

AM I AWAKE? Question and Answer session

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, May 2nd 2007

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[Q1, Q2, Q3 and so on refer to different questioners]

AZ: Questions or comments, please. Take a minute to settle yourself and reach deeply into your heart. Feel free to say whatever comes to you as something that you want to say. I only ask that you're kind and polite to the other participants—except for me, you can say whatever you want to me. *[laughs]* Okay?

Q1: Early on you were saying every so often it's helpful to say, "am I awake?"—it's helpful to bring you closer to that place. It made me think of earlier today when I was caught up in a state of mind, being irritated or upset about something, and I know I don't need to be in this state of mind. It's sort of like, just bringing to awareness, being awake, "what am I doing?", this kind of thing. It just struck me like that, sort of feeling today like, "oh, I know I don't have to be in this state of mind, it's just something that can pass."

AZ: It's not always easy to let it pass, but I think that can help to get it past. For spiritually oriented people who take this stuff seriously, something that can make that kind of state of mind, any anxiety or whatever, even worse, is this feeling like, "why aren't I beyond these things?" Right? You know, "here I thought I was doing well, and now here I am in this state of mind yet again." Part of the reason I'm talking about this transitional state is to help remove that added burden from a state of mind that might occur when you're feeling anxious, resentful, angry, anything that seems out of place. Don't add to that, "gee, I thought I was a spiritual person and here I am screwing up again." Just say to yourself, "I'm awake, but I'm experiencing this state that's drawing me out of the awakesness; I'm struggling with that, I'm going to work through it." Don't worry about the question of "what does this mean for me in terms of my whole progress in my spiritual life?" It's a matter of always right now, being awake. It's not a matter of, have you come to the place that's the end of the line and you're there forever; it's not a matter of how many years you've been working at this—it's always just right now, what's going on right now. "What state of mind am I in, *right now*?" When you remember to ask, "am I awake?", try to bring yourself a little closer to that.

Q2: It seems that we're talking about something very *qualitative*, "am I awake or not," and not quantitative, "am I awake or not—have I reached my goals, am I falling short?" Those are all distance, or numerical, quantitative things, when we're talking about the qualitative.

AZ: Yes, you don't want to be measuring your progress. What you're aiming at is just peace of mind.

Q2: And I can see your point, that by being aware, by having the thought, makes us more open, ready, and in that state, when the self-judgment, the evaluation, or criticism is absent.

Q3: I've never been here before—I was attracted to the idea of sitting and then having a talk—I'm not sure you want to talk about this now, but do you have a particular foundation that you work with, or—?

AZ: You mean like a religious tradition? Or do you mean a foundation like a legal entity?
[laughs]

Q3: Whatever it is. [laughs] Yeah, a tradition, a specific tradition, or—I don't know.

Q4: An assumption, a basic set of premises, to try to locate where this is coming from?

Q3: Yeah, basically that's it.

AZ: Okay. It's coming out of my own experience, primarily. I got interested in spiritual stuff decades ago when I was a young man, and for a long time was interested in the Christian mystics, so I'm pretty well-versed in that tradition. More recently, a few years ago—I've had this long time interest in Zen Buddhism, and a man who had been a Zen teacher, now doesn't call himself anything—Adyashanti—was very helpful to me in getting me beyond a particular point. So a lot of times when I talk, it has—what? I draw from some Zen ideas. But primarily what I'm talking about is my own experience, reflecting on that and trying to present it in a way that's helpful to other people.

Q4: I have some questions regarding or coming from her question. You called yourself interested in Christian mysticism; why is Christian mysticism of interest? And then Zen Buddhism, why Zen Buddhism? I mean, what was the nature of that interest and why were you interested? And then you said you were at a point and Adyashanti helped you to go beyond a certain point—helped you beyond which point? How do you define the point? That would be three premise-type questions.

AZ: That's a lot of questions. [laughs]

Q4: First, what would you say your interest was, and why?

AZ: Well, I had a sense—and this goes back to the late sixties, early seventies of course when I was a teen-ager and young man—that there were other states of consciousness that were possible, right? I mean, that was in the air and you heard about it and with drug experiences you could taste a little of it. And you say, “how can I get to those states of mind and how can I stay there?” You know, “what's that all about?”

