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Why do Academicians have Blank Stares?

An Essay in Search of the Origin of New Paradigms and Creative thinking

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Abstract:

The subject of theory is approached usually with great trepidation, and once initiated the scholar soon finds it to be bereft of closure. Paradigms in social sciences create structures for thinking about cultural texts in a novel manner, but the scholar soon realizes that the point of theory is to merely create stepping stones in order to evolve better and more evolved ways of looking at the same (and other) texts. Their goal is to generate new paradigms, but is it possible to think interestingly about this creative process, central to evolving theory? The paper traverses from

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the writings of Kuhn to Koans in order to look at how, why, when, where and what are paradigm shifts. The paper is not to structurally provide methods for charting how theory develops, but rather, is an attempt to think of theory as a creative and ever expanding subject which has definite practical applications for a student. The point is not to encourage engagement with theory as a definite structure to be memorized and applied in a formulaic manner, but to rather realize the underlying principles and move ahead viewing theory as 'de-finite'. De-finite as an opposition to the finitude implies growth and creativity, and the paper takes inspiration from the lived experience of scholars engaged in furthering this growth and creativity in the field of theory.

Keywords- *Koans, Paradigm Shift, Theory, Creativity, Out of the Box, Creative Thinking*

As research students, one of the principle frustrations I find doing the rounds in the circuit of aspiring academicians is the inability to figure out how to come up with new ideas, or how to represent life in novel ways not done before. One can go to academic institutions and find people walking half lost in their thoughts, bumping into walls with unseeing eyes or drawing vague figures on window panes in the style of John Nash as depicted by Russel Crowe in the 2001 movie “A Beautiful Mind”, and generally making a fool of themselves. People are constantly attempting to ‘think out of the box’, originally and creatively, aspiring to bring about ‘paradigm shifts’. At least, that seems to be a sort of Holy Grail for academicians, propounding new critical structures that will influence the world for ages to come, to become a new Einstein,

Satre, Derrida or Marx, and go down in history as one of the most important thinkers of all times.

This paper is dedicated to all those who haven't yet made it.

I found it interesting to ponder on the nature of this rare phenomenon, the paradigm shift, and was soon fascinated by its momentary manifestations almost like epiphany. Its inspiration seems to come as a sort of divine revelation in a sudden moment, and as soon as it is realised, the new paradigm emerges. This paper is an enquiry into the process of reaching this new idea, this new consciousness, perhaps one may even think of it as reaching Enlightenment. The paper is divided into five simple inquiries, the why, when, how, what and where of the nature of paradigm shifts. Through this I hope to engage in an interesting discussion about the nature of creativity, and the purpose of theory.

Why do we search for ways to create paradigm shifts? Any students of social sciences, in particular students of literature are baffled to enter into the subject to find not only literary texts, but also a gamut of theory which is supposed to be mastered in order to gain enlightenment. Pretty soon to their chagrin, they also discover that these theories are not necessarily the way in which they have to view literature either, and that often the point is to think originally beyond theory, or more likely, originally reorient theory in order to produce new ways of looking at the world. One of the essential qualities of being human is to try and attempt to make sense of the world around us. This search for better ways of knowing, of categorising, of discursivising nature, subjectivity and consciousness creates the world of critical theory, which in itself serves as a way for individuals to assert themselves and their consciousness. The word critical itself comes for the Greek 'Kriticos' meaning judgement, and in some ways it is the assertion of one's individual judgement of the world. Human beings find it imperative to assert their views on the world, and therefore theory can be seen as the collection of existing views on

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facets of the world. Established modes of this judgement often go on to inspire collaborative extensive application of similar ideas, which go on to create paradigms. The development of newer, more innovative, relevant and complete ways of judging and commenting on the world drives humanity to actively create paradigm shifts, or radical new modes of perception and interpretation. This quest for extracting meaning in novel and lasting fashion becomes an essential part of human life.

