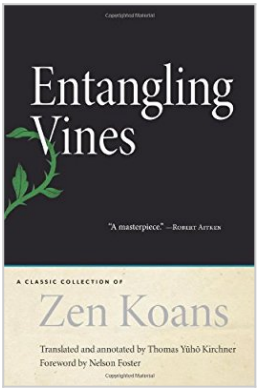

Entangling Vines: A Classic Collection of Zen Koans

From Wisdom Publications

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Entangling Vines, a translation of the *Shumon kattoshu*, is one of the few major koan texts to have been compiled in Japan rather than China. Indeed, Kajitani Sonin (1914 - 95), former chief abbot of Shokoku-ji and author of an annotated, modern-Japanese translation of the *Kattoshu*, commented that "herein are compiled the basic Dharma materials of the koan system." Most of the central koans of the contemporary Rinzai koan curriculum are contained in this work.

A distinctive feature of *Entangling Vines* is that, unlike *The Gateless Gate* and *Blue Cliff Record*, it presents the koans "bare," with no introductions, commentaries, or verses. Its straightforward structure lends the koans added force and immediacy, emphasizing the Great Matter, the essential point to be interrogated, and providing ample material for the rigors of examining and refining Zen experience.

Containing 272 cases and extensive note material, the collection is indispensable for serious koan training and will also be of interest for anyone drawn to Zen literature. The present translation had its origins in the discussions between three forward-looking modern Japanese Zen masters and Thomas Kirchner, an experienced Zen monk from America. And Kirchner's careful annotation of each koan makes this a brilliant introduction to Buddhist philosophy.

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Editorial Review

Review
"A masterpiece. It will be our inspiration for 10,000 years." (Robert Aitken, author of Taking the Path of Zen and The Gateless Barrier)

"A wonderful book, a book to take if you are planning to be shipwrecked on a desert island; it is the book I open every day, and teach from every day. It is surprising, lucid, scholarly, alive, unassuming, and it goes deep." (John Tarrant, author of Bring Me the Rhinoceros and Other Koans That Will Save Your Life)

"This book summon us into a dynamic immediacy with life itself." (Wendy Egyoku Nakao, Abbot of the Zen Center of Los Angeles)

"An excellent translation of an important collection." (*Japanese Journal of Religious Studies*)

"Anyone who plays in the fields of koan introspection will welcome this book." (Melissa Myozen Blacker, coeditor of The Book of Mu)

"Working with these koans is a challenging and joyous enterprise." (Ross Bolleter, author of Dongshan's Five Ranks)

About the Author
Thomas Yuho Kirchner was born in Baltimore, Maryland, in 1949. He went to Japan in 1969 to attend Waseda University in Tokyo for a year, after which he remained in Japan to study Buddhism. He spent three years training under Yamada Mumon as a lay monk at Shofuku-ji before receiving ordination in 1974. Following ordination he practiced under Minato Sodo Roshi at Kencho-ji in Kamakura and Kennin-ji in Kyoto. Following graduate studies in Buddhism at Otani University he worked at the Nanzan Institute for Religion and Culture in Nagoya and subsequently at the Hanazono University International Research Institute for Zen Buddhism. He presently lives at Tenryu-ji in Arashiyama, Kyoto. Among his publications are the *Record of Linji*, *Dialogues in a Dream*, and *Entangling Vines*.

Nelson Foster is a Dharma heir of Diamond Sangha founder Robert Aitken and succeeded him at its Honolulu temple. He now teaches mainly at Ring of Bone Zendo in the California foothills, making periodic visits to the East Rock Sangha in New England.

From the foreword by Nelson Foster

This book offers “entangling vines,” but who would want them and what for? The phrase suggests tough, jungly vegetation that will trip you up, snag you in its rope-like sinews, and hold you captive. As a title, it seems calculated to put off all but the boldest or most foolhardy readers, signaling that exploration of these pages will be a struggle—arduous, exhausting, possibly futile altogether. It invites risk-takers, curiosity seekers, and especially, perhaps, people driven to get to the bottom of life’s biggest questions. Shall we count you in?

As the subtitle makes clear, the vines threatening to tie us up here are koans, the famously enigmatic little stories of Zen tradition. The liveliness and strangeness of koans—the humor and inscrutability of their repartee, their unorthodox treatment of Buddhist doctrine, the indifference they exhibit to logic or social convention, their frequent eruption into hitting and hollering, their broad expressive range, from crudeness to banality to poetry of great subtlety and beauty—have made them intriguing to people of diverse cultures ever since they emerged as a feature of Zen's Chinese precursor, Chan, some nine centuries ago.

Understanding has lagged far behind interest, unfortunately. In attempting to characterize koans, popular writers commonly resort to the words puzzles and riddles, which are so inaccurate as to be positively misleading. Academic specialists fare little better with such arid definitions as "pedagogical tools for religious training." Zen masters, who seem supremely qualified to explain the nature and working of koans, typically deflect requests for such information, declaring words inadequate to do justice to the phenomenon. Try a koan and see for yourself, they say.