Q4: What was wrong with where you were? Because something was lacking where you were, would be an assumption, correct?

AZ: Yeah, yeah. At the time, I don't know if I could have put my finger on it. Just a general sense of unhappiness with who I was, or how I was experiencing life, or where my life was going, and feeling like spirituality had some kind of answer for me there. So there was an inner sense of something needing, and this outer identification that maybe religion and spirituality has a way to address that need or that sense of dissatisfaction. Why Christian mysticism? Well, the one thing Christian mysticism and Zen Buddhism have in common is they talk experientially rather than doctrinally. I don't know how much you know about either of them, but what they're talking about is a personal transformation and a direct experience of something, rather than what you're supposed to believe or what morality you're supposed to follow or which rituals you're supposed to undertake; it's more that all these things are to serve to get you into this other state of mind. So that's what attracted me to those in particular. Christianity at first had a—I don't want to say a repulsion because that's too strong of a term, but I was raised a Roman Catholic and I had, not bad experiences with the church but I had rejected Christianity at a certain point, so after a few years of this, it was really coming to be aware of the Christian mystic tradition and appropriating for myself some way of understanding who Jesus was and what part this played in my life that I was able to go into that tradition more deeply. So I was mostly in the Christian tradition for decades, and the interest in Zen Buddhism remained there because they talked experientially and because they practiced meditation, which was something I had been practicing all along from early on. And really just—what obstacle was it? At the time I didn't know what it was, but now I'd say it was identification with the self. And I'd say what Adyashanti helped me do was release myself from that identification. And I find myself, when I talk about these experiences and how I perceive things now, it sounds very Zen. But I can also put it in the Christian mystic language if I choose to. Did I answer your question?

Q4: [*Gestures to Q3*]

Q3: [*laughs*]

AZ: It was partially yours, partially hers. Did I answer *your* question?

Q3: Yes. To add to my question, did you study with any teachers, like, um—you had that one in Catholic mysticism—who was that person? Thomas Merton.

AZ: No. I did not study long term with any teacher. My encounters with people that I would regard as spiritual teachers were a little bit here and there. There was a man very early in my spiritual journey who was somebody that's not well-known—he was a man who worked with alcoholics in a downtown treatment center in Detroit. I happened to come in touch with him and he had a very powerful effect on me and I saw him several times and talked with him. Adyashanti, I've talked with him a few times. But nobody in the sense of receiving training. It was more exploring things on my own, practicing meditation daily—trying to learn from experience.

Q2: Did you read much, or—?

AZ: Yeah, a lot, and I still do. [*laughs*]

Q2: You hadn't mentioned that; so you did study and research.

AZ: Yeah, yeah. Well, I also became a professional academic in another field, political science, so still—the intellectual side of it, I think, can be helpful on the path, or it can be an obstacle itself. [*pause*] If you'd like to ask me more personal questions, feel free [*laughs*], that's fine if that's where you feel you want to direct your attention.

Q2: What does it feel like, Alan, to not be identified with your self, as you say you are now, compared to perhaps when you were decades younger?

AZ: Well, it feels free, and it feels—I've spoken about this before when you've been here—that sense of dissatisfaction, that itchiness, is gone. That's the big thing. The thing that was driving me towards the spiritual path, that was hard to identify—just something that felt like it had to be addressed and I didn't know what it was, and it was driving me into this—that disappeared. That's the big thing. Otherwise this state of mind is pretty much—I mean, there's no lights, there's no drama, it's just ordinary life, but without that. And happiness. Gratefulness. Contentment. Sensitivity to some inner sense of where I should be led, what I should be doing. That's all part of it. [*pause*] I haven't talked about myself and my own personal journey this much in the whole six months we've been doing this.

Q4: You don't need to put it into personal terms, but my question would be about meditation itself. Obviously it would be from your experience, okay, but you said you were doing it all along—like even before you started studying Christian mysticism? Or at the same time? As soon as you felt this pain of, of existence—you said you were drawn to meditate, to start meditating?

AZ: I think I felt the pain of existence when I was born, don't we all? [*laughs*] But I started meditating—oh, what? In my early twenties, and then it was a few years before I became even aware of the Christian mystic tradition.