When do we get paradigm shifts? I will refer to the ideas of Thomas Kuhn, whose study in “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions” (Kuhn) first popularised the idea of paradigms, and whose work is partly the inspiration for this essay. Kuhn conjectured that new paradigms developed when existing paradigms fail to explain observable nature adequately. This happens as over the years anomalies from the established theory accrue, until it becomes necessary to provide some explanation for them. Normal science is then challenged by proponents of a new revolutionary science, which attempts to incorporate these accrued anomalies, along with the phenomenon explained by existing theory. The success of this new paradigm constitutes a paradigm shift. In other words the timing of paradigm shifts depends on the failure of existing theory, which necessitates the creation of an alternative paradigm. The point to note is that for Kuhn new paradigms arise not because of spontaneous, sudden creative thought, or divine revelation, but rather from a material need. The new paradigm is in some ways still linked to phenomena that was also studied by the older paradigm. The shift in paradigm does not mean a shift in the object of study, but rather in its mode of study. The notion of paradigms also presupposes the existence of other paradigms. Kuhn forcefully points out the incommensurability between paradigms, but the recognition of a paradigm requires and presupposes the ‘othering’,

the ‘flawing’ or ‘falsifying’ of paradigms, which are perhaps to be relegated as Trotsky would have put it to be ‘bankrupt; (its)... role... played out... (now)... belong(ing) ... (to) the dustbin of history!’ (Fainberg). Unfortunately resurfacing of Menshevist deviations, as well as of other ‘debunked’ paradigms in evolved forms from time to time has shown, as Kuhn himself supposed, the inapplicability of such rules of total dominance of a single paradigm in the case of Social sciences. Paradigms exist simultaneously, interacting with and affecting each other. In other words, it is not as if a paradigm shift necessarily jettisons the older theory to mere historical relevance, but rather may, especially in the case of social sciences, create competing paradigms of more or less equal relevance.

I will next attempt to inquire into the ‘whatness’, or ontology of paradigms and paradigm shifts. Seeing in Zen Buddhism a system to reach a radically altered state of understanding, I will try and understand the way in which Zen provides for mechanisms for the ultimate paradigm change that leads to enlightenment, which is the ultimate aim of the Buddhist school of thought. The use of narrative Koans to create a structure for the understanding of Zen theory, rather than the usual use of theory to create structures for the understanding of narratives is an interesting inversion in the methodology of Knowledge production. I will look into the methodology of Koans of the Rinzai school of Zen Buddhism in Japan, which are collected in the “Gateless Gateway” (Wumen), or the Mumonkan which has 48 Zen Koans compiled in the early 13th century by the Chinese Zen master Wumen Hui-k’ai.

Koans, as are described in the book itself, are not supposed to be words upon which one is supposed to meditate, or riddles whose meaning one is supposed to extract. They are abstract philosophical concepts involving the acceptance of non-meaning, the understanding that language has limitations and they are actually tools which are supposed to work on the Zen

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practioner, rather than puzzles for the Zen practitioners to work on. As John Fisher describes them:

...although the form and content of the various koans in the Mu Mon Kwan differs greatly, the koans all seem to carry the same message to the Zennist. That is, that the way to satori (emancipation) is not through dependence upon words, even if they be words of the Buddha or past Masters; however, one should not reject words, for, imperfect as they are, they are the only means we have of attaining enlightenment. They should use the words and ideas contained in the koans to reach satori, but they should never confuse the two. Conceptualizations, words, logic and reason are means whereby one attains enlightenment, but they must not be equated with enlightenment. "The koan is useful as long as the mental doors are closed, but when they are opened it may be forgotten". We have seen from the structure of the koans that a question, no matter how skillfully asked, will be met with a seeming absurdity or contradiction as long as the student still holds on to conceptualizations. This idea is communicated to the student by means of the attitude exemplified in the koans, If this were bluntly stated, the student would merely accept it as a fact, an entity to be memorized and handed down. By means of the koan, Zen Masters are able to transmit this message to their pupils in such a way that they might realize the truth for themselves rather than relying on someone else's realization. The religious attitude of Zen is thus transmitted by means of the koans, while at the same time teaching the student not to dwell on the words or actions used." (Fisher)

Koans therefore become tools for conveying a philosophical sense, albeit not in a direct manner, but in the form of narratives. It is supposed to reflect on the transient nature of knowledge and truth, and the continuous possibility of improvement. Let us take a few Koans to get an idea of how they view knowledge, and how this knowledge is supposedly communicated.

