

Dr. Jean Klein

A French medical doctor and musicologist who became a great teacher of Advaita Vedanta after attaining self realization.

by Andrew Rawlinson

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Dr. Klein (this is how he is addressed in Britain so I follow the convention) presents himself -- though without fanfare -- as someone who embodies the teaching that he gives, namely, that one's true nature is 'ultimate awareness' which exists independently of any object of perception, including thoughts. This state is utterly tranquil and self-contained. It has nothing to do with 'names and forms' or, to put it another way, with space and time. It is not surprising, therefore, that it has radical consequences for personal identity. Hence when someone said that they would like to ask some personal questions, he replied,

"There's no person to answer personal questions. I listen to your question and I listen to the answer. The answer comes out of silence." (The Ease of Being, 19)

But certain facts about his life are available. He was born around 1916 and spent his childhood in Brno (in Czechoslovakia), Prague, and Vienna. He came from a cultured background and several members of his family were good musicians. He himself started to learn the violin at the age of seven and has been a talented player all his life. He had what he calls "a strong urge for freedom" as a teenager. He read Dostoyevsky and Nietzsche, and was especially influenced by Gandhi, whose teaching of ahimsa/non-violence led him to become a vegetarian when he was 16. He also read people like Coomaraswamy, Aurobindo, and Krishnamurti (though he found Theosophy itself too sentimental). But the person who had the greatest impact on him was Rene Guenon. Dr. Klein describes his reading of the *The Symbolism of the Cross* (which, like all Guenon's books, deals with metaphysics, cosmology, and tradition) as a turning point (*Transmission of the Flame*, iv).

At the same time, he had experiences that confirmed what he had read. He describes a "glimpse of oneness or self-awareness" that occurred when he was 17:

"I was waiting one warm afternoon for a train. The platform was deserted and the landscape sleepy. It was silent. The train was late, and I waited without waiting, very relaxed and free from all thinking. Suddenly a cock crowed and the unusual sound made me aware of my silence. It was not the objective silence I was aware of, as often happens when one is in a quiet place and a sudden sound throws into relief the silence around. No, I was ejected into my own silence. I felt myself in

awareness beyond the sound or the silence. Subsequently, this feeling visited my several times." (Transmission of the Flame, iii)

He went on to become a doctor and outwardly lived an ordinary life. But there was still "a lack of fulfillment". Then he "felt a certain call to go to India" (ibid., vii) and arrived there around 1950. He says that he was not looking for a guru. In fact, he had no preconceptions of any kind -- a central element in his teaching:

"...I was left with no reference to anything in my previous experience. In this suspension of evaluation I was catapulted into an openness, a receptivity to everything." (The Ease of Being, ix)

But he did meet a teacher. I do not know the man's name. Dr. Klein refers to him simply as 'Pandiji (sic) and says that " I never asked personal questions and I never spoke personally about him. It was a sacred relationship" (Transmission of the Flame, xiv):

"My master always pointed out to me during our life together that all perceptions need an Ultimate Perceiver. The ultimate perceiver can never be the object of perception. Once false identification with the body is understood, we are led to the question 'Who am I?'--and the one who asks is himself the vivid answer. The searcher is himself that which is sought." (Neither This Nor That I Am, vi)

Then one morning,

"between deep sleep and awakening, there was a sudden vanishing of all the residues of 'my persons', each having believed themselves hitherto to be a doer, a sufferer, an enjoyer. All this vanished completely, and I was seized in full consciousness by an all-penetrating light, without inside or outside. This was the awakening in Reality, in the I am...I knew myself in the actual happening, not as a concept, but as a being without localisation in time or space. In this non-state there was a freedom, full and objectless joy." (ibid., vii)

This realization is regarded by those who have accepted Dr. Klein as their teacher as 'total illumination'. It therefore makes him quite independent of his own teacher. But he says that he had an "urge to communicate my experience to all other beings" (ibid., viii) and his master suggested that he do so in Europe since he was himself European. In several of his books, it is stated that he "was sent back to...teach Vedanta" (for example, Neither This Nor That I Am, ix). He started teaching about 1960.

"People came to me. I have never taken myself for a teacher, so I never solicited students. The teacher only appears when asked to teach." (Transmission of the Flame, xx)

Advaita is a well-established tradition in India, of course, with a long history and many of the accretions that accumulate around any social organization. But Dr.

Klein is not interested in any of this. He acknowledges that he is in a lineage of teachers "in a certain way." "The way of approaching truth belongs to a certain current, but there are no entities in a line...It is only accidentally that I call the current of my teaching Advaita" (Transmission of the Flame, xxi, xxii).

Like all teachings that hold that our real nature is truth, what Dr. Klein says is essentially simple:

"You are primal awareness. Life is only primal awareness. Between two thoughts or two perceptions you are. You know moments in your life when a thought completely disappears into silence, but still you are." (The Ease of Being, 13)

This primal awareness is that which underlies all other kinds of awareness.

"At first you may experience silent awareness only after the dissolution of perception, but later you will be in the silence in both the presence and absence of objects." (ibid., 15)

Dr. Klein also calls this ultimate subject, the witness (ibid., 17) and the Self (ibid., 63). And though it may sound very removed from ordinary life, in fact it is the opposite because, no longer caught up in objects and therefore in desire and fear, it is open and free. So its true nature is love.

"But when you take yourself for somebody, all relationships are from object to object, man to woman, mother to son, personality to personality. And there is no communication, no possibility for love." (ibid., 63)

A natural question at this stage is, 'If our true nature is free and loving, where does everything else come from: attachment, desire, fear, the world itself?'

