

## **Be Who You Are: An Interview with Jean Klein**

By Stephan Bodian

I first met Jean Klein in the spring of 1988 when a Buddhist friend urged me attend one of his dialogues. I didn't know anything about Advaita Vedanta, and I certainly wasn't looking for a teacher. In fact, after nearly 20 years of Buddhist practice, I had become disenchanted with the teacher-student relationship that lies at the heart of the Buddhist tradition. Many of the teachers I knew used their power and authority to manipulate and exploit their students, and I had ended up leaving the Zen priesthood myself because I didn't feel comfortable with the identity and role of teacher that was gradually being thrust upon me. I went to my first dialogue with a blend of curiosity and skepticism.

Initially I was put off by the language Jean used (which was quite different from the Buddhist terminology to which I had become accustomed) and by the rapt attention and apparent adulation of his students. Participants didn't engage in formal meditation, and there seemed to be an emphasis on detachment that made me uncomfortable. Yes, I liked the simplicity, the directness, the absence of ritual, robes, and incense, but I was suspicious that this might be a cult. Still, I could sense a freedom in the absence of form, and I went back to see Jean a number of times.

In an attempt to get a better measure of the man, and to share his unconventional views on yoga with our readers, I decided to interview Jean for Yoga Journal. When I arrived at the house where he was staying, he came bounding down the stairs to meet me in a pastel jumpsuit, showing the vigor and flexibility of someone half his 76 years. As we talked I was struck by his openness, his ease, his delight in every moment, and the rapt quality of his attention. He seemed completely undefended, without a position or agenda, and his words seemed to arise not from his mind or his training, but from a deep well-spring of silence. I was intrigued. (The transcript of the interview follows this introduction.)

Several months later, as we sat together for tea during an eight-day retreat, I had a shocking, visceral realization: this man didn't take me to be his student, and he didn't take himself to be a teacher--in fact, he didn't take himself to be anyone or anything at all. I had become so accustomed to teachers who had a well-established identity and agenda and saw me in terms of my place in their scheme. But here was someone who was empty, transparent, devoid of expectation--someone, in other words, who, unlike most of the Buddhist teachers I had met, actually embodied the teachings of emptiness and no self. In that moment I recognized that I had found the teacher I didn't know I was looking for.

For the next 10 years I devoted myself to Jean and to the process of awakening that he helped to catalyze. Unlike the more enigmatic pronouncements and emphasis on practice of the Zen

tradition, Jean's words were direct pointers to the truth beyond words, and his dialogues and retreats were often punctuated by long silences that I found especially evocative. In the following interview, blended from two separate YJ interviews published several years apart, Jean provides a succinct introduction to what he called the "direct approach." (The interview and the original preface are taken from my book *Timeless Visions, Healing Voices*.)

### Preface

Jean Klein is a master of *Advaita Vedanta*, the philosophical culmination of the Hindu tradition. According to this teaching of ultimate non-dualism, the entire universe is, in essence, a single reality – consciousness, the true self of all beings – to which each of us is inherently capable of awakening.

Like his illustrious predecessors in this century, Ramana Maharshi (1879 – 1950) and Nisargadatta Maharaj (1897 – 1981), Klein does not draw on the terminology or doctrine of any tradition, but instead speaks directly from his own experience. Indeed, he is constantly seeking new ways to express the inexpressible, realizing that if he uses a word or phrase too long, his students will attach to it and thus fail to see the reality to which it merely refers. In true Advaita fashion (and much like the "direct pointing" of the early Zen Masters), his utterances themselves have the capacity to open our eyes, if only for an instant, to our essential nature.

In person, Jean Klein has the vigor, freshness, and attentive curiosity of a child. He speaks English slowly, with an accent that blends his native Czech, the German of his school days, and the French he has spoken in France and in Switzerland since before the war. Of his early background he talks little, believing it to be of no importance in the critical work of realizing our true nature.

In his latest book, *Transmission of the Flame*, he does admit to an idyllic early home life in Czechoslovakia (and later Vienna) between the wars, where he developed his lifelong fascination with music and began practicing the violin. At the University of Berlin, he continued his study of music while also preparing for the practice of medicine. When the Nazis came to power, he fled with his family to France and then Algeria, where they remained for the duration of the war.