‘Two hands clap and there is a sound. What is the sound of one hand?’ (Ekaku)

This Koan is usually accompanied by a narrative of a master pondering on some issue, suddenly demanding of his student the answer to this riddle. Sometimes, the riddle itself is framed as a response of the master to a question from the student on the nature Zen, or of Buddha (enlightenment). The Koan is not supposed to be answered simply as silence, no sound, or absence in a simplistic manner. The Koan may actually have a variety of equally satisfying answers, so far as the Koan is absorbed, and its referencing of the concept of ‘shunyata’, or voidness is understood by the student. Another related Koan from the Gateless Gateway, is the Koan of Zhaozhou’s dog:

A monk asked Zhaozhou, “Does a dog have Buddha-nature or not?”

Zhaozhou replied, “Mu.” (Wumen case-1)

Here the character for ‘Mu’ in Japanese is the same character which is used for ‘shunyata’ as well as ‘Buddha-nature’, leading to the answer being a pun leading to ‘yes’, and ‘no’. Again, it is not really important whether the dog has the nature of Buddha, or whether it can achieve the nature of Buddha, but rather it is the philosophy of ‘shunyata’ which is supposed to be grasped.

In some ways, the methodology of Koans involves a lateral thinking, a viewing out of the corner of one’s eye to get at a state of realisation which is radically different from one with

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which one becomes encumbered while living within existing paradigms. There is no real answer to these Koans because any fixed answer would create a paradigm by themselves. But in Zen, there is individual emancipation through individual realisation, not the acceptance of existing paradigms, even of enlightenment, but rather the forceful creation of new paradigms suited to the individual, the particular problem seeking a solution. In this way their methodology is similar to the nature of Paradigms in Social Sciences, where multiple answers to the same problem may all be equally valid, depending on perspective. Some Koans involve a realisation of the absence of any ultimate truth or paradigm, and the ever present possibility of newer paradigms. Let us take the case of the following Koan, in the collection of the 12th century chinese monk Wanshi Shogaku, known as the Shorayaku's collection:

One day, the World-Honored One ascended to the rostrum. Manjusri struck the table with the gavel and said,

‘Contemplate clearly the Dharma of the Dharma-King! The Dharma of the Dharma-King is like this.’

Thereupon, the World-Honored One descended from the rostrum. (Shorayaku, Case-1)

What this Koan creates is the possibility of new paradigms by pointing out the instability of hegemony, or the imperfection of ‘perfection’, or the permanence of change. The Koans sees knowledge to be a product of a constant flux of paradigms developing syntagmatically towards perfection, destabilising and contributing to theory in an endless cycle of possible paradigmatic

shifts. Case 33 of the Gateless Gateway, says: “A monk asked Baso, ‘What is the Buddha?’ Baso replied, ‘Not mind, not Buddha.’”. The need for paradigms shifts starts with the recognition of a paradigm and the establishment of its ego (mind), which will restrict it from further growth. This leads to the impossibility of achieving one’s Dharma (mission) in totality. This necessitates the creation of new paradigms. This can happen only from time to time, and through this the shackles of the Mind are broken. Buddha gets off from the Rostrum because he does not want to become the example to be followed for enlightenment. He does not want to create set rules or paradigms, including the example of his own life as each individual attempt at enlightenment must follow its own path. From the above, we get that the nature of knowledge paradigms is that they tend to get officialised and therefore bound, and that no such single paradigm is likely to give one the single right answer even for the same problem. This is because each problem must actually be pondered on long on its own merit and from an individual vantage which must vary from person to person. Therefore there are often not any right or wrong answers, but rather a realisation of knowledge, and that seems to be the point of the entire exercise.

