SPECIAL ISSUE

## Kong-an Practice in America

Zenson Gifford- "What is a Koan?"

(Continued from page 5.)

koan practice? It is only when one is involved in analyzing that one steps back and sees things. If you look at the koan Mu as a thing then it is outside of you. Mu is not a thing or concept because it defies definition. What happens when you become the koan with no separation- in essence when you die to the koan? At that moment there is Mu, mind, all things/no things. At the moment one truly enters the koan, what is put where? At that timeless moment, what is there?

I have tried to address some of the criticisms leveled against Zen koan practice. In considering such criticisms, an analogy comes to mind. I once met a student who was having a great deal of conflict with her university professor, an authority on Chinese culture. The student had grown up in Taiwan and knew a great deal about the Chinese people. On the other hand, the professor, the so-called authority, had never been to China.

No matter how many books one reads, if you've never been to a place you can't really know it. It's only by being there that one gets a real taste through all the sights, sounds, smells, etc. But if one only visits for a short time the experience tends to be colored by comparisons with one's own native land and culture. It is only after a person has lived in a place for some years that one begins to know it.

It is the same with koan practice. It cannot be understood conceptually because it's whole function is to take you beyond the conceptual mind. Likewise, if it's only practiced a short time or in a superficial manner then one will have all sorts of comparisons and criticisms. One is not yet able, as Mumonkan says, "to

emancipate oneself from one's previous learning." But when one really enters into the koans for years of training then it is obviously a different matter.

Zen is considered a very direct and practical way. Because something works, it is used. This is why so many have taken up koan practice over the years. Ever since Joshu first uttered "Mu", this and similar koans have brought countless people in various times and cultures to awakening.

What is essential to realize is that it is not only the practice per se that is important but also how it is entered into. That is, the person makes the practice. Basically it depends on the student's aspiration, and to some extent the teacher's pointing. The koan must be brought alive- it must be allowed to come to life, to be the focus' for one's own natural questioning.

The world is a wonderfully vast fabric of spiritual paths and religious traditions. Just as Zen Buddhism isn't the way for everyone, koan practice isn't the only way for Zen practitioners. Indeed, as one student joked, this is probably a good thing or there would be some awfully long dokusan waiting lines.

It has been my somewhat limited experience in seventeen years of working on and with koans that while they can have short-comings if not used properly, their potential is vast. People spend much of their lives living in shadows, sometimes looking at the shape, size and intensity while not looking at the root cause- not seeing what really blocks the light. Working on a koan can open one's eyes to the moon of truth. Although the light is sometimes obscured by clouds of delusion the moon is always shining.

What is a koan? Only you can answer this for yourself.

### Contributors Wanted For Next Issue

Our October Issue will contain a feature entitled "Right Livelihood: Buddhist practice and the American Workplace." We need contributors to write on how their everyday occupation reconciles with their practice and vice-versa. How does the one contribute to and support the other? What kind of conflicts arise? If you're interested, Write or call Bruce Sturgeon (Editor), 5 Devonshire Place, Asheville, NC 28803, (704)254-8140.

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## Old Koans, New Koans, One Koan

by Jan Chozen Bays, Sensei

Ves, I use koans in working with students of Zen. I use koans constantly in my own Zen work. Koans are not old stories in dusty books about monks who lived a thousand years ago, irrelevant to life today. "Old" koans are fresh and relevant, and there are "new" koans everywhere. The key to working with a koan is to plunge into it, become wholly immersed in it. A koan can't be figured out logically. The answer has to be experienced with the whole of body & mind. Breathe the words of the koan as you sit, bring the words of the koan up

during the day, at work, in the car. If you are working on an "old koan", and you seem to be standing on the outside, change the words a little if you need to, to make it as urgent as it was to the people involved originally.

Mumonkan Case 16: Ummon said, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your seven-piece robe at the sound of the bell?" Perhaps this koan seems foreign because the Mumon was talking to male monks in Chipa about putting on their kesa (kasa) and you are an American housewife. So change it to make it yours. Carry it with you all day long to make it constantly fresh. "The world is vast and wide. Why do you put on your bathrobe at the sound of the stupid alarm clock?" Or, "The world is vast and wide. Why do you pull the cookies out of the oven when the timer goes off?" Or, "The world is vast and wide. Why then do you feed the same mouths and wash the same dirty dishes over and over and over?"

