-view is changed, that results in a transformative shift of being.

I can offer an example for each. I was told these stores by the practitioners who experienced them.

A woman I know was running late for an important first meeting. She had less time to get there than she intended to allow. On top of that, she got stuck in a big traffic jam. This made her very anxious and upset, particularly with herself for being disorganized and running late in the first place. Of all the luck, why did she have to get caught up in traffic that morning?

Suddenly, she had the thought, *Wait a minute, I'm not stuck in a traffic jam. I am the traffic jam.* She laughed. After thinking that she relaxed and actually made it to the appointment in better time than she might have expected.

This may seem like an insignificant event. But really, it is not. Because in the moment of thinking, *I'm not stuck in a traffic jam, I am the traffic jam,* she was no longer separate from her experience. And the result for her was the ability to relax and be present in the situation, as it was, without succumbing to the conditioned states of anxiety and self-recrimination. This is an example of a shift in perspective, and it was liberating for her in that circumstance.

The second story is more than situational. It involved the resolution of the person's major life koan. He often spoke of a pervasive sense of alienation, a deeply felt need to find a place or situation where he could feel a sense of belonging. He dealt with this problem for most of his conscious life. It was exhausting how much energy it robbed him of. It cast a most painful shadow over much of his experiences.

One day, after a Tai Chi lesson, he felt something he couldn't ever remember experiencing before. He described it as a deep sense of wellbeing and completeness or wholeness. This was accompanied by the thought; *I don't have to find a place in the world where I can belong. I have to make a place in myself for the world.*

We may not understand this any more than any other Zen koan story we might read or hear about. And that's ok. It's not our koan. But the result of this experience was significant for him. He reports that he's no longer disturbed by that deep sense of alienation. This happened several years ago and the relief has endured. This was the answer to his Natural Koan, the question of a lifetime. This was a transformational change of being.

I chose to tell these stories this morning because I think we've all had these kinds of events in our life. But I wonder, do we recognize them for the awakenings they are? Do we take the time to reflect, and consciously integrate the changes in freedom they can initiate?

*We must learn to recognize and trust the intuitional insights that change us. Intuitive perception is how Universal truths are revealed in a direct and personal way.*

And although we cannot make them happen … there are things we might do to encourage their arising. We can train ourselves to begin seeing the world as a Buddha by immersing ourselves in the Buddha's principles of reality; Impermanence, Interdependence, and when we are lucky enough to experience a stolen moment of suchness, deep Intimacy.

Earlier I mentioned that I never connected with the term Nirvana when it is defined as 'extinction of all desire.' But recently I read a definition in an old copy of an Eastern Buddhist periodical that made more sense to me.

It said, "Attaining nirvana in Eastern Buddhism meant, 'mastering the mind or abiding in truth.'" That definition seems to fit more for our discussion, because it brings us back to the theme of this talk.

Mastering the mind can be interpreted to mean mastering our confusion. If we master our confusion, we clarify the truth of the situation. Accomplishing that, we will 'abide' in a different reality.

Master Hsing Yun states, "Ch'an masters emphasize again and again that enlightenment occurs in a flash of thought. The instant we see delusion for what it is, it ceases to be delusion." [*Lotus n the Stream* Pg. 110]

He also emphatically reminds us, "One does not awaken in any other 'place' but in mind. And one does not free oneself in any other way than 'through' mind.'" [*Lotus in the Stream* Pg. 111]