But the inner search, which had begun inside him as an adolescent, found no fulfillment in the West, and in the early 1950s Klein packed up his wife and two daughters and moved to India, where he hoped to find a culture that encouraged self-inquiry. In Bangalore, not long after he arrived, he met a Sanskrit professor who impressed him with his gentle openness, humility, and lack of striving. After several visits, this teacher, whom he called Pandiji, introduced Klein to a direct perception of his real nature, which, over the course of three years, he was able to deepen and clarify.

During this period, Klein lived very intensely in not-knowing, looking at the world with openness and receptivity “without formulating conclusions.” He also continued to have regular contact with Pandiji, which took the form of lengthy conversations that "exhausted thinking" as well as times of just being together in silence. "His being was the transmission," Klein says. "In a real teacher, this is all transmission is."

Then, one day in Bombay, Klein looked up at some flying birds and immediately found himself permanently awake in the openness which before had only been a transient state.

In 1957, at Pandiji's suggestions, Klein returned to Europe to share his realization with others. Yet over the years he has established no centers or organization. Instead, he prefers to travel from place to place answering questions and teaching his special brand of hatha yoga to those who gather, in six European countries and the United States, to study with him. Six collections of his dialogues have been published, including *Who am I?* and *The Ease of Being*.

The approach to yoga Klein teaches, which he calls bodywork, or the body approach, is a gentle, nondirective exploration of the interface between the physical body and the energy or subtle body. "Stay with the feeling," he advises students as he leads them in asanas or preparatory poses. "Don't get caught in effort or end-gaining. Keep the feeling alive."

The goal, according to Klein, is not greater flexibility or alignment, but rather a body and mind that are relaxed, open, spacious, and thereby more receptive to spiritual insight or awakening. Indeed, hatha yoga it is little more than a "pedagogical device" for Klein, a skillful means in the larger work of "transmitting the flame" of self-realization. Yet he is dedicated to this "pastime," as he calls it, and his teaching style is at once energetic and precise.

Klein first became interested in the connection between thought, feeling, and movement while studying music and medicine at the university. Before leaving for India, he had already begun exploring "certain movements for channeling the dispersed energy in the body," and while studying with Pandiji he journeyed several times to learn hatha yoga from the world-renowned pundit Sri Krishnamacharya. He also received guidance in the Kashmir approach to working with the energy body from a wandering *muni* (silent sage) he met in Bangalore. But he is quick to point out that, although these two men helped him refine his understanding of the body, he had only one true teacher, the one who introduced him to the nature of reality.

### **Interview**

*Jean, I find you and your teaching interesting for a number of reasons. For one thing, you are a Westerner who went to India long before such journeys were common and ended up attaining a high degree of realization. What prompted you to go to India?*

I was hoping to find a society where people lived without conflict. Also, I think, I was hoping to find a center in myself that was free from conflict – the kind of forefeeling or foretaste of truth.

*While in India, you found a teacher with whom you studied for a number of years. What is the value of a teacher for the spiritual life?*

A teacher is one who lives free from the idea or image of being somebody. There is only function; there's no one who functions. It's a loving relationship; the teacher is like a friend.

*Why is that important for someone on the spiritual path?*

Because generally the relationship with other people involves asking or demanding – sex, money, psychological or biological security. Then suddenly you meet someone who doesn't ask or demand anything of you; there is only giving.

A true teacher doesn't take himself for a teacher, and he doesn't take his pupil for a pupil. When neither one takes himself to be something, there is a coming together, a oneness. And in this oneness, transmission takes place. Otherwise the teacher will remain a teacher through the pupil, and the pupil will always remain a pupil.

When the image of being something is absent, one is completely in the world but not of the world; completely in society, but at the same time free from society. We are truly a creative element when we can be in society in this way.

*What did your teacher teach you?*

The teacher brings clarity of mind. That's very important. There comes a moment when the mind has no reference and just stops, naturally, simply. There's a silence which you more and more live knowingly.

*And the teacher shows you how to do that. Did you learn any meditation or yoga techniques from your teacher?*

No. Because what you really are is never achieved through technique. You go away from what you are when you use technique.

*What about the whole notion of the spiritual path – the idea that you enter a path, follow a certain prescribed way of practice, and eventually achieve some goal?*

It belongs to psychology, to the realm of the mind. These are sweets for the mind.

