Why Play With Koans
by Sam Mowe

How would your life change if you stopped believing all of your

thoughts? What if your problems aren't real? What if your goals are just distractions? Perhaps you have everything you need right now. It's questions and possibilities like these—rather than answers—to which Zen koan practice gives rise.

For over 30 years, Zen teacher John Tarrant has been teaching people how to meditate with koans. He has developed ways to practice with koans—traditionally reserved for advanced Zen students—that beginners might find useful. Tarrant is the author of Bring Me the Rhinoceros and The Light Inside the Dark and is the editor of the new online magazine Uncertainty Club. He is the director of Pacific Zen Institute.

He spoke recently with S&H about koan practice, the benefits of uncertainty, and the relationship between creativity and spirituality.

What are koans?

Koans are an ancient method for addressing the question of who we are. The basic assumption behind koans is that everybody has a light inside them, even before they try to improve themselves. Working with koans is a way to open a gate to your consciousness so that you can experience that light.

Sometimes the format of a koan (\'kÅ-'än\) is question and answer, but the answer is designed to shift your consciousness rather than answer the question. Sometimes a koan is snatched from a poem. It might be beautiful or puzzling in a way that is designed to stop your thinking so that you can experience life directly.

If you mention koans to people, they often think of the question: What is the sound of one hand?

In the West we tend to think of koans as a can opener for the mind—and they do have that quality—but they also point to a way of being in the world. They have a way of revealing life before and after consciousness. Before waking up we really identify with our thinking—we're caught up by our fears, hopes, sorrows, and so on. But then, after working with a koan, a person might experience moments of clarity and delight, when everything seems to be right with the world. Everything isn't right because you hoped for a new car and got one, but because there is a fundamental beauty in the world. Koans can give us more access to that sense of things, which is a natural experience.

Where do koans come from?

Most of them are old, and originally from Chinese teachers, but new ones are developed all the time. Many koans are records of conversations. Perhaps someone is confused, they've heard of a teacher who might be helpful, they seek the teacher out, and then they have a conversation. Gradually, the most interesting conversations get handed down and people began to use them as a meditation topic.

Do you need to work with a teacher to work with koans?

Well, I first started in Australia, where I was intrigued by the strangeness of the koans. I didn't have access to any teachers, so I just worked within myself. But teachers are helpful because they can tell you what the best practices are, what common reactions have been to the koan, and things like that. Also, there's a huge oral tradition about what such and such a medieval teacher said or how a student responded. So it's a mystery school in that way, but it's designed to give you access to the mysteries.

Can you say more about the mysteries? One thing that is attractive about Zen is that it doesn't seem geared toward answering questions but rather toward enriching a life full of questions.

Well, one koan goes: Not knowing is the most intimate. Usually, if you're in some kind of difficulty, one of the first things you do is become an expert about it so that you know all about it. But knowing things is often the least helpful thing in difficult situations. Knowing is good at helping you come to a decision, but sometimes a decision is not necessary. However, if you don't know, you have a sense of a wide field of possibilities and openness that allows the situation to come to you.

Koans can help you open yourself to a question, to the dilemma of a situation, to the predicament of it. It's what John Keats called negative capability—when we are "capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason." That was Keats's idea of creativity.

When you allow for uncertainty, then you don't always have to find solutions. You can live through a problem until it's not a problem anymore. Instead of seeing things as problems, you see the life you are living. You can live your way into the answers. This is different from standing outside of your life and throwing stones at your problems from a safe distance.

So rather than being a practice to help you solve your problems or meet your goals, it sounds like koans challenge some of the basic assumptions we make about problems and goals.

Yes, that's right. Ultimately, koans change who's looking to to solve the problem. Most of us, I think, get committed to our worldviews and become extremely attached to our problems. "Without my problems, how would I know who I was?" an attorney said to me once.

But what if we are willing to step into a space where we don't know who we are? Then we don't know that we have any problem. Perhaps you say, "I'm always bad with math" or "I don't enjoy music" or "my enemy hates me" and you're quite sure that it's true. But you can show kindness to yourself by disbelieving it. This is why Zen is not a path of belief. It's not something to believe in, it's something to be and do. In this way, you don't try to solve

a koan but rather try to live with it and let it act on you.

Can you give me a specific example of an experience you've had working with a koan?

Many years ago, while sitting with a Korean teacher, I was practicing inside a basement with concrete block walls. It was the most unattractive environment you could imagine, and we were sitting on these thin cushions on a cold, hard floor. So I'm sitting there working with this koan about there being a light inside you, and I'm wondering to myself, Why am I here?

Then, very suddenly, while I was thinking this, but also more or less struggling along to pay attention to the koan, everything became beautiful. The ugly cinder blocks, the way somebody would drop something and it would fall onto the floor, and the way the floor joined the walls—it all became just incredibly beautiful. I realized that we get happy just as we are, not because of random chance or by changing circumstances. That experience might sound like a bumper sticker for koans, but that was the sort of joy that came for me. After that experience I thought, Oh, I understand this stuff, everyone understands it, I just don't always have access to it.

You have described koans as "little healing stories that follow us around the way a good dog would."

Yes, it's very intimate. Have you noticed how in creative work people say things like, "Oh, the poem came to me" or "I wore out working on the problem and took a walk and it solved itself"? You get access to a deeper level of yourself in which you're not so bounded, and you're connected to the flow of life. So you do have a sense of being supported and held, and that's part of the intimacy that comes with koans.

