

# THE WORK OF THIS MOMENT

## An interview with Toni Packer

Springwater Center, NY (formerly Genesee Valley Zen Center)

By Jacek Dobrowolski

(After many years as a student of Zen teacher Philip Kapleau, Toni Packer gave up being co-leader of his Zen Center in Rochester, NY, and in 1981 founded a city center there, and later a country center in Springwater, NY. Interviewed in July 1986 by Jacek Dobrowolski, a Zen student and scholar from Warsaw, Toni is author of "Seeing Without Knowing." The Springwater Center has a staff of 12 and over 200 members around the country. Jacek, a resident of Cambridge Zen Center, is starting graduate studies in comparative religion at Harvard University.

Due to space limitations, we are unable to print the interview in full. An expanded version of it will be published in Toni's forthcoming book, "THE WORK OF THIS MOMENT." Toni's statements do not necessarily reflect the teachings of the Kwan Um Zen School. However, they are provocative and we invite our readers to comment.)

Jacek: Toni, two years ago you attended the "Woman and American Buddhism Conference" at the Providence Zen Center and you gave a talk there on clinging to images versus clear seeing. The talk was later published in *Primary Point*. From what I have heard it was well received and several Dharma teachers remarked: "She is very clear." But also some criticism emerged like: "She has a problem with form," "she is attached to freedom," "this is spiritual claustrophobia," suggesting that no matter how deep our insight is, we always have to manifest as somebody and we need not fear forms, but use them, and we need not fear labels imposed on us, these come anyway. What can you say to such comments?

Toni: I don't have any problem living with "forms"—what does it mean? We are human beings who think, feel, eat, drink, sleep, defecate, learn, work, create, recreate, communicate with each other and so forth. I left an established Zen center, because it became absolutely clear that I could not continue to function and question freely within a system dedicated to teach and propagate a specific religious tradition. It was as simple as that. As long as there is investment and identification with any system, one cannot inquire and see clearly. Where the optic nerve is attached to the retina, there is a blind spot where the eye cannot see. We have such blind spots wherever we are attached. Can we see that we are attached—become clearly aware of it? When attachment and investment are seen completely—root cause as well as the consequences that arise from it—then the seeing is the dropping.

The criticisms that you mentioned, as far as I can tell, stem from people who may have listened to a talk by Toni (or talk about Toni), but themselves may never have delved deeply into questioning our total psychological conditioning. So, before

forming any ideas and speculating about what Toni is doing, what her problems are and what she is attached to—if one is really interested in finding out, why not come here and question it directly with her? I am open to it whenever you come to open it up. I don't think I'll ever tire of looking at anything from scratch. The reason we are sitting and working together is to discover what is going on in the human mind and body - to question our deep-seated assumptions and conclusions, our beliefs, traditions and teachers, and to find out why we cling in the first place.

The diagnosis "spiritual claustrophobia"—what does it mean? Does it mean being afraid of living in a "spiritual box?" Being boxed in by spiritual ideas and programs? When one actually realizes that one is trapped in a box, one steps out of it, doesn't one? The intelligence of seeing makes that possible. Claustrophobia means panicky fear of enclosure without finding a way out. The direct insight that one is caught may be the end of the confinement. If it is, one does not go back.

Jacek: I remember Soen Sa Nim [Zen Master Seung Sahn] saying last spring at Providence Zen Center that "the worst kind of mind is dictator mind, then there is no love, no equality, no freedom and no harmony." He also mentioned that the Buddha never said: "Follow me, believe in me." Towards the end of his talk he said to his students: "You must become completely independent." Certainly you agree with such words, don't you?

Toni: It's not a matter of agreeing with anybody's words, whether they were Buddha's or anyone else's. Does one clearly understand for oneself what the person is saying, where he or she is coming from, and, if one doesn't, is one free to question it thoroughly?

The admonition "You must become completely independent"—is it just setting up the ideal of independence? As long as we are occupied with the ideal, are we free to discover how utterly dependent we are?

When we join a spiritual group or training center, there is usually a host of activities, ceremonies, etiquettes, rituals, vows and so forth that we are expected to participate in. There isn't even the consideration of a choice whether to participate or not. Any kind of hesitancy is equated with "ego," while participating in what is demanded in spite of doubts is called "lowering the mast of ego." The mind quickly becomes conditioned to the new ceremonies and to the expected ways of relating to "teachers," "senior disciples," "advanced students," and "beginners."

The brain has already previously been conditioned to all these patterns at home, in school, at work, in church, and so forth. Now there is reinforcement of old patterns in a new place. One sees the venerated teacher participate fully and sanction what is going on. And not only this present teacher—one is ceremonially linked with a whole lineage of past teachers who have all done and sanctioned what we are doing now.