Q4: Or the Zen Buddhist?

AZ: I was aware of Zen Buddhism, but not in an in-depth sense at all. You know, the thing with Christianity was because I grew up with it I assumed I knew it. So when I started exploring I looked into Eastern religions a lot, and it wasn't until someone said, “well, there's this other meditation tradition,” contemplative prayer and the rest, that I began looking into Christianity. It was, again, a personal encounter, with a woman that ran a commune in Denver. This was way back in the seventies. She was a spiritual teacher for this commune and she saw herself as rooted in the Christian contemplative tradition. So, when I encountered her that's when I got back into that. But you were going to ask a question about meditation, rather than about me? Or about me and meditation?

Q4: Meditation. I'm not quite sure what people mean by it. So I'm interested in your description, whether it's your experience or understanding—what is it, where did you—what was your experience of it?

AZ: Well, it's been changeable down through the years. What I'd say it is when somebody meditates, it's the part of them that's trying to wake up telling them to set aside a time and a place where you can enter into that. That's what's happening. When somebody's drawn to meditation, part of them inside is saying, "we need to do this to wake up." You may not understand it that way, but that's what I would say is what's happening.

Q4: Right. When you started your talk, you had a premise waking up is a good thing, and that people should ask themselves, "am I awake?" But somehow, I did not—I would ask her question in relation to that: what is the premise upon which you start a discussion?

AZ: With somebody else.

Q4: Yeah. Or—what is it, to be awake? I mean, is it the purpose of all, equivalent to what is called enlightenment? Some other people would say that the word enlightenment means 'being,' the ultimate, the ultimate whatever it is.

AZ: Was that the question?

Q4: Well, it's that I often hear things that are talked about like that in discussions like this, and they're spoken about as *things*. There's a tendency to, I guess the word, reify—but it's very difficult to speak without doing that, I know. In fact, the word "God," is so often so utterly misused in that way; it's usage, when we say we don't really have a way of conceptualizing God, "God this or that"—just the fact that they're using the word as a reference to some *thing*, is already completely misleading everybody.

AZ: Words are always one step removed from reality.

Q4: And there's a purpose, [*inaudible*] of some sorts, "hey, wait a minute! there's no such thing as enlightenment!"

AZ: It's not a thing, certainly. What would they say enlightenment is?

Q4: Because people are talking about, "oh, enlightenment" and how you're going to enjoy this and this and that about enlightenment. So, I get very—I don't get it when there's any talk about some sort of final ultimate state where you're supposed to be happy. And even if there were such a thing as peace, is that why whatever this—'God'—designed all this, or 'we' designed it, or whoever put all this here, is to be utterly placid?

AZ: This question comes up a lot. There's the assumption that to be at peace means you would not have motivation to do anything, yet to be at peace can mean you peacefully do what you do. You still live a life; you move by something else, this inner sense of life.

Q4: So no matter what apparent break is occurring in this manifestation of reality, your censor is at peace about movement on all sides whether they come together or make further friction and violent explosion—it's not about peace and love, it's about peace in your awareness, or your sense of awareness of it.

AZ: It's about the end of that which inside you drives you to try to grapple with these kind of things. People that are attracted to these kind of thoughts, these kind of ideas, these kind of practices, most often there's something inside them driving them to that. To find something; to find release from something; to find—you could call it peace if what you feel is that you're not peaceful inside, that there's no sense of rest, or you could call it freedom if you feel constricted, or you could call it no-self if you feel your self is a burden. But whatever it is, you're in a state of consciousness or a state of mind that feels something needs to change. And people get attracted to these ideas and these practices and talks like this because they're hopeful, at some part of them, that that change can be experienced. Now, part of what I'm proposing to you is that identification with thinking about it is part of the problem.

Q4: Identification with thinking about “how can I get out of this painful state” –

AZ: Yeah, can be part of the problem.

Q4: In other words, the assumption that I'm in a painful state in the first place is the problem?