Using some example Koans, I will next inquire into the epistemology, or ‘howness’ of paradigm shifts and how they can be achieved through two different methods. Firstly, by searching out and locating points outside existing paradigms that describe the problem, allowing a different vantage point and secondly by a radical restatement of the problem itself, or through a reshaping of the boundaries of the existing paradigm. This will also take care of the ‘whereness’ of the paradigm shift. In the first case, the point of resolution of the problem is located outside the existing paradigm, while in the second the point of resolution remains within the existing paradigms. In both cases however the intent to reach a radically different way of perceiving the world remains, and the possibility of paradigm shifts is imminent.

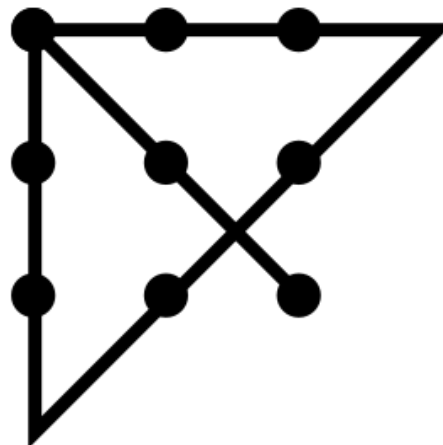
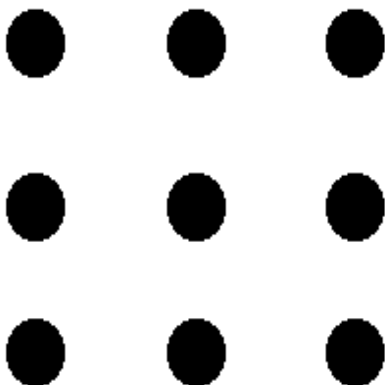
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To begin with our inquiry into the howness of paradigm shifts, let us take the case 46 of the Gateless Gateway:

“Master Sekiso said, ‘You are at the top of the 100 foot high pole. How will you make a step further?’ Another Zen Master of Ancient Times said, ‘One who sits on top of the 100 foot pole has not quite attained true enlightenment. Make another step forward from the top of the pole and throw one's own body into the 100,000 universes.’”

While the ultimate message about the Zen is not about suicide, it is not about holding on to the pole either. The Koan suggests, more clearly in the second version, that it is not merely enough to be at the top of a pole, or be well versed with a paradigm in order to be enlightened, and also that it is only the one who can leave the paradigm and step into space, and the possible 100,000 universes of knowledge that lie beyond the pole, who has a chance at real enlightenment. It is intended to jolt one out of the comfort zone of established paradigms, and encourage a resituating of the self out of the paradigm (here the pole) in order to achieve enlightenment. Another analogy, from western topographical puzzles is the nine dot puzzle, which challenges the reader to join a 3x3 dot matrix of nine dots with only four lines.



One may try and attempt the problem oneself, and the realisation soon dawns that you need a minimum of five lines to join all the lines as long as you remain confined within the nine dot square. The possibility joining the lines using four becomes easy once one allows the lines to go beyond the square figure. This example is used to illustrate the saying “thinking out of the box”, or lateral thinking.

What the Koan and the nine dot puzzle suggest is that one of the ways of thinking out of the box, or in terms of new paradigms is to move out of the existing paradigm by finding a point beyond it and applying that point in order to provide a new paradigm. This is akin to the idea of the Archimedean point, a hypothetical vantage point from which an observer can objectively perceive the subject of inquiry, with a complete view. The ideal of removing oneself from the object of study so that one can see it in relation to all other things, but remain independent of them, is described by a view from an Archimedean point. This is also akin to the idea of critical distancing.



