

## Don't Scratch Questions and Answer Session

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, Oct. 11th 2007

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**AZ:** Okay.

**Q1:** I'm not clear about the not scratching—well, I'm clear about not scratching the itch but what I wanted to clarify was, how does that relate to the meditation?

**AZ:** When you meditate, at least in the way that I've explained it, your mind wants to go off into these scratches, or these itches I should say—wants to go off and scratch the habitual itches. You bring it back to the focus of meditation; in essence you're ignoring it. You're saying, 'Oh, there it is, I've started to scratch it, maybe I've even got caught up in it, but now, oh, I remember—*no*; let it be, let it be.' It's as though you had a skin rash and someone said, 'Sit there and don't scratch.' It's hard to do, but eventually it gets easier.

**Q2:** Sometimes just bringing it up that there *is* an itch to scratch brings that into a person's awareness and that is exactly what will happen.

**AZ:** [*Laughing*] Uh huh.

**Q2:** Some things probably shouldn't be pointed out or highlighted by other people.

**AZ:** Well, I think sometimes when we tend to analyze our states of mind, we're doing that. Sometimes. Now it can be—there are moments when you have an insight where something keeps coming back, a mood or a thought or something, or a half-formed memory, and it won't go away until there's been a sort of release where you realize what was at the heart of that, usually some experience in your past. And it's allowing the whole thing into your consciousness. But generally I think that a lot of things that we experience are simply—you know, it becomes such a habit that you want to think about why you have this habit and the thinking about why you have the habit is making the habit even more so. And then you talk about it, right? And you tell people, 'I've got this terrible problem—I'm always anxious about something or other.' And you talk about it and you reinforce it. I mean it sounds simplistic and I don't mean it to cover every case of unpleasant experiences, but I think a lot of them are simply that we get so attached to it, so fascinated by it, that we want to make it the center of our attention.

**Q2:** I think the implication would be, choose what you want to entertain.

**AZ:** Uh huh. Yes, I could extend the metaphor by saying, when the itch is something minor that's going to heal itself, not scratching it is good advice. But if the itch has to do with like a major medical problem, not scratching is not enough and maybe you should get medical care like a treatment. [*Laughs*] Same thing with these states of mind. For some people a

particular state of mind is a sign that something needs more healing, but what I'm talking about is where people just perpetuate it by focusing on it, it's not quite as deep—

**Q2:** Like anxiety, or worry—

**AZ:** Yeah.

**Q2:** —that might be rather futile or useless?

**AZ:** Yeah. The only way to tell how deep-rooted it is, is when you start to not pay as much attention to it, it kind of opens up parts of yourself and then *boom*, something rise to the surface and 'oh, there's something in this,' and it's that very opening up that helps you let go of it actually. So it's being able to relax with it. Same thing why meditation is effective, is because you learn to relax in these mind states, and if there *is* something deeper that's perpetuating this, like usually some traumatic experience to some degree, relaxing, not focusing on it as much allows it to come up and release. Which for people might take some time, because they sense it arising and then they want to stop that, they want to push it back down because it feels threatening, it feels scary.

**Q2:** Sometimes to be transparent, known, and recognized, they may not just flee away and be let go; sometimes they need to be analyzed, but not into perpetuity. Sometimes it needs to be talked out and heard by another, and the counseling process is part of this too in that we do need others sometimes to help with the healing, rather than just ourselves.

**AZ:** Uh huh. I think all of those though, in one way or another, are learning to trust and relax with the process of letting these things arise and let go. So it's creating the environment in which you feel safe enough.

**Q2:** Oh, part of it is letting the defenses down, you know, putting it in psychological terms.

**AZ:** Yeah, uh huh.

**Q1:** And then by peeling off all these layers, one may come closer to enlightenment?

**AZ:** I wouldn't say 'may,' I'd say 'will.' [*Laughs*] And it's not a peeling off in the sense of an act of peeling, because once again it's a letting it alone to the point where it kind of, of itself either dissipates or—

**Q2:** Dissolves away maybe?

**AZ:** —or opens something up that then can dissipate, that you were holding on to at a deeper level. You can almost picture it this way: sometimes it's perpetuating a state of mind that's really familiar to us, sometimes it's we've incorporated that habit into our very physical experience and you can't not scratch it because it's held on to in a way. So those deeper things need to come out, but yeah, as this stuff let's go, what it—as far as *I'm* concerned; somebody else may have a different story—but enlightenment is simply [*laughs*]

experiencing life without this stuff. You know, it's not some, uh—I mean, you can picture this life without this stuff, which actually is the same yet different.

