



First You Play The Han

by Zoe Kaufman



The Zen Center is an austere, masculine place but it also has that certain hush that is feminine—the smell of incense burning, very spare and lovely. It has a kind of blazing feeling that I think of as very, very Zen. I'd been going there for about three years when one day, just before an evening sitting, Sensei strides up to me, his eyes glowing. He is built like a square block, dense and heavy, lots of atoms packed close together and he marches down the halls, so emphatic, his hands in fists, and says, "From now on you are the han player. Steve will show you how." Then he turns around and marches away.

"But, Sensei" I call out to his retreating figure, "I don't want to play the han." My voice is tremulous, helpless, but he is gone. Sensei doesn't discuss things, he just says something and you respond. This is how it is here. You obey because he is the teacher.

It is true I want to know how to play the han, but I do not want to actually play the han. Not for a real sitting. I'm shy. And I hate performing. Besides, sitting is already hard enough. But it's too late. Sensei is gone. I have to obey partly because of the force of his own nature and because this is the tradition.

I am standing in the hallway and people are drifting into the center. The han is in the zendo but I have never even gotten close to it. You could be sitting there for years and never know who was playing the han. It hangs from the ceiling but everyone sits facing the walls not the center of the room. You have to pay attention. The playing of the Han is what starts the sitting. The han is huge, about half the size of someone's front door. It hangs horizontally from two ropes and the mallet is big, like a sculpture mallet but all wood. The center of the han is pitted, almost carved out from all the times it has been hit, with great precision in the center of the board. The hollow in the center fans out gradually from the center, the color fading into the rest of the board.

“Well,” I console myself. “How hard can it be? It’s just a hammer and a block of wood”. After all, I’m not altogether unmusical. At times in my life I have mastered Bach partitas, Chopin preludes and Beethoven sonatas. I have learned to cantillate ancient Hebrew according to rabbinic trope. I guess I can hit a piece of wood with a stick.

After the sitting Steve, who is very skinny and wears little round glasses, explains the han riff: one loud strike, two soft. Then, one loud, one soft; one loud, one soft. Repeat several times. End with two soft, one loud. “Piece of cake,” I say, immediately forgetting everything Steve has just told me. Was it loud soft soft or loud loud soft? “No,” says Steve, who patiently explains the riff again. “Play as loud as you can,” he says. “Make the soft an echo. Then pause.

“How long is the pause?”

“Count all the states between Mexico and New England,” says Steve.

When it was clear I still did not understand how he wanted me to play, he made me a little diagram; triangles on a little piece of newspaper. This did nothing to improve my understanding.

“Count all the states? I don’t even know the states next to my state. “Does it have to be states?” I ask.

I try it again. Steve is kind enough not to overtly humiliate me, but my louds are not loud and my softs are not soft. Perplexed, I look at the mallet.

“Hold the mallet loosely,” says Steve. “Hold it farther down the handle.”

I try again. Now the louds are soft and the softs are inaudible!

“Practice!” says Steve.

At home, my husband is bewildered by the sounds of hammering coming from the kitchen chopping board.

But practice is useless. A chopping board and a hammer are not, after all, the same the same as a han. There is something about a han.

After only about one week of practice on my useless chopping board I arrive

If you use your small mind you’re always wrong. Small mind is always worrying. Big mind nails it every time.

at the Zen center and I am astounded to learn that I am playing the han for tonight’s sitting. “Me?” I ask Steve in true bewilderment. I say I’m not ready. Steve is sympathetic but there’s no way out.

I run through the other chores of the han player: I check the house. I make sure no one is arriving late and that the front door is locked. I turn off the phones. I arrive in the zendo, stand at the han and wait for the signal from the monitor.

“Loud soft soft” I remind myself. I strike the han. “That was too soft,” I say. I strike again. Too loud. I strike again. Not enough pause. “Texas, Tennessee, Arkansas, Illinois” I say. And Kentucky.” I add. “No that’s too far south,” I say. I decide to forget about counting. Suddenly I realize that counting the states is ridiculous. Counting the states in not being in the moment!

I am now officially the han player every time I come to an evening sitting, which is at least once, sometimes twice a week. Months go by. I have played the han perhaps fifty times, and every time I have found a different way to play it wrong. The complexity of the thing is baffling. The variations in it’s sound are endless and there is no discernible way to control it.

I am assigned to play the han for a six day sesshin. In sesshin the han is played several times a day, so by the third morning the mallet feels more friendly in my hand. I strike the han. “That’s it,” I say. At last, mastery!