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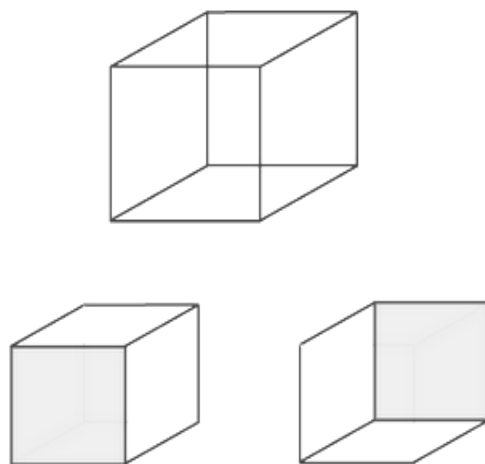
The expression comes from Archimedes, who supposedly claimed that he could lift the Earth off its foundation if he were given a place to stand, one solid point, and a long enough lever. This is a first possibility for locating Paradigm Shifts.

Trotsky while criticising the route Stalin was taking in Soviet Russia, sitting outside the Soviet world in Mexico wrote referring to Archimedes famous claim of being able to move the world- “Archimedes promised to move the Earth if they would give him a point of support. That was not badly said. However, if they offered him the needed point of support, it would have turned out that he had neither the lever nor the power to bring it into action.” (Trotsky). Trotsky like Archimedes could not find a point of such vantage which would allow them such agency so as to bring about a paradigm shift, either to move the world, or Stalinist hegemony. Fortunately Koans also refer to a second possibility about the whereness of paradigm shifts.

Taking up case 29, of Eno’s Flag- “The wind was flapping a temple flag, and two monks were arguing about the flag. One said, ‘The flag is moving.’ The other said, ‘The wind is moving.’ They could not agree, no matter how hard they debated. The sixth patriarch, Eno, happened to come by and said, ‘Not the wind, not the flag. It is the mind that is moving!’ The two monks were struck with awe.”

The Koan offers a second route for the creation of new perspectives, which lies in reframing the existing paradigm. Here the point of application of the effort lies within the system itself. The trick is not to move out of the movement of the wind and the flag and launching into space, but rather to introspect on the differences which lie between the points of application on

the part of the monks within the system. Both the monks are correct in their judgement. It is merely a separation of vantage points, and a manifestation of Ego that causes the argument. Eno's solution is to point out the moving mind and the differing perspectives, which are leading to the apparent contradictory understanding of phenomenon. The existence of multiple interpretations is allowed while the focus is laid on the variety of ways in which nature can be perceived. There is no need to jump off the hundred foot pole. One can attain enlightenment as long as one is able to bend the pole to suit one's needs. This idea is found in the concept of dual perception as exemplified in the Necker Cube.



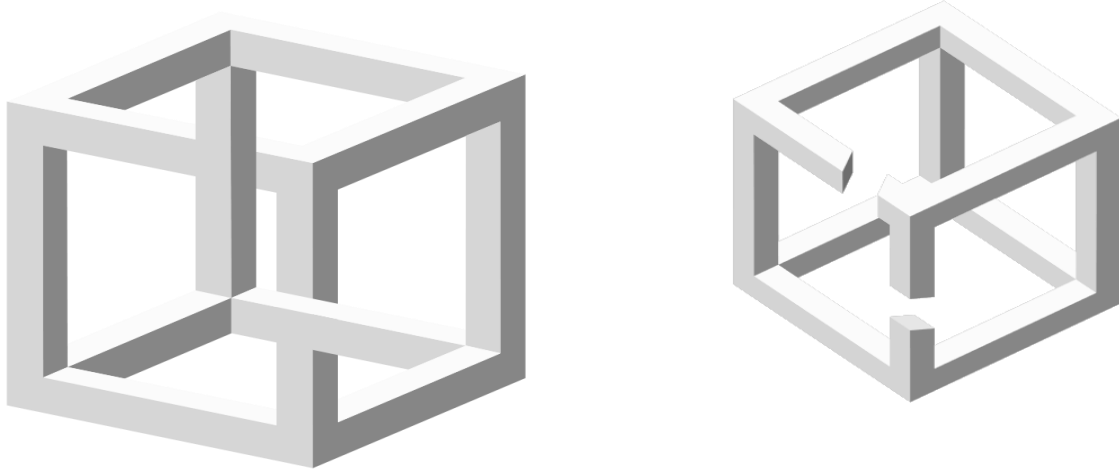
The Necker Cube (Marr) is an optical illusion first published in 1832 by Swiss crystallographer Louis Albert Necker. It is an ambiguous line drawing. It is a wire-frame drawing of a cube in oblique perspective, which means that parallel edges of the cube are drawn as parallel lines in the picture. When two lines cross, the picture does not show which is in front and which is behind. This makes the picture ambiguous; it can be interpreted two different ways. When a person stares at the picture, it will often seem to flip back and forth between the two valid interpretations. This