A heavy conditioning is being perpetuated without any encouragement to question and doubt. On the contrary—doubting is "giving way to ego." The mind is readily finding refuge in the whole thing. Feelings of guilt, anxiety, loneliness and isolation are assuaged. And now the teacher says: "You must become completely independent." Another teacher says: "The function of the teacher is to withhold his influence from his students." But what does that really mean? Doesn't the teacher stand for everything one has become engaged in and committed to? He or she stands for the whole past tradition! How is one going to be completely independent of that? It is an enormous question, isn't it? Can a human being be independent of the past—not in theory, but actually?

So—can one start by looking and listening to what is actually taking place from moment to moment, understanding clearly what is happening right now and what has happened in the past? How one constantly seeks refuges which one defends, rather than face fear, guilt, loneliness, insecurity...

Jacek: How one imitates...

Toni: How one imitates! Imitation gives a sense of belonging, a feeling of identity, and one isn't even aware of it! There is just this longing to be like someone one admires or worships—trying to be like him or her without any critical awareness.



Jacek: You have challenged the dictatorial way of teaching, but no matter how well one guards oneself against being a father, or a mother figure, or any authority figure, if one speaks out with certainty, a great deal of certainty, people who hear it may try to push you into that role, or even unconsciously become dependent on you and you may not be able to detect each and every such attachment.

Toni: There are two aspects to your question. One is, does a person who speaks out with certainty, who talks to people and points out things, does that person influence the listener through personality, through the association with authority figures, through the power of words? Is the listener influenced to become a follower, an adherent who believes what is said without questioning the validity, just following or repeating mechanically what has been said?

The other question is: what happens if the person who is talking to lots of people coming for help? Is this creating images for her or him like "I'm someone special, somebody important, I'm spiritually advanced, enlightened..." "I know and you don't know." "Just do obediently whatever I tell you and eventually you may know too." Can such ideas and images be seen instantly and dispelled? One can never assume that one is beyond such images. One has to see. If they are not seen and not dispelled, they perpetuate illusion and separation.

Let's look at the first question again. Obviously all of us are influenced by the words and actions of authority figures unless there is direct insight. If one doesn't see the truth or falsehood of what is being said, regardless of who is saying it, comprehension remains intellectual at best. Or one will just believe in the words, follow and repeat them faithfully without any insight. This kind of influence happens no matter who the speaker may be.

You also asked, can you detect whether another person is becoming attached to you? I may or may not detect it, but we can always open up this whole question of authority and attachment in talks and meetings. We do talk about it again and again. Whether or not someone will really have insight into attachment and drop it...no one can do this for anybody else. It is up to us to discover truth for ourselves. This brings me back to the question of what happens to the person to whom people come for help. Am I dependent upon people coming to me and listening to me? This would be a very dangerous thing, I do pay close attention. We discuss it and look at it together. I think that a teacher who depends on having students, inevitably uses them. How can it be otherwise? Can there be freedom and love when there is dependency and attachment of any kind? So I feel that I am utterly responsible for what I am doing and saying, but how people receive it, use it, interpret or misinterpret it is not up to me alone.

Jacek: What you say in your talks is very similar to what the late Jiddu Krishnamurti

## Summer '87

### Tibetan Medicine Training

with Dr. Lobsang Rabgay

In cooperation with the American Institute of Buddhist Studies

July 11 - 19

Tibetan healing integrates Indian, Chinese, Persian and Greek medicine with the Buddhist perspective. Taught by Dr. Rabgay, a Tibetan physician, psychologist, and fully ordained Buddhist monk, and designed for the Western health professional, the training includes:

introduction to the theory of the five elements • the three humour model • in-depth diagnosis and treatment • Tibetan therapeutic massage • moxabustion

The course is conducted through lecture, practical sessions, and hands-on instruction of suggested techniques.

Study with leading teachers and thinkers at Omega's peaceful lakeside campus. Enjoy evening dances, films, and concerts. Drop in on daily T'ai Chi, yoga, and meditation classes. Meet friends over wholesome vegetarian meals. Visit the sauna, receive a massage or explore the beautiful surrounding countryside.

Upcoming classes include:

Chinese Landscape Painting	with Shou-Cheng Zhang
Psychotherapy and Spirituality	with Pir Vilayat Kahn
Oriental Diagnosis	with Waturu Ohashi
T'hanka Painting	with Pema Wangyal, co-sponsored by The School for Sacred Arts
The Zen of Seeing	with Frederick Franck
Morita and Naikan Therapies	with David Reynolds
A Meditation Retreat	with Ram Dass
Vipassana Meditation	with Shinzen Young

Write or call for a summer catalog: Omega Institute, RD 2, Box 377 PR, Rhinebeck, NY 12572 (914) 339-6030

Omega  
Institute  
for Holistic Studies



has been saying for decades, speaking of attention, questioning and inquiring, speaking and seeing, dependency, freedom, and unconditioned love. How do you see him and how close do you feel to Krishnamurti?