This koan talks directly to us all, no matter what age, sex or condition, because it is talking about the fundamental matter of who we are, how vast and wide we truly are, and how vast

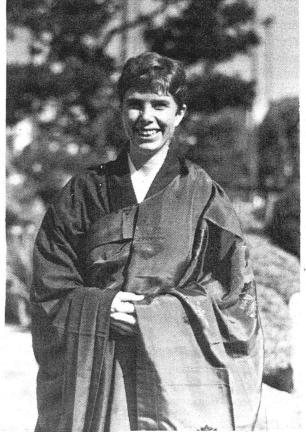
and wide is clearly revealed by the smallest, even unconscious, action.

"New" koans are everywhere. The best ones are those which leap out and grab you. One of my students was talking about addiction and addictive behavior the other day. The worst addiction we have is the addiction to the notion of who we think we are and how we think things should be. We are pitiful in our addiction. How do we know when we touch that addiction? When we become angry....or afraid, which is the emotional level just under and usually disguised by, anger.

Anytime we become upset or angry, right there we have been caught by a "new" koan. Someone has just challenged our idea of who we think we are. We have been given a clue as to where we are stuck. Explore that anger/fear and see what notion it leads to.

For example, I used to work with someone I did not like. To be in a meeting with him drove me crazy. As soon as he spoke I began to squirm and eventually to seethe. No matter that a lot of people agreed with me that this guy was a "jerk", I knew that my reaction was out of proportion, and I had to work on it to see what it said about ME. I sat with it for several days, trying to narrow my distress down to a single characteristic that bothered me. I eventually realized that what really got my goat was that (I felt that) he was lazy. And even worse, he got away with it. No one challenged him or made him do his fair share.

Once I had gotten to the crux of what characteristic irritated me, I had to turn it back on myself. How was I in the laziness



Jan Chozen Bays, Sensei began Zen practice in 1973, doing zazen in a corner of the bedroom while her 2 year old took naps. She started study with Maezumi Roshi in 1974, received jukai in 1975, tokudo in 1979, and became a sanctioned teacher and Dharma heir of Maezumi Roshi in 1983. She moved to Portland, Oregon in 1984 and is teacher in residence at the Zen Community of Oregon. She is a pediatrician and medical director of the child abuse programs at Emanuel Hospital in Portland. Her husband is a therapist for sex offenders at the Oregon State Penitentiary. They have three children, two cats and a big garden.

> department? The opposite. Miss Compulsive Worker. Stay up all night to finish a project. Do it myself rather than delegate to someone else. Haven't allowed myself to take a non-working vacation in 15 years. Suddenly I realized that I was actually jealous of this man. He was "lazy" and I never let myself even relax. I'd stumbled onto an idea of who I was and how I had to be ...busy, productive, compulsive. As soon as I realized this, my excess emotion at him dissolved, and I was able to leave "him" and go back to work

Anger is a very good koan, enabling us to step back a little from our self- notion and see where we are attached. Do we have to do anything about what we discover? I don't know. Depends. Often just stepping back to see something is enough. Often just becoming aware of something, like a little piece of our notion of self, means the beginning of the end of that something. Many koans show evidence that Zen teachers used anger skillfully to poke at their students' addictions, unbalance them and help them step "off the top of a hundred foot pole".

#### Jan Chozen Bays- "...One Koan"

(Continued from page 6.)

Another example. A student came to me in sesshin, unsure if she should work on Zen koans because she was a Catholic. I asked her if she had any questions within Catholicism which were bothering her. She said that she had been worried over the question "Is there anything outside the will of God?" Perfect koan! She worked intently on it all sesshin. In Zen terms we could re-phrase it, "Is there anything outside of Buddha nature?" Is jealousy outside the will of God? Is child abuse outside the will of God? Is a toilet brush outside of Buddha nature?

This is precisely Joshu's Mu, the first case in Mumonkan. "Does a dog have Buddha nature?" The exact wording doesn't matter so much when someone has a koan which has grabbed them by the throat and gives them little rest.

There are koans everywhere. Take AIDS. It stands for Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome. Take it one word at a time. What does acquired mean? The dictionary is one of my favorite Zen texts. I use it when I'm stuck and can't get "inside" a word in a koan. Acquire means to come into possession of. It comes from ad + quaerere, to seek, obtain. Do we acquire a thing out of the blue? Do we have to seek it or be accessible to it in some way? Is there a mutual relationship between the thing acquired and the acquirer?

(No, I'm not talking about that tired New Age notion that people bring on their illnesses and can get rid of them if they only try hard enough. And by referring to a dictionary I'm not speaking about an intellectual dissection of each word in a koan. I'm talking about using any tool to help immerse ourselves in the koan the way a swimmer is immersed in water...only more intimate...breathe, eat, sleep, walk and sweat the koan.)