Which brings us back to the entanglement under consideration—yours. Entanglement in koans takes two basic forms, one of them praised in Chan and Zen tradition, the other deplored, even ridiculed. The latter is a fascination with koans that remains merely literary or intellectual. The tradition doesn't reject such pursuits wholesale; indeed, it possesses an extraordinarily rich literature, and many of its great figures have demonstrated nimbleness and delight in the life of the mind. Zen has always insisted, however, that other interests be subordinated to practice and awakening, and it deploys a set of vivid metaphors to emphasize the absurdity and fruitlessness of a Zen student entering the thickets of analysis and interpretation before experiencing insight: heading east when you want to go west, scratching your shoe when your foot itches, beating the cart instead of the horse.

The approved form of entanglement with koans involves thorough, sustained absorption in one koan at a time, in the hope that it will eventually resolve in a deeply liberating realization. Before the process runs its course, however, engaging a koan in this fashion often feels tedious or even torturous—every bit as constricting and exasperating as the title metaphor implies—and the bonds grow still tighter if one thrashes around mentally in the effort to get loose. So whoever originally applied the phrase "entangling vines" to koans undoubtedly deserves a prize for Truth in Advertising (Medieval Chinese Division). It wasn't a private effort, though; institutionally, for centuries Chan and Zen have stressed the hardship of working with koans, promoting images of the process even more painful to contemplate than getting snarled in a web of creepers. The most cringe-inducing of these liken koan study to nightmares at the dining table—gnawing on an iron bun, eating the putrid mash left after the fermentation of alcohol, lapping up the shit and piss of bygone sages, swallowing a red-hot iron ball that can't be disgorged.

Despite such repulsive warnings, generations of Zen practitioners—male and female, lay and monastic, dauntless or terrified—have undertaken koan work and survived to verify its joys and lasting benefits as well as its intermittent miseries. Most descriptions of the process attribute the difficulty of koans to their deliberate thwarting of rationality. By this account, koans function as efficient traps for logical thought because the masters of old designed them expressly for that purpose. While it's true that logic rarely produces significant insight into a koan, the notion that koans are explicitly intended to impede logic doesn't hold up.

Centuries ago, the annals of Chan tell us, a monk questioned his distinguished master about the sayings of his predecessors, asking, "Did the buddhas and ancestral teachers have the intention of tricking people or not?" The master's reply holds for Buddhist texts of all kinds but fits koans particularly well:

Tell me, do rivers and lakes have any intention of obstructing people? Although rivers and lakes have no

intention of obstructing people, still people can't cross them, so they become barriers from a human standpoint. Although ancestral teachers and buddhas had no intention of tricking people, right now people can't go beyond them, so ancestral teachers and buddhas trick people after all.

Rather than presuming that koans were created to confound us, we would do well to take them at face value, as good-faith attempts to present the Dharma, the wisdom of the Buddha, in a straightforward, perhaps striking, manner. Many events in everyday life surprise and confuse us, after all, though no one intends them to; we simply don't understand them or even know how to understand them. From this perspective, it seems utterly unremarkable that a koan—a few words cherished for illuminating reality in a profound way—would go over our heads on first encounter (and maybe for quite a while afterward). Koans often perplex the monastics and lay people who appear in them, and evidence abounds that they've perplexed innumerable monks, nuns, and lay people who've pondered them as well. You're baffled by them? Big deal. Join the crowd.

Beyond the qualities that have made koans a challenge in any age lie obstacles of a more mundane sort. Readers of this book can't help being hampered by the fact that an enormous gulf of time, language, history, and worldview separates us from the original parties to its content—both the people who speak and act in its koans and those who later transcribed, edited, compiled, and published them. While the latter surely had posterity in mind as they went about their tasks, they had to speak to their culture in its own terms. Even if they could have imagined readers like you and me, they couldn't possibly have tailored their texts to suit modern minds.

Judging it infeasible to bridge this culture gap, some Asian teachers whose own training centered on traditional koans have chosen to set them aside when instructing Westerners, instead improvising koans free of exotic references. Other masters, determined to transmit the legacy of koan study intact, have strived to help non-Asian practitioners cross the cultural gulf. This effort has sometimes led them to minimize cultural differences and assert dubiously universal human qualities and "archetypes," and it has inevitably necessitated more or less detailed exposition of distinctively Asian elements that crop up in the koan stories.

Entangling Vines presents a lesser problem in this regard than earlier and better-known koan casebooks such as the *Gateless Barrier* and *Blue Cliff Record*, for it dispenses with all the embellishments that complicate and enrich those collections. Even so, most readers would be lost without the exemplary assistance that Thomas Kirchner provides in this translation, elucidating as he does every contextual feature that would obscure the basic sense of its koans. Luckily for us, he works from both sides of the cultural divide, coupling scholarly expertise and long years as a Zen priest in Japan with a keen awareness of Westerners' needs deriving from his American upbringing. Besides rendering the text into English with great care, he has supplied the Chinese graphs for convenient comparison, generously annotated terms and allusions that would escape most of us otherwise, and furnished biographical information on every identifiable figure who appears herein.