You draw a lot of parallels between poetry and koans. Can you say a few words about the relationship between creativity and spiritual life?

Spiritual life is creative work. Of course, you can have a spiritual life that has protocols, where you do a certain thing on a certain day of the week, and you hold everything in a very predictable manner. This approach can keep the psyche contained. But I think the core of spirituality is to experience and entrust yourself to processes that are bigger than the things you can manage and manipulate and scheme about every day. You can experience this when you try to write a poem because to write a poem you have to open yourself to the universe before something starts to come.

It's the same with a koan: Something you didn't plan on comes out. You may have a plan for your own development, but spirituality doesn't work like that—as if you could approach it like a shopping list or something. What if you put "I want to become kinder" on your spiritual shopping list. You might think that you need to start with trying to be kinder to other people. But what if the kindness comes from being open to yourself? If you start by not finding fault with yourself and not finding fault with your circumstances, then you're not bitter about your failures. Then it's much easier to be kind to other people because you're not gritting your teeth. So there's a spontaneous quality to actual kindness.

Is kindness always a result of an authentic spiritual life?

When you really stop believing your thoughts, you notice that you have more gratitude, appreciation, and love toward life. You realize that you can't oppose your own life, so you

feel this way even toward the people you thought were difficult because they're part of your life, too. It's not so much of a struggle—it's more that we are open to reality.

What about happiness? Sometimes I get the sense that happiness is oversold in the spirituality marketplace.

Yes, that's true because life is always going to be difficult. If you love someone, one of you is going to die first. There is an immense amount of difficulty and sorrow and frustration in life and you're always going to do things that make you think, God, I wish I had done that differently. And yet, in the midst of that, you can always have the sense that it's wonderful to be alive. That feeling can run through everything, including the difficult things. The word happiness has a slightly clueless feeling to it, but cluelessness is innocent and the only problem with happiness is if it becomes an ideology and is forced. We can also use the word joy.

I've gone in for surgery feeling like I didn't know if the surgery was going to work, and being pretty sure it would be painful, but I remember really appreciating the whole experience, feeling gratitude to the surgeons and the light in the recovery room. Or I remember when my dad was dying of bone cancer and he wasn't taking his pain medication. He said, "I want to feel what's happening. I know I'm on my way out, and I'm not objecting to that, but I want to have what I have." Then the pain would get to be too much and he'd take meds and then feel that he was missing his life and back off again. So that was what feeling it was like for him. Why would you want to miss the end of your life?

A lot of meditation is just showing up for what we have, and there is joy in that. It's different from the kind of happiness that comes from getting what you wanted. It's a joy that doesn't have a good reason. It's a joy that allows you to be sad or upset, because you're alive in the midst of it.

16 Things to Do with a Koan in Your Pocket

Here is a koan. It's a saying of a great old Chinese teacher, called Linji, who was known for his clarity and graciousness in teaching. It's a basic coaching in meditation.

Solitary brightness
There is a solitary brightness without fixed shape or form.
It knows how to listen to the teachings,
it knows how to understand the teachings,
it knows how to teach.
That solitary brightness is you.

The thing about a koan is that it doesn't really come with instructions, any more than the moment you are inhabiting does. But basically you find a route to keep company with the koan. There are many possible ways to keep company with this koan but, just for fun, I'll suggest some for you to try. Feel free to ignore those that don't seem right for you and just form a relationship to the koan without any intermediate suggestions.

First of all, say it aloud to yourself. Memorize it.

Just keep company with the brightness and see how it changes you. You don't have to know what brightness is, or even who you are; just trust that you already know.

A certain piece of the koan will appear to you—perhaps a word like brightness or solitary, perhaps a phrase like It's me. That's how you form a relationship with the koan. Hang out with the piece that appears.

Think of the koan as a friend who follows you around and is always there. All you have to do is turn toward it.

If you forget the koan, don't worry; it might remember you, and turn toward you. If you notice you have forgotten the koan, then you have remembered it.

You'll wonder if you are doing it right. You can't do it wrong, and working out whether you are doing it right is as useless in koan work as it is in poetry or love. It's all right not to know where you stand. So just go back to hanging out with the koan. It's better company.

At times, you'll be certain you should be calmer, kinder, having better-quality thoughts, being less tormented. But if you look, there isn't really a problem. There's nothing there.

When you realize the problem is in your thoughts and not in the world, then you don't have to fight with your thoughts. That's just more thoughts. You don't have to explain your thoughts to yourself or anyone. You don't have to pretend that they make sense, because they don't. You don't have to justify them. There is just the koan everywhere you look.

No need to judge, assess, criticize, evaluate, condemn, or find fault with your thoughts. Those actions, like other thoughts, seem to stave off not knowing. But the brightness arrives through the not knowing.

Even your thoughts are the brightness, even your delusions are life.

Don't make any part of your history or your life wrong.

The one who is looking is the brightness that she is looking for. That's what the instruction "just hang out with the koan" means.

Take your koan to work. To bed. To sleep. To the pub. To a telephone conversation. To the impossible family problem. To the jungle. To the night when the racing clouds open and a few stars shine through.

You don't need to reach for the koan because it is you.

Infinite thoughts and worlds fold into each other. They are here now in every moment. And the solitary brightness goes through them all. The solitary brightness is you.

Enjoy yourself.