Toni: My husband and I have gone several times to Ojai, California to listen to K., and we have also heard him speak in Switzerland and once in England. We have never personally met him. It was only after coming in touch with his work that veils started dropping from my eyes and things became clear. The questioning intensified about what I was doing at a Zen Buddhist Center giving talks, holding meetings, participating in ceremonies and rituals, and later being in charge within this formidable setting. The whole question of authority and influencing people burst open and it was no longer a matter of choice that I left the whole tradition. I just had to do it.

You are asking how close I feel to Krishnamurti. When two human beings, you and I, see the same thing directly, wholly, this instant, then there is no longer any question of "closeness." There is no "you" and no "me," no separation of any kind. Something entirely new is functioning freely, and it does not belong to anyone. It is not dependent upon anyone.

Jacek: How do you see him?

Toni: Krishnamurti never ever put his person into the foreground. "The speaker is not important" was his constant admonition. What is important is to see clearly for oneself the truth or falsehood of what is being said. There has never been the shadow of a demand for discipleship, followership or worship. He referred to all of that as "nonsense" and said that it was an abomination to him.

Jacek: I have heard one Zen Buddhist monk say that "Krishnamurti was a very slippery fellow" since he did not propose any formal meditative practice. You do offer it at your Center. There are seven-day retreats held in silence, consisting of periods of sitting and walking and a period of manual work. Every day you give a talk and interviews, called meetings for people who want them. Sitting is optional, but from what I have noticed people rarely skip rounds. The atmosphere of the sitting room, as you call it, is that of vibrant awareness and purity. In spite of the lack of an altar, and the presence of beautiful green plants standing in pots in the center of the room and in one of its corners, there is a definite aura of a meditation hall.

The etiquette is minimal, no bows, no kyosaku, no chanting, almost no instruments, just a bell signalling the end of a sitting or walking period. During walking you can hold your hands any way you wish, even loose on the sides or in your pockets, yet people move with attentive care and a certain form seems to be arising. When I described it to George Bowman [a senior teacher in the Kwan Um Zen School], he commented: "No matter what she calls it, if there is sitting, walking, talks given and interviews held it is still Zen training." What would you say to that?

Toni: To a casual passerby, some of the forms you are describing might match very closely a textbook definition of a Zen retreat. However, we are constantly re-examining these forms and they do change. We are specifically looking at them from this point of view: do they provide something conducive to a smoothly functioning, quiet retreat, or have they been retrained because of unquestioned assumption or just habit? We state on our information sheet that people may use the schedule in any way they wish as long as they do their retreat job and maintain silence. Incidentally, in spite of what you observed at that particular retreat, there are many times during the day that only very few people are present in the sitting room. Also, people can sit on any kind of chair and they do.

But let me also ask again: why does one have to compare and pin a label on something that is going on? We do it all the time. But does anything really become any clearer by being named and compared with something else? The important thing is to be directly aware of what is happening in the mind as it is happening—to be aware of comparison, for instance, and observe its immediate effects. At the instant of comparison, where is the awareness? Hasn't it been replaced by a narrow memory channel which now connects with all kinds of ideas,

feelings and emotions?

If someone says, "Toni is still doing Zen training..."—what is that person really trying to convey? Why is he saying it? I can speculate about it but I would have to talk with him or her directly to find out. When people come for a silent retreat, we question immediately what is going on in the mind. Why did one come to this retreat? What does one want? It is easy to say: "Don't have any goals, just sit quietly, embracing the present moment without thoughts of enlightenment." But is this what is actually happening? One has to look!

The moment one sits still and attends for brief instants at a time, doesn't one see the thought of wanting something and of getting something arise? It happens. We have been conditioned that way from earliest childhood and have seen it in others ever since we can remember. "Do something." Be somebody. Get someplace." Or "Be quiet. Stop fiddling. Don't do this. Don't think. Don't want this or that. Just be in the moment."

Can there be awareness without judgment of this running stream of thoughts, commands, reactions, desires, goals, without any reaction for or against? If there is any holding on to the idea that I want something or should not want anything, wanting itself does not come into awareness. The wanting is just running its habitual course. What is wanting? Can we see?



The Springwater Center

Do you see the difference between wanting, and the actual process of wanting as it manifests throughout the mind and body? I always come back to the question: is one wondering how the mind actually functions from moment to moment, and if so, can one begin to attend quietly, in all simplicity?

Jacek: What kind of inquiry do you advocate?

Toni: I am not advocating any kind of inquiry, but I am inquiring. Can there be awareness this instant that the brain is asking for a "HOW"—a method to latch on to? Do you see that? Can there be simple,

quiet observation, silent listening to what is actually happening this instant?

Jacek: Then how should one carry on the questioning?