But during kinhin, the walking meditation, Wilson, the monitor, draws me aside and whispers “You are playing the han too loud.” I am

shocked. Did Wilson not hear my confident, round, and resonant han strokes in the morning sitting? I am bewildered. I resolve to play the han more softly.

I finish sesshin and resume my normal duties playing the han for evening sittings. Each time I play the han I renew my resolve: my softs will be exquisite and almost inaudible; my pauses will luxuriate; my rhythm will be smooth and even; and my louds will not be loud! But the han is my foe. It stares at me with its smooth, simple surface, I continue to find new, incorrect ways to play it.

One night Steve takes me aside.

“Zoe,” he says. “You are playing the han too softly.”

What?!?!

“Hit it hard!” he says. “Louds should

be loud. Softs should be soft.”

“Louds loud,” I say, “softs soft.”

I go back to playing loudly but now my softs are wildly unpredictable. Some are soft, it's true, but some are medium and some are loud. I am horrified at my incapacity. A year has gone by and I can't hit a piece of wood with a hammer correctly three times in a row. I would like to walk away from it, but I've been in Zen long enough to know there's no way out. This playing of the han is my existential predicament. I am the han player. I have to play the han.

More months go by and I am again standing at the han. “This time I 'm gonna do it right!,” I resolve. I strike the han. Once, twice, three times. Loud, soft soft. “Wow” I say. “That's it!” I say. My louds are loud and my softs are soft. I am exultant.

After the sitting, Wilson, who is in attendance, takes me aside.

“Zoë, you are playing the han too loud,” he says. “Play it s-o-f-t-l-y.”

“G-r-r-r-r” I say to myself. At this moment I am not developing compassion. I am gnashing my teeth.

Now fear grips me every time I face the han. “There are a limitless number of ways to play this thing wrong,” I realize, as I confront it again. It is the first day of another long sesshin. I play the first loud. Too soft. I play the two softs. Too loud. And uneven. And too fast. I have finished playing the han and walk to the spot where I will sit today. My footsteps thunder as I walk to my seat.

The next time I am at the han I jump when the mallet is suddenly snatched from my hand. I whirl around and see Sensei standing with the mallet in his hand and a gleam in his eye. I take my seat and listen carefully.

Loud soft soft, says the han. Loud soft. Loud soft. Soft soft loud.

“Oh,” I say.

Because no one plays the han louder than Sensei. Wham. Echo. Gorgeous. Very, very loud. Very loud. I resolve to ignore Wilson and play like Sensei at the very next opportunity.

Soon enough I am at the han again. “Play like Sensei” I say to myself. I hit the Han. LOUD, soft soft. Zen IN ACTION. Wham. Echo. Gorgeous!!

After the sitting Sensei takes me aside.

“Zoë”, he says. “You are playing the han too loud.”

Now my head is spinning and I am speechless. I am about to argue with him, but instead I remain silent. I recognize this spinning feeling, this utter bewilderment, and I know simply that I do not know and that I will never understand.



I continue to play the han. More weeks go by, and months. I wonder why in the world Sensei chose me to be the han player. I play the han both too loud and too soft. My playing is both sluggish and too fast; my repetitions both too many and not enough, my pauses both too short and too long. I hold the mallet too tight and too loose, too high up on the handle and too low. When I finish playing I walk to my seat both too slowly and too fast, and too loudly. (And, I forget to turn the phone off as well as on.)

I decide I have flunked out at this very, very complex thing, this piece of wood and a stick. I am sure I am the worst han player since Bodhidharma crossed the China sea.

Every once in a while Wilson takes me aside and tells me to play softer. Steve tells me to play louder. We now have a new chant leader who tells me to lengthen my pauses. He then demonstrates by playing very short pauses.

And so time passes.

One day when I arrive at the zendo, Sensei says to me, "I'll play the han today". He takes the mallet and plays the han. On this day, I hear. This is how Sensei plays the han: First he plays the han. Then he stops. Then he sits down.

It's true there are an infinite number of wrong ways to play the han. But now that I have heard, I know that there is one right way to play the han. This is how you do it:

First play the han. When you are done, stop. Then, sit down.

How complicated can it be?



In the morning, **Zoe Kaufman** teaches and practices Yoga in a Northern suburb of Chicago. After that, she paints in her studio. She practiced with koans in the Rinzai tradition for nearly a decade before shifting to a Chan practice with Xianyang Carl Jerome in Chicago and with Master Ji Ru, Venerable Kungshih, and Venerable Konghuan at MABA.