



# Opening a Mountain: Koans of the Zen Masters

*Steven Heine*

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## **Opening a Mountain: Koans of the Zen Masters** Steven Heine

With the growing popularity of Zen Buddhism in the West, virtually everyone knows, or thinks they know, what a koan is: a brief and baffling question or statement that cannot be solved by the logical mind and which, after sustained concentration, can lead to sudden enlightenment. But the truth about koans is both simpler--and more complicated--than this. In *Opening a Mountain*, Steven Heine shows that koans, and the questions we associate with them--such as What is the sound of one hand clapping?--are embedded in larger narratives and belong to an ancient Buddhist tradition of encounter dialogues. These dialogues feature dramatic and often inscrutable contests between masters and disciples, or between masters and an array of natural and supernatural forces: rouge priests, wild foxes, hermits, wizards, shapeshifters, magical animals, and dangerous women. To establish a new monastery, to open a mountain, the Zen master had to tame these wild forces in regions most remote from civilization. In these extraordinary encounters, fingers and arms are cut off, pitchers are kicked over, masters appear in and interpret each others dreams, and seemingly absurd statements are shown to reveal the deepest insights. Heine restores these koans to their original traditions, allowing readers to see both the complex elements of Chinese culture and religion that they reflect and the role they played in Zens transformation of local superstitions into its own teachings. Offering a fresh approach to one of the most crucial elements of Zen Buddhism, *Opening a Mountain* is essential reading for anyone seeking to understand the full story behind koans and the mysterious worlds they come from.

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