

SPECIAL ISSUE

Kong-an Practice in America

Can Clear Seeing Be Attained Without Koan Practice?

An Interview With Toni Packer

Interviewed By Jacek Dobrowolski

After many years as a student of Philip Kapleau Roshi, Toni Packer gave up being co-leader of his Zen Center in Rochester, New York, and in 1981 founded a city center there and later a country center in Springwater, NY. The Springwater Center has a staff of 10 and around 200 members in this country and abroad. Toni, author of *Seeing Without Knowing*, was interviewed in July 1986 by Jacek Dobrowolski, a Zen student and scholar from Warsaw, Poland who was living at Cambridge Zen Center.

Primary Point: Many Zen Masters insist that clear seeing cannot be attained without koan practice. Now you say that all systems condition the mind. You work with people allowing them to bring and to work on their everyday problems, the koans of their own lives and you work by looking at that together, but don't you feel that a certain Springwater jargon or conditioning can emerge in this process?

Toni Packer: Of course it can. It does! As to the statement that only through koan practice can there be clear seeing- how does anybody know? Why does one make such a claim? On what basis?

If one is trained in koan practice one will advocate this method, and if one has had a different training one advocates that. We propagate what we think we know. It is

safe. But truth cannot be known.

It is as simple as that. Insight, truth, clarity, en-

lightenment- whatever word you may give to what is unnamable- is not the effect of any cause. It has no method, no training. It has nothing to do with the conditioned, trained mind. So why condition people's minds by saying, "Do this practice in order to attain enlightenment?" We all want clarity and safety, and wonderful experiences, because we feel so utterly empty, insecure and afraid. As long as we

are afraid and wanting, we are totally vulnerable to ever-new programs and exploitation.

Now what is a koan- what does it mean to work on a koan? If a koan is a single word like "MU," working on it means voicing it (audibly or inaudibly) on the exhalation, trying to get totally absorbed in it to the exclusion of everything else, even to the point of self-forgetfulness, using it to shut out distracting or disturbing movements of the mind- straining hard not to let go of it day or night. Working in this way, the mind is clearly not in a state of open, choiceless attention.

Other koans, in brief, are statements, descriptions of dialogues which are incomprehensible and perplexing to our conditioned, fragmented way of thinking. The thinking mind cannot gain insight into them. Many koans are the very expression of a mind in which the deceptions of self-centered thinking are clearly revealed and dispelled. The beauty of a koan is the beauty of mind without the limitation of self. Thinking about it cannot touch it. So the question is: can a koan be seen and understood directly, without any sense of duality, division? In this way it reveals its meaning.

Our way of living, since time immemorial, has been a series of contradic-

tory, perplexing, incomprehensible events created by the fragmented, self-enclosed, conditioned mind. Except for brief moments of pleasure and joy, we have existed in conflict, strife, violence and

unspeakable sorrow, at the same time yearning for peace, harmony and happiness for ourselves. We have not clearly understood the root cause of this dilemma. What is it? Can it be resolved? Does this question concern us profoundly? If it does, will there be the energy to find out? Can one begin to watch how one thinks, speaks, reacts, emotes and interrelates in actuality and in fantasy?



Toni Packer

"We propagate what we think we know. It is safe. But the truth cannot be known."

When the mind is in an acute state of questioning, attending, not knowing- what difference does it make whether it is koan that is questioned or this very instant of reality? What matters immensely is seeing, not any object of seeing.

What I have observed with koan work in myself and others is that it hooks so deeply into our already-conditioned

ing to be trapped in it? If we human beings do not understand ourselves freely, profoundly, from moment to moment, there cannot be any intelligent, loving and compassionate relationship among us. Division and sorrow will persist.

Primary Point: People put you down saying that this kind of practice does not aim at self-realization.

"When the mind is in an acute state of questioning, attending, not knowing—what difference does it make whether it is koan that is questioned or this very instant of reality?"

programs. One uses the koan as means to an end. It can also be used to have something to do while sitting- something to occupy the mind rather than face present difficulties. A Zen teacher once said to me: "If people didn't have subsequent koans to work on after passing their first one, they would leave the center." What is this mind, what is this instant when there is nothing to do, nothing to accomplish, nothing to hold on to?

While working on koans, does one seriously and continuously look at the feelings of accomplishment and pride which may be generated by passing a koan? Is one aware of this? Koan work has a built-in system of rewards. It ties in with our age-old feelings of success and failure. Does one continue to depend on the teacher who passes or rejects? Is one in awe of the teacher and senior students who have already passed all these koans?

Does one see the emerging feeling of elitism? Of having something others don't, or not having what others do? Is there ambition and competitiveness among koan students— comparisons about who passed which and how many koans? These comparisons take place among students and teachers alike. It happens when we get involved in any system. Can one become aware of this in all simplicity and be done with it? If not, self-centeredness, strife, violence and sorrow will persist, no matter how many koans are seen through. So whether the work is a koan or any other problem- is the mind clearly aware of these traps?

Primary Point: Do you believe that our personal problems can carry us beyond our personal ego to that point of silence and emptiness to which koans are supposed to lead us?

Toni: Our personal problem is our personal ego and it leads us around in circles. Emptiness and silence aren't a place to be reached by methods. Nothing can lead to it. Quiet and empty states of mind can be induced through different practices, but we are not talking about induced quietness and emptiness

Something entirely new comes into being when the brain, together with the rest of the organism, isn't mechanically engaged in wanting, striving, comparing, fearing, suppressing, attaining, defending, following, believing, and so forth. It is not a question of getting rid of these movements, but seeing without a shadow of deception what is actually happening inwardly and outwardly.

Can the vast, running river mind slow down, come to a halt? Not practicing to halt it, but seeing what is there and ceas-

Toni: What does one mean by self-realization? A powerful experience which will settle our daily problems? Awakening to a state of nirvana, bliss, ecstasy? Is that what it is thought to be? I am asked about this all the time. We all have read so many accounts of enlightenment experiences and one wants that experience for oneself. One will give anything for it, practice any method, follow any teacher.

What is self-realization if not the immediate, moment-to-moment insight into the processes of the human mind? Can fear and wanting be instantly seen and directly understood- not just the present feeling of it, but seeing the root cause and the inevitable consequences that follow? Not thinking or speculating about it, but a penetrating awareness which dispels what is seen. This seeing, this undivided openness, has nothing to do with any experience. There is no experiencer in it- no realizer, no recipient of anything. It is something entirely new and unknowable.

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