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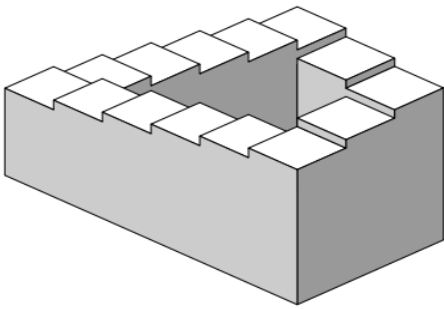
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is also referred to as ‘multistable perception’. Just as the Mind in the Koan moves from the flag to the wind, the Necker Cube makes the Mind move between its two orientations.

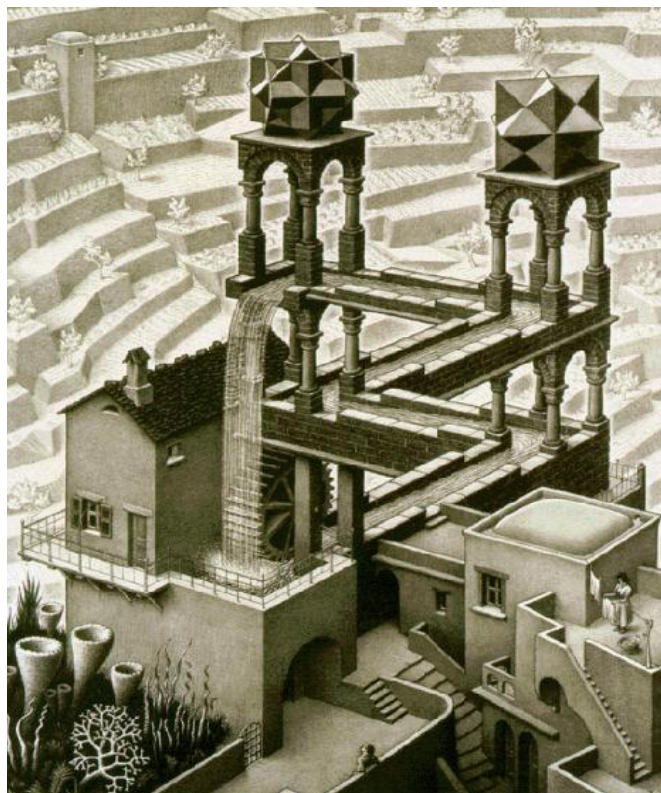
An extension of the Necker Cube is the Impossible Cube, which is its manifestation in three dimensions.



On closer scrutiny, the object is revealed to be the result of a particular point of view. In reality, the object is not exactly how it appears from a particular vantage point, or more correctly, the object looks different depending on the vantage point. Similar topographical conundrums like the Penrose Stairs, which are a set of stairs that seemingly meet despite climbing up all the way, and the Penrose triangle (both designed by and named after the British Mathematician Roger Penrose), which is akin to the impossible cube, forms a three dimensional triangle. These are examples of phenomenon which can be studied using existing paradigms, by reorienting them for a different perception.