**Q2:** It's really interesting to me how we can choose—maybe not what thought comes into our minds sometimes, if a thought comes unbidden—but we can choose what to entertain, or to play with. And also we can in an instant bring up emotions connected with certain thoughts or certain events.

**AZ:** There's an element of freedom in being a human being. Now it's degrees—some people have less and some people have more—but it has to do with this waking up to these habits. Because so much of our life is habitual, to just be immersed in those habits and not make any choices means to be in a state of suffering, really. But then as people become aware of their own mind, you know, and they're getting that little distance they're actually waking up to these things as habits rather than their own being, so the area of choice begins to expand. And each time something becomes seen through, that freedom of choice becomes expanded. That's why they call it 'liberation,' 'freedom,' because these things that kind of make your mind fall into the same grooves over and over and over, you have the choice not to go there. It doesn't just pull you into that rut, you can determine whether or not that rut is appropriate for you to make use of or not. Because ruts aren't always bad, right? Ruts in the road can help you keep on the road, as long as you don't need to get out of the rut and *can't*—that's where it's a problem.

**Q2:** I think part of what you're talking about is to not identify one's core personhood, one's soul, with the habit.

**AZ:** Uh huh. And a good first step is having someone say that's what you're doing; then you start to watch for it. Because unless it becomes part of your personal experience, it's just an interesting theory. But if you watch for it and find it's true, then it has possibilities, right? Then you can do something with it; take it further.

**Q1:** I heard NPR talking about Mother Teresa; she felt as if she—I don't know, that God had forsaken her, or she could not come closer, and she lived in this state of kind of seeking for a lot of the time that she was doing all these wonderful things. And so in many ways though, she had, obviously she had let a heck of a lot go in her life, where she was stripping down to do what was essential, but still it did not seem to bring her to that sense of connectedness.

**AZ:** Uh huh. I wouldn't want to analyze her.

**Q1:** I was just thinking of the fact that here she had spent much of her life in this practice, and yet she, I guess early on she felt union with God, and then somehow she didn't—and I think that you were suggesting not that we would already become one with God by doing this, but that if you deal with things and let them go, you become deeper in yourself and understanding of your [*inaudible*] more peace.

**AZ:** I can say a couple things from my own experience that might be relevant to this. Again, I don't want to try to analyze her because I know so little about her psychological life. In my

own experience it's possible—like early on when I starting meditating, doing these things—to have sudden, spontaneous feelings of very great freedom; but it doesn't last, you know, because there's a long process of working through things that most people have to go through. And that can in one respect give you a lot of incentive to keep looking, because you've tasted it: 'Oh, this is really possible to have some kind of state of mind where I feel so free, and feel love pervading the universe and all this, yet it's gone now and I want to find that, I want to be closer to that.' Okay? So I know it's possible to have an opening but then it takes a long time to have it become a consistent thing. And so it's not a spectacular breakthrough, but it's more of a gentle, 'okay, this is just a way of being.' That's one point I would make.

The other one is that when you start searching for this experience to recreate it, a lot of times we pick up—well, necessarily we pick up—all kind of stories from the world around us as to what you need to do to get there. Right? And some of the stories are about how you need to act like a saint acts, whatever that is. Now it can be that people are doing something out of a genuine, God-given vocation—like maybe she was with taking care of very poor people—but it's also possible that people do things that look to us like very self-sacrificing, saintly things, out of a sense that they're trying to recapture that experience, right? Because this is what they're told, act like a saint and you'll be like a saint. But it doesn't always work that way because it's perpetuating yet another identity; it's scratching that itch with the thought, 'If only I do this, if only I be this kind of a person, God will look down on me favorably.'