AZ: Not the assumption that you are because if you feel you are, you are. But what causes that pain, often, in the kind of cases we're talking about, what's causing that pain, what's causing that suffering or that dissatisfaction, is moving all of your attention into your thoughts, and your imaginings and your feelings, and not allowing some of it to move back and say, “I'm more than this. There's parts of me that I'm just neglecting, because I'm so preoccupied with thinking about it, with searching for it, with what I'm feeling, with what I'm going through, with how things are changing, that I can't find any anchor.” All that preoccupation is part of the problem. Now that doesn't mean just having the intellectual agreement that that's true is going to change that. It really needs this stepping back from it. In answer to your question, what is meditation, mediation is often a practice of stepping back from it. You sit quietly and you let those states of mind move and wash over you and you say, “I'm stepping back and watching that rather than moving with it and pushing it further.”

Q4: It doesn't have to be when meditating—you can do this running down the street, I assume.

AZ: You can. It's hard to do, unless you're somewhat rooted in it already, to maintain that state in your day to day life, because there's so many things in the world that can just provoke states of mind. When you sit quietly you're limiting the number of distractions that can make your mind run off. But yeah, the object is to maintain that sense of rooted peacefulness, even in your day to day life.

Q3: I [*inaudible*]—are you saying you're enlightened?

AZ: No, I'm not saying that; I'm perhaps implying it. [*laughs*]

Q3: I feel better now. [*laughs*]

AZ: It doesn't make any sense to talk about it one way or the other in those terms, because it presumes, as he was saying, a *thing* like a possession. To say "I'm enlightened" means I have possession of a state of enlightenment. Well, who knows—right now I could be fully awake, five seconds from now something could happen and I could drift off. It's not under my control, in other words. I can say that it persists, this state of mind, fairly well, and it has over the last few years. But to claim that this is a thing that I have possession of and it's never going to leave me is claiming too much. And the 'me' that even talks about it with you, is exactly what I'm saying you've got to let go of. Once you let go of that, who's enlightened? Who's left to be enlightened?

Q2: You're thinking we're on the way and on a journey, and sometimes we don't realize where we were until we look back. You were talking about "stepping back," well, I think there's also "looking back" too, because we never know exactly where we are *now*, but sometimes looking back there's added perspective as to where we were. But at the now, we don't know exactly where we are.

AZ: Yes, that's often true. That's helpful, putting it in this context in particular: that the important thing becomes, when you're aware you're in a state that's dissatisfying to you, the important thing is to say, "I'm released from that state, I no longer have that sense of suffering or dissatisfaction." Now, before that you might have thought, "well, what I need to do is become enlightened, what I'm looking for is enlightenment," right? You're driven towards that. But what you *know*, once that state of dissatisfaction is gone, is that it's gone. Now, who cares what you call it, right? Who cares what it is? Who cares what other people experienced, you know, if this is the same thing that the Buddha experienced or that some other spiritual teacher experienced or whoever it is—who cares anymore? What matters to you is that the thing that was driving you is no longer driving you. That sense of dissatisfaction is not there. At that point those kind of questions become irrelevant.

Q2: That brings me to think that it isn't always dissatisfaction and pain and suffering that needs to be the motivator. Often it is. Sometimes, for example, people do not begin to take care of their health until they've fallen prey to a cancer, a heart attack, or something like this, instead of being proactive or preventive. And so I also think that it's possible to want more, be more; you know that there's something more and you'd like to have it. There's a positive motivator, rather than an escape route.

AZ: Except that if someone said there could be more, that wouldn't be attractive to you unless you had a visceral sense or an experiential sense that there was something *less*, right? If somebody says, "you could experience something more" and you say, "well, I don't want anything more—"

Q2: Well, in comparison, of course there would be something less.

AZ: No, without that comparison. Say you're just sitting here and you're not even thinking about something more and someone says to you, "you know, you could experience life more fully." What reaction are you going to have? You're going to have one of two reactions, I think, either, "oh, that sounds good, tell me more," which means already that you've identified that there's something *less* than what could be experienced and there could be more, or you're going to say, "I'm not interested; I'm not looking for something more."

Q2: I think there's a possibility in idealism, too. Or—

AZ: Curiosity? [*laughs*]

Q2: Yes, curiosity. Or a richer, more bountiful life.

AZ: That's possible.

Q2: A kind of a knowing, a feeling, a trusting?

AZ: That's possible.

Q2: And wanting more.

AZ: My thesis, though, is that it's all driven by the same thing, whatever you want to call it.

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