*What about the argument that if you don't practice, you can't attain anything?*

You must first see that in all practice you project the goal, a result. And in projecting a result you remain constantly in the representation of what you project. What you *are* fundamentally is a natural giving up. The mind becomes clear, there is a giving up, a stillness, fulfilled with a current of love. As long as there is a meditator, there's no meditation. When the meditator disappears, there is meditation.

*So by practicing some meditation technique, you're somehow interfering with that giving up.*

Absolutely.

*How?*

You interfere because you think there is something to attain. But in reality what you *are* fundamentally is nothing to obtain, nothing to achieve. You can only achieve something that remains in the mind, knowledge. You must see the difference. Being yourself has nothing to do with accumulating knowledge.

*In certain traditions – Zen, for one – you have to meditate in order to exhaust the mind; through meditating the mind eventually wears itself out and comes to rest. Then a kind of opening takes place. But you're suggesting that the process of meditating somehow gets in the way of this opening.*

Yes. This practicing is still produced by will. For me, the point of meditation is only to look for the meditator. When we find out that the meditator, the one who looks for God, for beauty, for peace, is only a product of the brain and that there is nothing to find, there is a giving up. What remains is a current of silence. You can never come to this silence through practice, through achievement. Enlightenment – being understanding – is instantaneous.

*Once you attain this enlightenment or this current do you then exist in it all the time?*

Constantly. But it's not a state. When there's a state, there is mind.

*So in the midst of this current there is also activity?*

Oh, yes. Activity and non-activity. Timeless awareness is the life behind all activity and non-activity. Activity and non-activity are more or less superimpositions upon this (and) constrain beingness. It is behind the three states of waking, dreaming, and sleeping, beyond inhalation and exhalation. Of course, the words "beyond" and "behind" have a spatial connotation that does not belong to this beingness.

*In the midst of all activity, then, you're aware of this presence, this clarity.*

Yes, "presence" is a good word. You *are* presence, but you are not aware of it.

*You've often called what you teach the direct way, and you contrast it with what you call progressive teachings, including the classical yoga tradition and most forms of Buddhism. What is the danger of progressive teachings, why do you think the direct way is closer to the truth?*

In the progressive way, you use various techniques and gradually attain higher and higher states but you remain constantly in the mind, the subject – object relationship. Even when you give up the last object, we still remain in the duality of subject and object. You're still in a kind of blank state, and this blank state itself becomes an extremely subtle object. In this state, it is very difficult to give up the subject – object relationship. Once you've attained it, you're locked into it, fixed to it. There's a kind of quietness, but there's no flavor, no taste. To bring it to the point where the object vanishes and you abide in the beingness, a tremendous teacher or exceptional circumstances are necessary.

In the direct approach, you face the ultimate directly, and the conditioning gradually loses its impact. That takes time.

*So the ultimate melts the conditioning.*

Yes. There's a giving up, and in the end you remain in beingness.

*You say that any kind of practice is a hindrance, but at the same time you suggest practices to people. You teach a form of yoga to your students, and to some you recommend self-inquiry, such as the question, "Who am I?" It sounds paradoxical – no practice, but you teach a practice. What practices do you teach, and why do you use practices at all?*

To try to practice and to try not to practice are both practice. I would rather say listen, be attentive, and see that you really are not attentive. When you see in certain moments in daily life that you are not attentive, in those moments you are attentive. Then see how you function. That is very important. Be completely objective. Don't judge, compare, criticize, evaluate. Become more and more accustomed to listening. Listen to your body, without judging, without reference – just listen. Listen to all the situations in daily life. Listen from the whole mind, not from a mind divided by positive and negative. Look from the whole, the global. Students generally observe that most of the time they are not in this listening, although our natural way of behavior is listening.

*The path you are describing is often called the "high path with no railing" which is the most difficult path of all. The average person would not know where to begin to do what you're talking about. Most could probably be attentive to their inattention, but after that, what? There's nothing to grasp onto.*

No, there's nothing to grasp, nothing to find. But it is only apparently a difficult path; actually, I would say it is the easiest path.

*How so?*

Listening to something is easy, because it doesn't go through the mind. It is our natural behavior. Evaluation, comparison, is very difficult, because it involves mental effort. In this listening there is a welcoming of all that happens, an unfolding, and this unfolding, this welcoming, is timeless. All that you welcome appears in this timelessness, and there is a moment when you feel yourself timeless, feel yourself in welcoming, feel yourself in listening, in attention. Because attention has its own taste, its own flavor. There's attention to something, there's also attention in which there's no object: nothing to see, nothing to hear, nothing to teach, only attention.