Answer:

"The world of names and forms is the result of mental activity. Ignorance (Avidya) begins at the very moment when the ego takes names and forms to be separate realities." (Be As You Are, 15)

So how do we avoid identifying with the body and mind and all the objects that mind projects? The first stage is what Dr. Klein calls listening (Be As You Are, 3). He defines this as global awareness, which is not limited to any of the five senses (or the mind):

"If you let your attention go to your ear, you'll feel that it is constantly grasping. It is the same with the eye, the mind and all your organs. Let the grasping go and you will find your whole body is spontaneously an organ of sensitivity. The ear is merely a channel for this global sensation. It is not an end in itself. What is heard is also felt, seen, smelled and touched. Your five senses, intelligence and imagination are freed and come into play. You feel it is being completely expanded in space, without centre or border. The ego, which is a contraction, can

find no hold in this presence, and anxiety, like and dislike dissolve." (Who Am I?, 72)

But this is only the first step. It leads on to realization of the Self, "our true nature" which "is reached by a complete elimination of the world of objects" (ibid., 70).

(the following is a footnote to the paragraph immediately preceding, but is included here as a continuation of Rawlinson's text:)

This "complete elimination of the world of objects" has consequences for cosmology that are quite as radical as they are for personal identity... Someone once asked him what significance the world can have -- in the sense in which Sri Aurobindo (and, the questioner might have added, the Mother) uses the term lila, the divine game of the Lord -- if it is seen as unreal. Dr. Klein replied,

"He who aims at Ultimate Reality places no accent on the things of the world: it would seem completely futile to him since he has ascertained the unreality of things...The world is directed towards the perceiver, it celebrates the ultimate perceiver. He who is established in the Self is in no way interested in theologies and cosmologies. The construction of a cosmological hypothesis, such as the one which looks upon the world as a divine game, is a mental hypothesis due to ignorance, which does not understand the true nature of the Ultimate." (Be As You Are, 87)

Elsewhere, Dr. Klein is unequivocal in his rejection of evolution (spiritual, not physical):

"This notion of evolution is one of the most characteristic errors of modern thought....It is the belief that more can come out of less, that better can be produced by worse. Evolution in the strict meaning of the word, is only an unfolding, a passing from what is implicit to that which is explicit, from what is not manifest to that which is manifest. It produces nothing. It never produces, let alone creates. We cannot rely on it in our search for salvation or liberation. Liberation is not a problem of evolution, for no evolution can lead to liberation, which is the result of discernment only.... We are not concerned with evolving, but we should endlessly put the question 'who am I?' to ourselves." (ibid., 17)

This certainly looks to be at odds with what Andrew Cohen, for example, says about evolutionary enlightenment. On the other hand, Cohen has his own critique of the sort of 'pure' non-dualism that Dr. Klein advocates. ... I mention these disagreements -- which are largely implicit and never raucous -- simply because they are a significant element in the phenomenon of Western teachers. There are genuine issues here and it is important that it is Westerners who are raising them. (Here ends the footnote...jk)

Given that Advaita, as Dr. Klein teaches it, is the direct approach to reality, it cannot make use of any method or technique.

"All technique aims to still the mind. But in fact it dulls the mind to fix it on an object. The mind loses its natural alertness and subtleness. It is no longer an open mind...Meditation belongs to the unknowable...The point of sitting in meditation is only to find the meditator. The more you look, the more you will be convinced that he cannot be found...Fundamentally, you are nothing, but you are not aware of this and project energy in seeking what you are...When, by self-inquiry, you find out that the meditator does not exist, all activity becomes pointless and you come to a state of non-attaining, an openness to the unknowable." (Who Am I?, 98, 99)

But there is an obvious question here. If there is no meditator and hence no one to find the truth, what is the function of the teacher? Answer: to make this truth manifest.

"Ultimately there is no longer a subject who sees nor an object which is seen. There is only oneness. That is what I come here to communicate." (The Ease of Being, 1)

And he gives a splendid metaphor for this process,

"Let's say you are looking at a sculpture from Angkor Buddhism. The smile on the face of the Angkor statue is particularly beautiful. When your attitude is receptive, you may be completely taken by this smile...The smile captures you and you feel yourself smiling." (The Ease of Being, 7)

In a similar way, the teacher/guru/master embodies the quality that one is seeking and thus helps to bring it out in the seeker. But since this quality is our true nature, it cannot be given or transmitted from one to another. It can only be pointed to by one who already manifests it.

(the following is a footnote to the preceding paragraph:) Dr. Klein has extended this idea into a complete philosophy of art: 'true' works of art indicate something beyond themselves.

"All objects point to the Ultimate, and a real work of art actively brings whoever sees or hears it to his real nature, which is beauty. The difference between an ordinary object and a work of art is that the object is passive in its pointing towards the Ultimate whereas the work of art is active." (Neither This Nor That I Am, 10; cf. 'A Conversation on Art' in Who Am I?)

This is obviously connected with what he says about the smile on the face of the Angkor statue of the Buddha. (end of footnote.)

The striking thing about Dr. Klein is his independence. He teaches Advaita but he rarely uses its technical terms. In fact, he has developed his own vocabulary which consists mainly of the special use of words like 'listening', 'transparency', and so on. Nor does he refer back to the tradition for any kind of confirmation. He occasionally gives a quotation from Gaudapada but nothing more. He does not mention other teachers (such as Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj, to name only two of the best known). His is not an approach which makes itself more persuasive by making connections of this kind.