It is not as if these figures are mere mathematical abstractions. The lithographer Maurits Cornelis Escher used many devices such as these to produce paintings which leave the viewer with an eerie feeling.



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For example, in his lithograph, 'Waterfalls' printed in October, 1961, there is an apparent paradox where water from the base of a waterfall appears to run uphill before reaching the top of the waterfall. While most two-dimensional artists use relative proportions to create an illusion of depth, Escher here and elsewhere uses conflicting proportions to create the visual paradox. The waterfall has the structure of a Penrose triangle. These images can be understood by reorienting them, rather in the manner of the three dimensional unfolding of the Penrose Triangle sculpture as shown above, to allow for understanding them within existing paradigms. This nonetheless gives us a new way of looking at these which is a result of reorienting our perspective towards the objects.

The application of interpretative effort by altering the premises of the paradigm, or working to change the way the paradigm is applied is also contained in the story of Christopher Columbus' Egg. It is said that when someone asked him about why his discovery of the new world was of such great importance, he proposed this problem, which constituted trying to make an egg stand on its tip. In light of the fact that no one initially believed that he could sail around the world, once he had presumably found India, anyone else could achieve the same feat. The problem is supposed to demonstrate that once a new idea has been demonstrated, it is no longer considered of any great value. When no one could do as he had challenged, Columbus broke the tip of the egg, and made it easily stand on its end. When others protested that it was too easy a

solution, his point was driven home. What is important again is that the solution is found through an alteration within the 'paradigm' of the egg.

Finally, I would like to conclude by thinking over how one should actually engage in thinking creatively. Going back to the Koans on the Buddha Nature of the Dog, the explanation provided by the author is of some interest. He says on a possible way to meditate on the 'Mu' answer:

Then concentrate your whole body, with its 360 bones and joints, and 84,000 hair follicles, into this question of what 'Mu' is; day and night, without ceasing, hold it before you. It is neither nothingness, nor its relative 'not' of 'is' and 'is not.' It must be like gulping a hot iron ball that you can neither swallow nor spit out."

(Wumen, Case-1)

While there is an obvious joke in how it must feel to be unable to find the solution to a problem that is really bothering you, the analogy of the Iron ball is otherwise very apt. In other words, the quest for knowledge is worse than a bad itch. It is almost painful in being like a hot iron ball in one's stomach. It is supposed to emerge on its own accord without much effort, after one decides to keep the question within oneself while engaging in a concentrated meditation. One cannot force it out. Buddha himself, we must remember, attained enlightenment on having rice pudding after a long meditation session which had reduced him to mere skin and bones. When the idea has to come, after the full analysis of relevant facts, it will come suddenly. Going back to Archimedes, (who did not ultimately move the world) we remember him running across the streets naked after he found the answer to his problem while meditating in his bath. Kekule claimed that the structure of Benzene resonance rings too came to him in a dream. The common

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theme running through all of these is that the answers seem to come when the mind is not thinking about the problem exactly, but merely concentrating hard, in a relaxed fashion, ie. in meditation, in a bath, or in a dream. The idea seems to be to achieve a sort of relaxed focus that can encompass not only the problem, but also other elements which may help in the proper critical engagement with the problem. The methodological problem seems to be akin to one of focussing in pistol shooting. The human eye cannot focus on more than one thing at a given distance simultaneously. Therefore while lining up the sight to the target, it becomes difficult to aim correctly if one focuses on either only the target or the iron sight. The solution seems to be to relax the focus slightly so that one gets both the iron sight and the target in the form of a slight blur (Haynes). This allows one to aim correctly and shoot the target. This is of course nothing new whatsoever, because we are somehow back to our friends who were moving around with half focussed eyes, running into walls, drawing vague figures on windows in the fashion popularised by the depiction of John Nash in the 2001 movie “A Beautiful Mind”.

They must be on to something.

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