*And in that moment of pure attention, you realize the one who's being attentive?*

I would say that this attention, completely free from choice and reflection, refers to itself. Because it is essentially timeless.

*The Zen master Dogan said: "Take the backward step that turns your light inwardly to illuminate the self." That seems to be similar to what you're talking about.*

Yes, but one must be careful. Turning the head inwardly is still doing something. There's really no inward and no outward.

*I noticed that you use the word "attention." Is this the same as what the Buddhists call mindfulness – being acutely aware of every moment, every sensation every thought?*

Mindfulness mainly emphasizes the object, the perceived, and not perceiving, which can never be an object, just as the eye can never see its seeing. The attention I'm speaking of is objectless, directionless, and in it all that is perceived exists potentially. Mindfulness implies a subject-object relation, but attention is nondual. Mindfulness is intentional; attention is the real state of the mind, free from volition.

*What about the yoga you teach, which you call "bodywork?" What is it, and why do you teach it?*

You're not your body, senses, and mind; body, senses, and mind are expressions of your timeless awareness. But to completely understand that you are not something, must first see what you are not. We cannot say "I am not the body" without knowing what it is. So you inquire, you explore, you look, you listen. And you discover that you know only certain fractions of your body, certain sensations, these are more or less reactions, resistance. Eventually you

come to a body feeling that you have never had before because when you listen, it unfolds and the sensitive body, the energy body, appears. It is most important to feel and come into contact with the energy body. Because in the beginning your body is more or less a pattern or superficial structure in the mind, made up of reactions and resistance. But when you really listen to the body, you're no longer an accomplice to these reactions, and the body comes to its natural feeling, which is emptiness. The real body in its original state is emptiness, a completely vacant state. Then you feel the appearance of the elastic body, which is the energy body. When you speak of "bodywork," it is mainly to find this energy body. Once the energy body has been experienced, the physical body works completely differently. The muscle structure, the skin, the flesh, is seen and felt in a completely new way. Even the muscles and bones function differently.

*What is the yoga that you teach like?*

It is not really yoga. It's an approach to the body based on the Kashmir teaching. The Kashmir approach is largely an awakening of the subtle energies circulating in the body. These energies are used to spiritualize the body, to make it more *sattvic* (literally, "pure" or "true"). In a *sattvic* body there is already a giving up. You see more clearly what you're not – your tensions, ideas, fixations, reactions. Once the false is seen as false, what remains is our timeless being. By spiritualizing the body, therefore, I mean orchestrating all the dispersed energy that belongs to the false. Our approach is an exploration without will or effort. It is inspired by the truth itself. The natural body is an expression, a prolongation of this truth.

*But I understand you use the traditional asanas of hatha yoga.*

Every gesture, every position the body can take, is an asana; there are certain archetypes that are not even mentioned in the classical texts of hatha yoga. But there archetypal positions par excellence that bring the harmonization of body and mind. Before going to these archetypes, however, one must prepare the body. There is no point in assuming these archetypes in a conditioned body. Otherwise, yoga is nothing more than a kind of gesticulation. What you see for the most part in Europe and the U.S. is gymnastics, gesticulation, and has nothing to do body integration.

*Do you have any other reasons for not using the term "yoga"?*

Yes. The term "yoga" means to "to join," so there must be something to join, something to attain. But join who? Join what? In a certain way the body approach helps you to listen quietly. It is through real listening to the body that you come to true equanimity of mind and body.

*Should this be practiced every day?*



Don't make a discipline of it, because in discipline there is anticipation – you are already emphasizing the goal. This doesn't belong to exploration. Practically speaking, wait until you're invited by the energy of the body itself. This recall of our natural state is not memory. It comes from the needs of the body and appears spontaneously. Go to it as you would to a dinner invitation. Otherwise you're doing violence to the body.

