

SPECIAL ISSUE

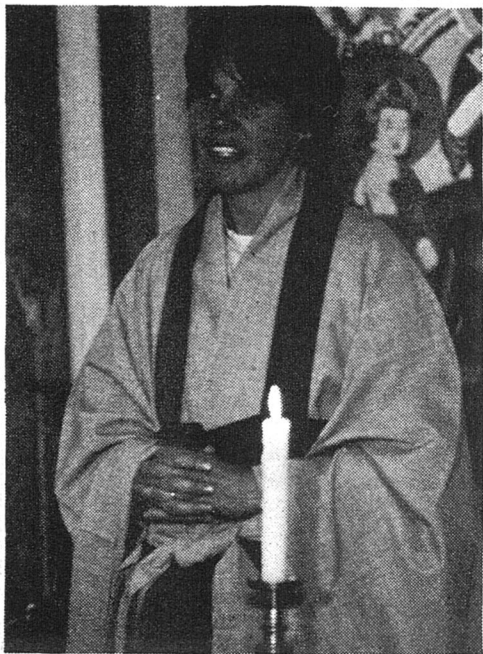
Kong-an Practice in America

A Kong-an Is Nothing Other Than The Present Moment

By Barbara Rhodes

The function of a kong-an is to spark a question, to give rise to that which in the Zen tradition has been called the *Great Question*. When the mind "questions", it awakens and opens. This moment of questioning, however fleet it is, is a manifestation of a pure and unconditioned mind. In this moment all filters of pre-conception and pre-judgement are taken away and only pure questioning remains.

This "questioning" is vastly different from "checking". A "checking" mind is always resisting, trying to find an argument based on its preconceived ideas and opinions. A "questioning" mind on the other hand, is one which is stuck, which truly doesn't know. This mind only asks, "What is this?" The mind that truly asks, "What is this?" does so in



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response to something in the present moment,

whether it be a concrete life situation, a feeling, an emotion, an incomprehensible thought or whatever. In asking, "What is this?", the mind stops assuming, even if only for a fleeting second, stops operating on pre-conceptions and, instead, feels and looks attentively at the moment at hand.

There are two stories that have helped me tremendously to understand how kong-an practice applies to daily life. As it happens, both stories are about mothers. The first story was told by Zen Master Seung Sahn when someone asked him how to "keep" a kong-an:

A mother of four has just watched her oldest child board a plane headed for Vietnam. In the months that follow she attends to her family, her part-time job, her friends and community. She plays bridge, goes to her daughter's class play, shops for food, etc. Through all of this she never forgets that her son is in Vietnam. She never doesn't feel some fear and concern. There is never a time when she doesn't wonder where her son is, or what he is doing. She always asks herself: "When is my son coming home?" Because of her tremendous love for her son, she always has him in the recesses of her mind. At the same time she is totally present in her daily life.

Kong-an practice can be like this mother's mind. The "Great Question" of a kong-an, like the "Great Question" in the mother's mind about her son, remains with you, always in the recesses of your mind. The kong-an reminds you always to

ask, look into "What is this?", rather than to *know*.

The second story is about a mother lion. This mother lion takes her five cubs out for their very first walk. They instinctively form a single line behind her. Up until this point, she has been their only source of love, warmth, protection and nourishment; their world so far has been safe and most generous. So as they walk, the cubs take in the sights, sounds, and

smells around them and innocently delight in nature's gifts. Suddenly, the mother lion turns to one of the cubs and bats him five feet into the brush. The cub is shocked and hurt. Why would the thus-far warm and benevolent mother do such a thing? The cub scrambles back to the line and continues with the others. The mother has just taught the cub to be careful, be aware. She did it in the simplest, most direct way she knew.

A kong-an is able to wake up the mind in the same way. An

alert mind can see through the kong-an and bring it to a wholesome conclusion, like a wise lion walking through the forest and being perfectly in tune with all that is there. As the mother lion swings her great paw towards her child, she has no thought as to being superior or better. She only wants the child to learn. A genuine Zen master shares this mind.

The questions that a kong-an can raise can bring a deeper attentiveness to both sitting meditation and to daily activities. Just as a weight attached to a fishing line can help the hook to sink deeply in the ocean rather than bobbing on the water's surface, a kong-an can guide the mind to places of deeper insight, to places that are often difficult to enter without a persistent, steady direction. Using the mind's natural tendency to question gives it more focus and perception.

Thus, bringing the mind to the present moment by asking, "What is this?" is to enter the space of *not-knowing*. Trusting this process of not-knowing is to go beyond the edge of what is familiar. Going beyond the edge of what is familiar is to let go of the self-imposed constructs of reality that we have created for ourselves and to which we cling so desperately. It is to look at each moment with a pure awareness, rather than through colored filters. So, maybe when you ask someone, "How are you?", you are *really* asking, really open to see, feel and listen to the response. Then true intimacy is possible and compassion naturally arises.