There is the koan "The Buddha Holds Out a Flower". Seeing the flower, Mahakashyapa was enlightened. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and devoted follower, asked Mahakashyapa after the Buddha's death, "What did the Buddha transmit to you besides the gold kesa?" He was hoping to "acquire" the same thing that the Buddha "gave" to Mahakashyapa. What is it we acquire or "un-acquire" with Zen practice?

How about deficiency? Is there any deficiency anywhere? Isn't everything whole and complete just as it is? What do we lack that we seek in practicing Zen? This is the koan of Enyadetta, who thought she lost her head and had to work hard to find it again.

Do I use koans with every student? No, only the ones who wish to use them, or those who have already been seized by the throat by a koan they can't shake. Do I follow the entire formal system of koan study? I haven't started a student on it yet, but it may become appropriate in the future. I am too young as a teacher to have settled upon a way of working, and students are too diverse to have one course of study for all.

I feel that my own formal koan study was immensely valuable, testing and deepening in a way that would be difficult to reproduce out of the blue. When it becomes appropriate, I would be honored to offer that experience to another student. I loved, hated, delighted in and dreaded koan study. I looked forward to each new koan like a new food to be tried...kind of like working your way through a huge cookbook, recipe by recipe. I wanted to chew them up and digest them. I'd finish one and be full, and sometimes exhausted, and then I'd be starved for more. Nourishing and delicious.

It was also horrible...when big chunks fell away. Like having your house hit by a wrecking ball. I dreaded going in to dokusan (private interview) to present my answer, to face those hard eyes that brooked no hesitancy and saw any unclarity instantly. I often emerged with sweat running in little streams under my arms. I would go back to the zafu after my "answer" had been rejected, sit, mad, for an hour or a day, sure that I had explored all that a particular koan had to offer, then sigh and plunge back in. Sure enough, another level would open up.

Anyone who practices is working on koans, whether acknowledged or not, whether we adopt or reject the formal koan system. We are working on the koan that underlies all koans, we are this fundamental koan, "Who am I?"

#### Soen Sa Nim Interview (Continued from page 3.)

Our style of kong-an practice means not holding kong-an. The old style was to go into the mountains, cut off outside world and just work on one kong-an. Our style of practice means to learn how to function correctly in everyday life through kong-an practice. So, when you are doing something, just do it. In that doing, there is no thinking, no subject, no object. Inside and outside become one.

In our style of practice, correct kongan practice, correct life and correct direction are all the same. If we make our everyday life clear, then kong-an practice is no problem. Then kong-an practice is not special.

If our everyday life is clear, then kongan practice is not necessary. Then kongan practice is not for me. It is only to teach other people. So we use kong-ans, old kong-ans and new kong-ans, only to teach other people. Sometimes a person's own life may be very clear, but they don't understand how to teach other people how to function correctly in everyday life. Also, they don't understand how to teach truth and correct way. When clear life, truth, and correct way come together in a meticulous way, moment-to-moment, that's kong-an practice. Only "my life is clear" is not enough. For example, if you eat only one kind of food all the time, your body will have a problem. So, your body needs different kinds for a good balance, for a correct body.

PP: Can you explain your system of kongan teaching? What are the different kinds of like this kong-ans you use?

SSN: We use four kinds of like this kong- ans:

WITHOUT LIKE THIS

=True Emptiness

=Primary Point

=Silence

=Complete Stillness

Example kong-ans: "What is true emptiness?" "What is complete stillness?"

BECOME ONE LIKE THIS = KATZ!

= Correct demonstration of

= Hit

**Primary Point** 

Example kong-ans: Buddha picked up a flower, Mahakasyapa smiled. What does it mean?

ONLY LIKE THIS

=Meaning is Truth

= True function of **Primary Point** 

Example kong-ans: Spring comes, grass grows by itself. 3x3=9. "What is Buddha?" "Three pounds of flax."

JUST LIKE THIS

= Just doing is correct life

= One-point

**Correct Function** 

Example kong-ans: Go drink tea. Go wash your bowls.

We can understand these four kinds of kong-ans in this way. You go into the interview room; the teacher places a cup and pen before you and asks you if the cup and the pen are the same or different. The four kinds of like this answers will be:

WITHOUT LIKE THIS = Maintain complete silence, a don't know mind.

BECOME ONE LIKE THIS = Hit the floor or shout KATZ!

ONLY LIKE THIS = Saying "cup is cup, pen is pen"

JUST LIKE THIS = Drink from the cup, write with the pen.

SSN: So, "Just like this" is Just Doing It, Correct Function, Correct Everyday Life.

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