In your daily life you may experience moments of absolute silence in which there is nothing to do, nothing to avoid, nothing to achieve. In these moments, you're completely attuned to this stillness without any effort. Become more and more aware of these timeless moments, moments when you cannot think, because when you think, the moment is already past. Present moments free from all thoughts. Often you'll have these moments when an action is accomplished, when a thought is finished, in the evening before you fall asleep, in the morning when you first wake up. Become more and more familiar with these gaps between two thoughts or two actions – gaps which are not an absence of thought, but are presence itself. Simply let yourself be attuned to these timeless moments. You will increasingly welcome them, until one day you are established in this timelessness, knowingly the light behind all perceptions.

*So you don't recommend practicing meditation as a regular discipline?*

No.

*Talk about stillness and silence. Are these goals of spiritual life?*

When I speak of stillness and silence, nobody is still and nobody is silent; it is only silence and stillness. This stillness does not refer to somebody or something.

*So in the midst of this stillness there is activity?*

Yes. Stillness is like a hinge of the door. The body is the door that opens and closes constantly, but the stillness never moves.

*T. S. Elliott called it "the still point of the turning world." Since the practice has no goal – in fact, there isn't even a practice – what is the purpose of spiritual life at all? Obviously, most of us would say that we are not enlightened or liberated, and so we do feel a need to go somewhere where we are not. Then it seems as if we do need to undertake some kind of spiritual life. What is that like?*

I would say that we are constantly, without knowing it, being solicited by what we *are* fundamentally. But the feeling by which we are solicited is often mistaken for something objective, for a state or some relative mental stillness that we can achieve through effort or practice. We seek this state as a kind of compensation for real stillness. The moment you're

really solicited by the inner need and you face it and visit with it, you will be taken to it. But generally we are looking for compensation.

*This process you're talking about is very different from the way we usually do things. Usually we have an idea in mind of where we are going and then we set out in a certain direction and use our will to get there.*

But all doing has a certain motive. I think this motive is to be free – free from oneself, free from all conflict.

*The motive is a good one then, the response is a little misguided.*

When you become more and more acquainted with the art of observation, you'll first see that you do not observe; when you see that you don't observe, you are immediately out of the process. There is a moment, a kind of insight, when you see yourself free from all volition, free from all representation; you may feel yourself in this fullness, this moment beyond thought. It's mainly through observation and attention that you come to feel what you *are* fundamentally.

*How would you describe liberation?*

I'll give you a short answer. It is being free from yourself, free from the image you believe yourself to be. That is liberation. It's quite an explosion to see that you are nothing, and then to live completely attuned to this nothingness. The body approach I teach is more or less a beautiful pretext, because in a certain way the body is like a musical instrument that you have to tune.

*And we tune it to play on it the song of our own nothingness.*

Exactly. Liberation means to live freely in the beauty of your absence. You see at one moment that there's nothing seen and no seer. Then you live it.

*This is what you refer to as living free from psychological memory.*

Absolutely.

*Is it really possible to live in the world in this state of total openness and freedom from your own identity, doing the things we do – leading busy lives, taking care of family, etc.?*

Yes. You can live in a family perfectly without the image of being a father or mother, lover or husband. You can perfectly educate your children not to be something, and have a love relationship with them as friend, rather than as a parent.

*One teacher of vipassana meditation who is also a clinical psychologist has written, "You have to be somebody before you can be nobody," meaning that for many people, particularly now in the West, who have been brought up in dysfunctional families, there are very often such deep psychological problems, such a deep lack of self – esteem and such a conflicted or uncertain sense of who they are in an everyday way, that they must first develop psychological and emotional strength before they can embark on the path to becoming nobody. There are people who would hear you say that ultimately we have no identity, we are nothing, we live in this nothingness, and would turn around and say, "Oh, yes, I know that." What they are really talking about is their own inner emptiness, their own inner feeling of lack or deprivation, which is a kind of sickness. Do you agree that we have to be somebody before we can be nobody?*

First you must see how you function. And you'll see that you function as somebody, as a person. You live constantly in choice. You live completely in the psychological structure of like and dislike, which brings you sorrow. We must see that. If you identify yourself with your personality, it means you identify yourself as your memory because personality is memory, what I call psychological memory. In this seeing, this natural giving up, the personality goes away. And when you live in this nothingness, something completely different emerges. Instead of seeing life in terms of the projections of your personality, things appear in your life as they are, as facts. And these appearances naturally bring their own solution. You are no longer identified with your personality, with psychological memory, though your functional memory remains. Instead, there is a cosmic personality, a trans – personality, that appears and disappears when you need it. You are nothing more than a channel, responding according to the situation.