

One Hand Clapping

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Abstract

Zen Buddhism is famous for its koans. These are paradoxical anecdotes or riddles that demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning, and provoke deep enlightenment regarding our core being. We examine a famous koan, “the sound of one hand clapping,” and find a new level of understanding appropriate for our modern age.

Among the various forms of Hinduism and Buddhism, Zen Buddhism stands apart. Instead of just meditating and chanting venerated texts, Zen masters direct their students to individually find deep truth in paradoxes, which we call koans. These [koans](#) have been designed to demonstrate the inadequacy of logical reasoning, and to provoke self-enlightenment.

The most famous (or infamous) koan deals with the seemingly absurd idea of one hand clapping. There is clear method to the Zen master’s seeming madness. When a student sits on the floor meditating on the idea of just one hand clapping, there is another process going on in his or her head. This process facilitates the beginner’s return to original consciousness of his or her natural oneness with the world, something we easily lose as we make our way within complex society.

It is normal for everyday humans to look first for the logical solution to a physical or intellectual challenge. Furthermore, clapping itself is a highly social gesture. What then does the brain do with the idea of just one hand clapping, which is clearly not a very social gesture? The beginner's brain first defaults to experience or logic, which seemingly has worked before, but not here. This one-hand-clapping dilemma is a mental version of being caught between a rock and a hard place.

Consider further what goes on in the mind of a person with one arm missing, either from birth or amputation. That person never has had, or will no longer have, the opportunity to listen to both of his or her hands clapping. Does having a phantom second hand make a difference?

Our ears are situated on both sides of our head, next to our brain. Our eyes are just in front of the brain, and are part of our brain itself. Clapping is both visual and aural, as well as social. When clapping we are responding to, and giving out, social clues to those within hearing or seeing range. Again, does human head architecture make the difference with those having only one hand to clap? Is there a difference between one functional ear or two?

It should be noted that there are several styles of clapping or slapping hands, and at least two of these require only one hand, and there can be a loud sound with one slapping hand: The first activity could be slapping somebody else on the back, to show approval or support. The second activity may be clapping one's hand to one's head as a sign of dismay or regret. In both of these cases having two hands or one hand is not relevant to the no-sound koan.

Another aural variant is the rare example of [four bent fingers clapping their palm](#). This non-social gesture will generate a modest sound, which merely tests the rule. We are instead looking for the literal sound of one hand clapping.

THE HAND KOAN RESOLVED

Even though the original Zen awareness lesson retains its full value within any time or culture, there is another resolution that can enhance, but not replace, the original:

The world we live in is generally filled with extraneous noises that we consciously block out. Our bedrooms, for example, are notorious places for intentional noise from fans, dehumidifiers, television, and so forth. Yet we sleep. Our brains try to shut off our "internal ears," so we can get enough quality sleep. Still, the best quality sleep comes from a very quiet bedroom.

During the day our activities are somewhat guided by what and when we hear, which is proper for our eyes-open and ears-on hours. Even though the eyes provide most of our critical input, the ears are important data collectors too. Other senses, such as smell and touch, complete our sensory symphony. The brain's neural networks combine and contrast real-time daily data with memories to create a new pattern of understanding. The main exception is an emergency sound, which defaults to primitive survival neurons. Note that we monitor our internal sounds (such as digestive noises) and their feelings just like we monitor our external environments.

Now we approach the literal sound of one hand clapping:

People normally clap with both of their palms, and the cupping effect thereby generates a satisfying sound for those nearby to hear. Another version of normal clapping is the less common practice of clapping only with fingers on both hands, leaving the palms uninvolved in the sound effects. We see this rare variety when people really don't approve. It's sometimes seen among royals applauding each other, or something else formal.

Visualize yourself using just one hand as follows: Lift your hand (either left or right) in its rigid and flat extended position up to just outside its adjacent ear. All fingers will be straight and

touching each other. Then go through an as-if fast clapping motion multiple times without actually hitting your head or ear. There WILL be a sound for your aural canal to hear, if you are in a quiet space.

The sound you will hear is a whooshing sound associated with flowing air around your hand, and with waves of air being pushed toward your eardrum. It will sound percussive and whooshing, but not very loud. The volume of loudness is irrelevant as to whether you hear the sound of this hand clapping, only that there is an identifiable sound which can be accessed by our normal senses, and explained by a logical everyday understanding of air flows and pressure waves.

WHAT IS THE POINT TO ALL THIS?

I have great respect for the heroic educational efforts of Zen masters and other enlightened Buddhist teachers. They are all trying to shake us loose from dualistic and dissonant thinking created by living in alienating social environments. The purpose of this and other koans is to help elevate and unify our private consciousness toward our original and natural nature, which is unitary within Nature itself. Nature in totality, sometimes called [myoho](#), is seen as a deep mystery beyond logic, and thus it needs fresh ways of envisioning for us to embrace its unity.

We have revealed some of the locally accessible elements within the great mystical. Sages know there is universal logic behind and within all mysticism. It's just that we have difficulty discovering the simple within the seemingly very complex. What we can learn from the actual sound of one hand clapping next to our ear is an authentic example of what we all need to cultivate at the rapidly accelerating twilight of our hubristic species.

It is correct to say that the summation of all times is timeless. It is equally correct to note that even the timeless/eternal is full of relative times within itself. On a foundational physics level, it is noteworthy that the smallest yin/yang electromagnetic spheres

combine in many ways to create all that exists within our mystical multiverse. Our bodies are symphonic systems of systems, ranging from viruses to organ systems, and thus our “insides” mirror the symphonic architecture of totality.

Merely noting the “unknowableness” of all currently mystical aspects of the universe does not separate these aspects from the measured physical aspects of the visible universe. The essential problem is within our limited perceptions, not with the elemental architecture of all negentropic things.

Each era of human intellectual and industrial progress yields new powers to perceive, and new opportunities for experimental physics. Nevertheless, the full mystical is always there just beyond our powers to detect and verify.

Ironically, the primary realm is both closest and most distant from our abilities to detect and try to understand it all. Science has a logarithmic experimental challenge within sub-Planck physical dimensions that we can only hope to understand by deduction or induction. The same challenge applies to most of the 4D multiverse beyond our visible local universe.

There will thus remain apparently mystical elements both challenging and perplexing for our consciousness, which is OK for finite beings contemplating what today seems like the infinite.

From this perspective **the modern lesson of the one-hand Zen koan is not to give up trying to perceive in old ways. It is to continue to explore all accessible ways to perceive what we must, but have not even tried to understand.**

This simple change in consciousness is increasingly important as our ape species, and indeed our entire ecosystem, faces accelerating existential challenges just before our cosmic midnight – and I’m not talking about midnight at the oasis.