

The word koan corresponds to Chinese characters which can be rendered in various ways. Just as Japanese Zen, Chinese Ch'an, Korean Son, and Vietnamese Thien, and Western Zen all share many features in common, likewise koans play similar roles in each, although significant cultural differences exist.

Zen teachers often recite and comment on koans, and some Zen practitioners concentrate on koans during meditation.

English-speaking non-Zen practitioners sometimes use koan to refer to an unanswerable question or a meaningless statement. However, in Zen practice, a koan is not meaningless, and teachers often do expect students to present an appropriate response when asked about a koan. Even so, a koan is not a riddle or a puzzle. Appropriate responses to a koan may vary according to circumstances; different teachers may demand different responses to a given koan, and a fixed answer cannot be correct in every circumstance.

more info:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Koan>