



# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

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## Two Monks: Six Variations. A Poem-Essay

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### The Story

*At the Zen-river  
the river flows muddy and fast.  
There she stands looking  
across to the other side  
unable to walk on water.  
It is said she is beautiful.  
Both monks pause,  
remember their celibacy vow.*

*The younger feels alive  
where temptation thrives.  
The older does not hesitate.  
Lifts her. Enters the waters.  
Carries her to the other side.  
Man, you would do what  
if she trembled and sighed?*

This is the beginning of a well-known Zen story, almost as famous as “what is the sound of one hand clapping?” The lesson happens later in their journey and depends on their celibacy vow: it is so strict that any touching of a woman is forbidden.

*Righteous words burst  
from an angry mouth. “That woman,  
why did you touch her,  
so contrary to our celibacy vows?”  
The accused seizes the moment,  
announces a lesson:  
“I left her at the river.  
Why are you still carrying her?”*

### Interpretations

*My students smile at the punch line.  
Ah, quick medicine for the end  
of suffering as if enlightenment  
were suddenly theirs.*

They fall in line with on-line interpretations:

This simple Zen story has a beautiful message about living in the present moment. How often do we carry around past hurts, holding onto resentments when the only person we are really hurting is ourselves... We can choose to let go of what doesn't serve us anymore and concentrate on the present moment. Until we can find a level of peace and happiness in the present circumstances of our lives, we will never be content, because 'now' is all we will ever have. <http://www.kindspring.org/story/view.php?sid=63753>

For another interpretation, with more diagnostic terminology:

The older monk, having a mind free of attachments, saw the situation, responded to it, and continued to be present to the next step after letting the woman down. The younger monk was bound by ideas, held on to them for hours, harboring negative emotions like anger and regret. In doing so, he missed the experiences of the next part of the journey.

Mental attachment to ideas, experiences or attitudes blocks the full experience of the present, "the here and now". Attachments slow the mind, interfering with appropriate responses to the immediate situation. We make excuses for our attachments when we say "this is the way it always being done" or "this is the way I was taught". We become prejudiced and our first response is always "no" or "I don't like that" it, instead to be open minded and try something new or better.

Leaving the attachments behind is like peeling the onion, the journey gets lighter and easier every time. If you had an argument with your spouse, your children, your neighbor...don't hold on to that anger or grudges for too long. We are humans and is perfectly normal to have feelings. But just like the older monk in the story, once you finish crossing the river with your anger, leave it on the river bank and continue your journey... <http://buddhistreflections.blogspot.com/2011/01/two-monks-and-woman.html>

*After I tell the story in class  
for an immediate test, I ask  
"did you get it?" Of course, they nod.  
"Then show me." I play the Zen-master  
game. Most elaborate their understanding.  
Trapped in automatic mind  
None display spontaneity.*

My students only retell the story. They do not understand the point of the request, "show me." In Zen literature enlightenment is revealed by an immediate non-cognitive response manifesting a profound reality-shift. Even when the answer to a Zen koan is known the answer must be delivered in a way revealing enlightenment. For example, "Mu" is the answer to the question "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" It may take a Zen-initiate years expressing "Mu" in innumerable ways before getting it.

*I admit I too would gladly drop  
all garbage I create, carry and suffer.  
But how?*

Instructions from internet sources above like “let go of what doesn’t serve us anymore,” “concentrate on the present moment” and “leaving [your] attachments behind” are not clearly instructive by themselves. How does one let go of attachments? Not as easy as it sounds. The Zen answer involves complex practice of meditation, study, meetings with a master, perhaps koan demonstration. There are other practices, usually involving mindfulness.

### Something in the Story is Unresolved

*Someone, tell the smart-ass monk who  
is quick to appear Zen-wise, that  
he put down his friend. And me.  
And tell this mocking voice in my head  
to stop its mean yapping heedlessly.*

The story’s structure is a journey. The monks presumably had a destination beyond the river and the lesson about carrying. So, it is fair to ask, what is it like on the next day for the two monks? If the story were to continue, how would yesterday’s disruption in the relation between the two monks play out? Assume the admonished monk is now silent, angry that he has been chastised. Should the Zen-wise monk make another instructional comment, “What are you carrying now? Angry again?” In effect, the Zen-wise monk is acting as if he is wiser—in some sense better—than his anger-carrying companion. They seem separate now, not as equals when they set out sharing the same vow and destination. The “wise” monk showed compassion for the woman who could not cross the river. But he does not show compassion for his fellow monk who is suffering. Is he carrying something more important, an image of himself as a wise teacher?