Toni: Listen! There is breathing, isn't there? Let's just listen quietly for a moment. It doesn't need to be counted, it doesn't need to be called "inhalation and exhalation," it doesn't need to be concentrated on. It doesn't need to be known in any way. Just simple listening... Not saying to oneself, "I am breathing," or "I am aware of my breath," or "I know what it is," but listening wordlessly, inwardly, without knowing...

Is this separate from the sound of the birds? The car? The airplane? The moment we "know" the sound, the instant the brain reacts with naming, with liking and disliking, there is separation—many separate sounds, and me separate from what I hear. Can you see this? Listen again—just openness without knowing...

Jacek: What kind of questioning may take place?

Toni: I don't know what kind of questioning it is. It is just questioning, wondering, inquiring, listening openly. No prescribed method! The moment you find a technique, you become attached to it and there is no longer any open listening. The mind clings to methods because it finds safety in them. Real questioning has no methods, no knowing—just wondering freely, vulnerably,

what it is that is actually happening inside and out. Not the word, not the idea of it, not the reaction to it, but the simple fact.

Anxiety arises...will one immediately react by "knowing" it from previous times and bracing against it? "Oh, not that again—I hate it—it's going to get worse—how can I get rid of it," and so forth. Simply meeting it as for the first time, attending quietly, feeling it, letting it move on its own, revealing itself for what it is without any interference by the brain.

Jacek: Do you think it is possible to transcend a given tradition and yet act from

within it? Do you feel that your way of leaving the tradition is the only way?

Toni: It is often pointed out to me that if truly great teachers did not leave their tradition, what arrogance and ingratitude of me to have left it. Of what use are comparisons? Don't they instantly lead away from the work at hand? If one really needs to find out the cause of human division, violence and sorrow, doesn't one have to work empty-handed, free from the accumulation of any kind of knowledge? Tradition is accumulated knowledge. A seeing mind does not know—it understands the limitation of all knowledge.

You ask whether I feel that my way of leaving the tradition is the only way? What do you mean by "way?" It is not a way from "here" to "there."

I did not leave tradition as a matter of protest or principle, but because any kind of authority, any kind of following, any adherence to what is known, remembered and cherished does not reveal truth. There is no way to it. Therefore there is also no "only way." Truth is not found by striving for attainment of a goal in the future, but it has to do with questioning, wondering, and seeing what is this instant.

I am not engaged in comparing what we are doing here with what other people are doing. If other people wish to compare, that's up to them, but can one detect comparison in the mind and see the effects of comparison in our daily life, in our relationships? As long as I compare myself with you, with an image I have of you, how can I be in direct touch with you.

Jacek: Recently you have decided to drop even the word "Zen" from the name of your center and it will be called simply Springwater Center. Do you feel that by doing it you are severing your last connection tying you to your former teacher and the Zen patriarchs?

Toni: The ties to tradition and teachers were severed long ago. The reason that the word "Zen" was dropped was that even though we were using it in, let's say, a "generic" way, it remained a "brand name." In many people's minds "Zen" is firmly associated with its specific tradition, with Buddhism, with Japanese cultural patterns, or just something "oriental." There is either attachment to the name and what it stands for, or people do not even want to come to this place because of their negative associations with "Zen." Incidentally, even though we have registered our name just as "Springwater Center," we are adding "for meditative inquiry and retreats" wherever needed. Springwater is the place, geographically, where the center is located. With this beautiful word, we don't have to look for any other.

(Copyright 1987 Tony Packer)

## Conscious Living, Conscious Dying

A Two-Day Workshop with Zen Master Seung Sahn and Stephen Levine.

**Z**en Master Seung Sahn is an internationally renowned teacher of Zen meditation. His deep understanding of the nature of mind, emotions and energy is presented with humor and compassion.

**S**tephen Levine is nationally known for his work with the terminally ill, their loved-ones and caretakers. Having studied and worked with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross and Ram Dass, his methods combine unusual open-heartedness, awareness and innovative healing techniques.

**B**lending their skills together for the first time, Stephen Levine and Zen Master Seung Sahn will offer a two-day program of lectures, healing techniques, guided exercises and small group meetings. There will be ample time for talking with the teachers, as well as time for participants to share with one another.

**& 3 DAY  
RETREAT**

with **Zen Master Seung Sahn**  
June 29 - July 2

workshop
KUZS members, \$60 non-members, \$95
Participants must enroll for the full two days.
retreat
KUZS members, \$15/day non-members, \$24/day
Participants must register for a minimum of two days.

Send a non-refundable \$10 deposit for the workshop or the retreat. If you are registering for both, please send a deposit for each event.

For more information, call

**PROVIDENCE ZEN CENTER**  
528 Pound Road, Cumberland,  
RI 02864. 401-769-6464.

Note: the deadline to register for either retreat is June 19.