Now this is why in Christianity there's such an emphasis on just faith and trust in God, and that you don't—I mean Protestants emphasize this more than Catholics maybe—but you don't need to do anything, right? God loves you the way you are; you don't need to make yourself worthy by doing these heroic acts. That's not to say 'Don't do them'—if you're called to do them, do them, and it'll give you joy in the doing of it, I would think. But you can be doing great things and yet God is still distant. I've experienced some of that because I tried to do the right things to recreate that state of mind, but it didn't get recreated that way. It wasn't that it was a bad thing because I was trying to improve my life in a lot of little ways, do all the right things religiously, go to church and study the Bible, and, you know, be a good father, husband and all that—I mean, there's nothing wrong with that! But when you're doing that because you think it's going to gain you God, it doesn't. God is there, God's love is there—you can't gain it, you can't earn it, you can't make it happen. All's you can do is let go of the stuff that distracts you from experiencing it, I think. That would be my experience, anyway. *[Laughs]* So, if you want to put my word up against Mother Teresa, not too many people are going to be convinced, but—

**Q1:** I wasn't thinking that she would be rewarded by doing all these good things, I was thinking about the angst she came to experience when she was, I imagine, and most people imagine, that all her life she had done this prayer and seeking connectedness. Not that she wouldn't have moments of doubts, but that she has this long period—

**AZ:** —period, decades—

**Q1:** According to what they said, the last long part of her life she felt desolate because of that.

**AZ:** Well, there's all kind of possibilities. I mean, there's a possibility that somewhere early in her life she was abused and never faced or dealt with that. There's a possibility that she had some kind of genetic predisposition to an imbalance of the brain chemistry or depression. There's a possibility that—I'm suggesting it's possible for some people, I don't know if it's true for her—that it was just perpetuating a state of mind, a feeling that God was distant. All kind of possibilities.

**Q2:** I think a major one would be the content of her work; day by day, what she saw.

**AZ:** It would get you down?

**Q2:** Yeah!

**AZ:** Hard to say.

**Q2:** Well, if I were watching movies of the war all the time, if I were embedded in with the soldiers over in Iraq, I think that it would be very hard to maintain the positive, blissful attitude.

**AZ:** Not having spent decades dealing with the very poor, it's hard for me to say what that would be like. But what I would want to discourage is somebody taking on this story of Mother Teresa as a model for how a Christian should be—you know, that if she felt this great angst I should be feeling it as well, otherwise I'm not really living the spiritual life. That, I don't—

**Q2:** Well, you know, how I would look at it is like looking at the twelve disciples. Here they were with the Master and the Lord, day in and day out, and yet they had doubts, or they then had denial and such. If they, who were really enveloped in the spirit of their Master this way, then what about mere humans who didn't have that continuous experience? It would really—for me it would really create an acceptance of that might very well be normal to have the periods of doubt, periods of depression, and perhaps I shouldn't be shocked, you know, or when I see them in other people. Because it's a part of the human situation and dilemma.

**AZ:** Well there's two sides to that, right? You could say, 'It's normal to experience these things, so I'm okay if I experience it; it's not like I'—

**Q2:** Yes, that's how I would look at it.

**AZ:** Or you could take it the other way and say, 'Well, it's normal so I'm never going to feel any differently and so I should just expect this,' which would be taking the wrong direction. So, have we beaten this to death? [*Laughs*]

**Q1:** I was thinking, I don't know who—I think it was Thomas Merton, or maybe it was Thomas Keating, who said something about when he started to be a novice and he would go to chapel by himself and nothing would happen. And he just felt completely devastated. And

this other novice would be in there, looking—be prostrate, and seem to be transfigured and so on and so forth. And he just thought things like, “I guess I shouldn’t be here,” and all kinds of doubts and all kinds of worries. And years later he met this guy again and he said, “You know, I was always impressed with the way you were able to communicate so wonderfully to God.” “Oh,” he said, “no!” He said, “I was there and thinking to myself, ‘oh my gosh, nothing is happening!’ And ‘why am I here?’”

[*General laughter*]

**Q2:** I really think we need to not compare ourselves and our experiences to others and have that the expectation of how it should be for us or how we should aim to be.

**AZ:** Uh huh. The touchstone should always be your own experience, what’s true in your own experience. Because we could in our imaginations create all kind of scenarios based on what we’ve heard about other people, and how this is the way it’s supposed to be and this is the way to do it—but for me the test is always, okay, if someone says something that seems like it’s supposed to work, well try it, and then if it doesn’t seem to be working, try something else. If it’s not getting you somewhere, question it. Question everything. We get a lot of stories about spiritual things third hand, fourth hand.

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