Poep Sa Nim- "Dharma on the Radio"
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radio. You are listening to me and I'm talking to you. Without energy we cannot do this. So, this energy is very important.

When you attain this absolute world you are not only perceiving karma; you can also give energy to others. Your body is like a generator of electricity. But it is not only giving; it is actually balancing people's energy. For example, when your mind is sick it is not because you don't have enough energy. It means your energy is not balancing out. When your body is sick, it is not that you don't have energy. You are balancing your energy. So, by perceiving a person's karma, a master can balance their energy, if necessary. But it is not enough if I only help the person by perceiving their karma and balancing out their energy. Because then they will only attach to me and my method. This is not correct Buddhism. Therefore, we teach them how to practice, how to attain their true self. Then they are able to save themselves and find their own, true master. When we do that, we know what human beings are about and what life is about. It is very important to find our correct human beings' job.

Question: You said that the energy goes through you like through a generator to help others. Is that because you practice mind-to-mind transmission?

PSN: It is not only mind-to-mind transmission. Actually, mind comes from thinking. As I said just now, before-thinking is absolute energy. So, when your mind is clear you can receive and utilize this universal energy to help others.

Question: Is this what we call "cosmic energy"?

PSN: Actually, the energy does not have a name. "Cosmic" or whatever, it's people who make the names. For example, the blue sky never says, "I am blue sky". This means that this world does not have words and speech. That's what you call, if you want to, mind-to-mind. But I don't think that that is the correct word. If you want to explain it, this is complete stillness and extinction. That's what you call absolute energy. So, if you want to call it cosmic, I don't think that is clear.

Question: What is the energy center for the human being?

PSN: Energy is everywhere. It is right in front of you. But we can't see it because when we receive our human form it is as though we are blocked by the six senses. So, when you take off the six senses, which means when you attain truth, you can use the six senses very clearly and then you can see right in front of you. This is absolute attainment. Someone who is a master is not special, which means he or she attains through their practicing. Everyone has this, but it can only appear when you cease to be controlled by your karma. Absolute attainment is not a knowledge, it is not intellectual. You have to attain for yourself. For example, when you eat salt, you can say that it is

salty. But you cannot express or capture in words for another how salty it is. Same with sugar and honey. They have a different sweetness. But until you put them in your mouth, you don't know for yourself what the different tastes are.

Question: Poep Sa Nim, you attained Enlightenment. What is the correct function of Enlightenment?

PSN: Enlightenment is not special. Everybody already is enlightened but we cannot see it because we are covered by our form. You and everyone are already enlightened but you have not re-discovered that. When you discover, that is what you call Enlightenment. The reason you attain Enlightenment is not that you want to be clairvoyant or a hermit or something for yourself. In other words, you attain Enlightenment to live life correctly, without any condition, any suffering. It is not special.

When I was eighteen I attained, but to me that wasn't special. That was the right thing to do in life, in order to live correctly with others. Enlightenment is not kept for yourself. Everything that you do, you have to do with others, for others. Exist with and help others. That's what you call Enlightenment.

Daido Looi- "Koan Study"

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in realizing themselves. There is no correct "answer" to a koan. Seeing it is a state of consciousness in which our usual reference system has been abandoned and the thing itself is seen directly and intimately. This intimacy transforms our way of seeing ourselves and the universe. Once realized it is no longer possible to live our lives in the old way.

These words represent one experience of koans, and as words they remain dead until you the reader make them your own, bring them to life in the moment-to-moment reality of your own existence. At that time these words, having fulfilled their meager function, should be thrown away, so that the spiritual journey may continue as it is and always has been from the beginningless beginning- boundless and unhindered.

John Daido Looi, Sensei is the spiritual leader and resident Zen teacher of Zen Mountain Monastery in Mt. Tremper, New York, and the spiritual leader of the "Mountain and River Order," an organization of affiliate Zen centers and sitting groups in the U.S. and abroad. Rev. Looi's interest in Zen began in the sixties as Zen practice first emerged in America. His training is in both the rigorous school of koan Zen and in the subtle teachings of Dogen's Zen. Looi is a Dharma successor of Hakuyu Taizan Maezumi Roshi.

Looi's background as scientist, artist, and Zen priest affords his students the rich opportunity to experience Zen Buddhism in its unique and emerging American form. Looi's other published works include: The Way of Everyday Life (Maezumi & Looi, Center Publications) as well as articles in various periodicals.

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