Thus equipped, in most instances even a newcomer to Zen can readily discern the literal meaning of these koans and get a sense of their players, but engagement with a koan only starts there. What ensues will depend on a number of factors: your background in Zen practice and in koan training particularly, the character of the specific koan under consideration, your teacher's guidance, and so on. In general, however, the process involves finding one's way into the koan, imaginatively inhabiting the situation that it describes and exploring the metaphors and images it uses. Out of this reconnoitering comes an awareness of which point or points in the koan require clarification. Then the hard work begins. To promote full absorption in the koan and penetration of each point, many masters advocate the use of a huatou, a word or brief phrase that stands in for the full koan and that, with enough determination and practice, you can learn to carry in the

midst of daily life and even in sleep, as well as during periods of formal, seated practice (zazen).

From this, it should be apparent that we're talking about complete immersion in the koan, an absorption that crosses supposed boundaries between the physical, emotional, psychological, and mental aspects of our lives. Although reason doesn't play a prominent role in this process, it can't be excluded; as engagement with the koan deepens, a type of inquiry develops that doesn't privilege one faculty over another. It often comes as a surprise to Westerners that inquiry of this nature is bodily as much as anything else and that, accordingly, expressions such as "working on a koan" don't boil down to euphemisms for thinking hard. Rather, they signify total commitment to the koan without trying to wring meaning from it. Its resolution can't be forced. One can only trust the process and carry on, however long it may take. Such is the degree of entanglement that koan study calls for.

At no small risk of oversimplification, perhaps we can say that koan work amounts, in the long run, to passing through a koan as a set of words and reanimating the realization from which those words sprang. The experience of resolving a koan has the quality of seeing with your own eyes what its originator must have seen in order to formulate them that way. One has the feeling not of matching wits with some faraway sage but of an intimate, immediate meeting of minds, a variation on the "mind-to-mind transmission" that Chan and Zen have noisily proclaimed and celebrated. A well-known Chinese master of the thirteenth century went so far as to declare that a breakthrough on his preferred koan would enable you to meet its author personally and "walk hand in hand with the generations of ancestral masters, truly knitting your eyebrows with theirs, seeing with the same eyes and hearing with the same ears."

How this could occur no one can tell. I suppose neuroscientists may hope to document it with their imaging devices, but such an event is rare enough even in serene temple circumstances that the chances of its taking place under laboratory conditions become hopelessly small. To say, as I just did, that resolving a koan entails "reanimating" a prior realization actually attributes too much agency to the practitioner and too little to the koan. I might just as well say that the ancient realization encapsulated in the koan enlivens us practitioners. A phrase favored by the illustrious master Hakuin Ekaku conveys the mutuality of the process: "Mind illuminates old teachings; old teachings illuminate mind."

The preceding overview of koan work derives all but entirely from the lineage of Chan and Zen known in Japan as the Rinzai sect. The other major strain of Japanese Zen, the So¯to¯ sect, for centuries institutionally disavowed and criticized koan practice, but that's started to change in recent years. Research demonstrating a long and proud heritage of koan work in their own school has prompted some So¯to¯ leaders in the United States and elsewhere to begin experimenting with ways to revive it. Entangling Vines may prove helpful in this endeavor, for it contains follow-up koans, often referred to as "checking questions," omitted by earlier koan collections. Masters use these secondary koans to test students' realization and prod them to further insights.

The So¯to¯ sect historically has denigrated koan practice chiefly on the grounds that it can become delusory in its own right, hooking people on a quest for buddha nature—a quest to grasp the ungraspable and gain what nobody lacks. This criticism, trenchant as it is, doesn't diminish in any regard the benefit countless Chan and Zen practitioners past and present have received from koan work, but it does point up a third form of entanglement with koans perhaps more dangerous than the pair described above. Frequently koans cling for a while after resolving, as practitioners' understandable elation and feeling of accomplishment morph into smugness and obsession with "passing koans." If this tendency isn't soon scotched, it can easily toughen into private arrogance and condescension and, even more lamentably, sometimes results in exagger- ated public attention to kensho¯ (realization experiences) and koan study per se. Old Chan worthies called this getting bound with a golden chain, since attachment to liberation has brought merely a glorified sort of

enslavement.

Consider yourself warned. *Entangling Vines* is a magnificent book, subject to serious and consequential misuse. If you feel drawn to investigation of koans, get yourself a reliable guide—a Zen master of good reputation who's done protracted, close training in a lineage with a history of koan work—and throw yourself into it headlong. The old vines still hold.

Users Review

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