changes in the meditation instructions from The Cloud of Unknowing and Zen master Dōgen’s Fukanzazengi for the practice of “unknowing” and “non-thinking”

In his instructions for practicing contemplation in The Cloud of Unknowing its anonymous 14th century English author wrote:

> When you set yourself to do this practice … lift your heart toward God with a humble stirring of love … because a naked intent directed toward God, without any other reason than himself, is enough.

> But if you’d like to have that intent folded up and wrapped into a single word, in order to have a better hold on it, just take a little word of one syllable, since that’s going to be better for working with the mind. And such a word is the word GOD or the word LOVE. Choose whichever you like, or another one if you want, that you most prefer that’s a single syllable, and fasten that word to your heart, such that it never leaves there, no matter what comes up.

> … With this word you’ll beat on this cloud of unknowing and this darkness that’s over you. With this word you’ll knock down all manner of thoughts under a cloud of forgetting; such that if any thought pushes itself up and asks you what you’d like to have, respond to him with no more words than just this one. And if he offers out of his great educatedness to expound on that word for you and to tell you about all the features of that word, tell him you’ll have it totally whole, not undone or taken apart. And if you hold yourself firm in this purpose, be assured he won’t stay for very long. (Cloud, ch. 7)

Several years afterwards, in a kind of sequel to the Cloud, called The Book of Privy Counseling, the author altered somewhat the language of his core meditation instruction. Rather than speaking of cultivating a “naked intent” and a “blind love” as he had in the Cloud, he writes of uncovering a “naked blind feeling of being”:

> There is no name, or feeling or awareness more, or as much, in keeping with eternity, which is God, as is that which can be had and seen and experienced in the blind and loving awareness of this word IS…. And so be as blind in the loving awareness of the being of God as in the naked awareness of the being of yourself, without any curious seeking through your senses to examine any characteristic that belongs to his being or to yours. But all analysis let go and put far away, worship your God with your substance, all that you are that you are to all him that he is as he is, which by himself, without anything else, is the blessed being of both himself and of you.

> And in this way you will knittingly, and in a manner that is wonderful, worship God with himself; for what you are you have from him and he it is. (Privy Counseling)
The 13th century Japanese Zen teacher Dōgen’s first writing was a brief manual of zazen instruction, the *Fukanzazengi* (“Universal promotion of the principles of seated meditation”). He composed it the same year he returned to Japan after his five years’ travel to study and practice Zen in China (1227). Representing something of a Zen manifesto, it is the most important and widely read document of Sōtō Zen in Japan. Zazengi were “short, easily memorized texts devoted to the method and significance of zazen practice” (Waddell & Abe, 1973, nt., p. 115), and several were in circulation in China during Dōgen’s time there. His own was in large part an adaptation of the then best known of these, which had been compiled by a teacher named Tsung-tse in the eleventh century C.E.

In the first version of his *Fukanzazengi*, where Dōgen provided instructions for how a meditator is to deploy his or her attentive awareness in zazen, he had originally simply repeated the instructions that were present in Tsung-tse’s meditation manual. Dōgen’s and Tsung-tse’s original instructions read this way:

> Whenever a thought occurs, be aware of it; as soon as you are aware of it, it will vanish. If you remain for a long period forgetful of objects, you will naturally become unified. This is the essential art of zazen. (in Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 181)

Tsung-tse’s instructions were in turn reminiscent of ones that had been attributed to the early Zen figure, Shen-hui:

> [Shen-hui:] Good friends, for those at the stage of practice, whenever a thought occurs to the mind, be aware of it. When what has occurred to the mind disappears, the awareness of it vanishes of its own accord. This is no-thought. (in Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 93)

When Dōgen re-wrote his instructions some years later, he changed that key passage to read this way:

> Think of not thinking. How do you think of not thinking? Non-thinking. This is the essential art of zazen. (in Bielefeldt, 1988, p. 181)

That change constitutes making Dōgen’s core meditation instructions into a koan. That koan is derived from the following Chinese Zen teaching story:


The structure and message of this koan is reminiscent of another story that involves Yao-shan, in dialog with his teacher, Shih-t’ou:
Once as Yao-shan was sitting [in meditation], Shih-t’ou saw him and asked, “What are you doing here?”

Yao-shan said, “I’m not doing anything.”
Shih-t’ou said, “Then you are just sitting idly.”
Yao-shan said, “If I were sitting idly, that would be doing something.”
Shih-t’ou said, “You said you are not doing anything; what aren’t you doing?”

[Alternate translation: “You say you are not doing anything. What is this ‘not doing’?”]

Yao-shan said, “Even the saints don’t know.” (in Cleary, Timeless Spring, p. 35)