Rather than speculate on a sequel to the story, consider how the structure of story has an application personally or for a client in philosophical counselling. Two monks may correspond to two aspects of oneself in conflict. For example, to have a judgmental “voice” constantly criticizing an action or emotion in one’s on-going experience. Also, it would be important for the philosopher-counselor to be careful not to show his “wisdom” in a way that might demean the client. Mindful counselors would, ideally, keep the client’s experience in focus and be aware of how they might be carrying their own vows and self-image.

### The Structure of the Story

As noted, the story is structured as a journey. The story’s full structure, formulated as questions, can be helpful in exploring a client’s story and experience, as well as the counselor’s:

- What is the journey: where does it start, where is it now, and where is it headed?
- What vows are present? Vows understood as deep commitments and impactful experiences, not necessarily in awareness.
- Who else is present?
- What is the (current) obstacle or conflict?
- What choice or action the resolves the conflict, if there is one?
- What might still be carried or left unresolved?
- Is there a lesson?

## Stories Have an Audience and Often a Moral

In my case, my audience was my Zen class. My purpose was to give them a taste of Zen and demonstrate that understanding Zen is not the end of journey; maybe a beginning for a few. The online interpreters have a general audience and offer their action-less insights into how to lessen suffering. Within the Zen world there may be different purposes.

As I construct this essay, I do not know who the audience is. At this point I do not have a moral. Except, there is a quandary here: I am constructing a story, which I am in, and now I am in the audience critiquing-revising my story. Any person as story-teller is in the same quandary, including clients in philosophical counseling and the counselor. In effect, the self is an activity, a jumping around of perspectives, in a hypothetical space. In this space self-knowledge is a story of a "self", constructed by a "self" for an audience, in which the most significant member is the self. While there is a historical pattern in these self's, they are not fully coherent. At least in my story.

### A Personal Relation to the Story

*I am not a monk, have taken no vows.  
There is no beautiful woman needing help  
who teases me. Yes, my gleeful telling  
exposes the storyteller, me, a sad example.*

None the less, the two monks represent an existential condition, being simultaneously in two selves. In the Buddhist view there is no independent, substantial, true self, underlying all the many manifesting of acts of selfing (a locution that avoids the nominative self as if self and action are separate.) When asking students to show me their understanding I am aware of playing Zen master, enjoying it, while painfully aware of how un-Zen I am. There are other imposter options in the philosophy classroom. Play Socrates and demonstrate to students they do not know what they think they know. Or play being wise about reality by appearing to live outside the cave, having glimpsed The Good.

I do not confess to my class the gulf between my admiration for Zen, my lust for enlightenment and the challenge of practice. When I tried, they assumed my confession indicated my enlightenment.

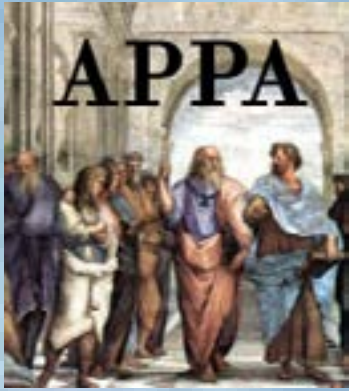
*So professor: You are standing beside  
your river. Look. See what's  
on the bottom. Pick up yourself.  
Maybe you are a beautiful presence.  
Or not so. Just feel the calling;  
cross to the other side. Of course,  
being cautious you will consider  
drowning is a possibility.*

The thought arises: as I continue my story, the story-teller will have at least two audiences. In this instance, the reader who has journeyed with me through these sentences and my virtual-self left beside a metaphoric the river, maybe about to cross.

**George Hole** is a Distinguished Teaching Professor at Buffalo State College and Chair of the Philosophy and Religious Studies Department. His poems have been published in Cimmaron Review, Rapport, Stone Drum, Earth's Daughters, and Sugar Mule, as well as the Buffalo News. He is the author of *Thinking Well about What Matters* (out of print) and a member of the Buffalo State Rooftop Poets. Dr. Hole graduated from the University of Rochester with a BA in physics and a Ph.D. in philosophy, and is also in the U. of R.'s Sports Hall of Fame for records in football and track. His courses in Zen Buddhism, Existentialism, the philosophy of love and sex, moral issues, and the history of the Greek philosophers help inform his philosophical practice. He has advanced training from the Ellis Institute in Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, and runs a philosophical counseling practice. He was the keynote speaker at Critical Thinking, the first conference of the New York State College English Association.

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# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

### APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

### APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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