

## The Indispensibles

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, June 27th 2007

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I was thinking about all the different practices and disciplines that people use in the spiritual life: meditation, prayer, fasting, devotions of various kinds, spiritual readings—all these different things that people do. And I was thinking, out of all that, what do I regard as really the most important, the essentials—or at least, what is indispensable to the spiritual life and to this process of awakening?

What I came up with were two things that are connected, and these are the two things that I think are at the center of it all, that are indispensable. These are qualities of character, really, more than they are practices, although practices are related to developing these qualities. These qualities are, number one, honesty, and number two, openness. I'm going to go into them each because the word itself could easily be misunderstood as something else—and because if I didn't their wouldn't be much more to say. *[laughs]*

So first of all, honesty. By 'honesty' I'm not referring to moral principles of not lying or not deceiving other people, although that's important itself, obviously. You can get into a long discussion of the fine points of that kind of honesty—when is a white lie acceptable, or those kinds of questions—but that's not the kind of honesty I'm talking about tonight.

The honesty that I'm talking about as indispensable to the process of awakening is the ability to speak the truth about yourself. The ability to speak the truth about yourself. This has three phases, really. The first is paying attention to what's going on in yourself. The second is correctly identifying what's going on in yourself. And the third is voicing what's going on in yourself.

First of all, paying attention. This is what a lot of spiritual disciplines are about; why it's sometimes called the inner life, right?—when people look within. Instead of being engaged entirely in a busy, worldly life, paying attention to the world outside you, you begin to look inside yourself and start to introspect to some degree to see what's going on in you, expecting to find some kind of truth within. What you initially encounter is just a lot of garbage about yourself, usually. *[laughs]* People find the parts of themselves that are mundane, or even unacceptable to them, things that they don't like to look at about themselves.

This first part is just turning your attention inward, and paying attention to what's really going on inside you and being honest in that way. What is really happening inside myself? Meditation, self-examination, all these old—when we were young they would teach us, before you go to bed at night go through a daily examination; think back on what you did that day, and what bad actions you took or what bad thoughts you had. I don't want to just focus on the negative, but it's a practice of looking within that they teach children. Meditation obviously is a big one. Mindfulness, paying attention throughout the day, not just in your meditation, to what

you're actually experiencing inside yourself, what's going on there. So paying attention to inside yourself.

The second part is learning to identify whatever it is that's going on there *is*, because of our tendency to either suppress or mislabel what's really going on in ourselves in order to maintain a certain image of ourselves to ourselves or to others. To just call a spade a spade, so to speak. 'I'm anxious.' 'I'm angry.' 'I keep having the same thought over and over about this subject.' 'I have the suspicion maybe I have experienced awakening, to some degree.' 'I'm wondering if my spiritual quest is futile.' Whatever it is that's going on inside yourself, picking up on exactly what that is. It may be a vague sense of discomfort that you have to give a name to, and you may cast around a little bit for the right name to be able to get it—it starts out with something that feels uneasy or something seems to always come up in my mind and I'm not sure what the name of this pattern is, but learning to recognize that means going into it and feeling it more deeply, paying attention more closely. So it's a travelling deeper inside.

With emotions, it's especially common to misidentify emotions because we don't like to think of ourselves as having certain kinds of emotions. For me, very common to find myself saying something like, "*I'm not angry!*" [*laughs*] In your voice you sense the anger, if you're sensitive at all. People around you are going to pick it up and they're going to probably either say either, 'Ooo-kay,' or 'Well, you sound angry to *me*,' or something like this. And then if you want to evade those accusations or the troubling sense that maybe you *are* angry or whatever, then you call it something else. You know, 'Well, I'm not really angry, I'm just a little frustrated with this or that.' [*laughs*] But there's a little element of anger there—maybe a big element of anger, and it's the same thing with a lot of other emotions.

We don't want to admit that we're having these because it doesn't fit our picture of ourselves, either that we want to maintain of ourselves or that we want to maintain before other people. 'No, I'm the parent, I have to maintain this front,' or 'I am the grown-up' or 'I am the spiritual person' or I am whatever; I have to maintain this front so I lie even to myself about what I'm really experiencing or I mislabel it. So that honesty goes a little deeper when you start to clearly identify what it is you're actually experiencing, and allow yourself to acknowledge that you, like the rest of us, have these feelings, these thoughts, these inner desires, whatever it might be.

Third, then—speaking, speaking out. It may be as simple as in a private prayer time speaking to God very honestly about what you're experiencing. If you have a prayer time, rather than using that time simply to say things that seem in some pious sense to be appropriate for talking to God, speaking to God very honestly about what you're experiencing. 'God, today I'm very angry; right now I'm feeling angry.' Or, 'God, I'm very—' whatever it is. Anxious—'I'm really preoccupied by these thoughts.' Or, 'I'm discouraged; I'm discouraged—I don't know why I'm praying, I'm skeptical that I'm getting anywhere or that any of this is true.' Speaking that honestly, allowing that to come forth. So not only are you reaching in more deeply to identify what's going on in yourself, but you're bringing it forth and articulating it so it's fully conscious, fully present.

Even better, or in addition to talking to God, is talking to another human being—somebody you can trust, somebody that you can speak openly to if you have such a person. It could be a spiritual director, could be a counselor or therapist, could be a trusted friend or family member—somebody that you feel you can voice things to honestly and they won't immediately judge you or come back with advice or something, but they're good at listening, they're good at allowing you to voice things and be who you really are in their presence.

As I talk about this I'm taken back in my memory to our Catholic upbringing and when confession was a regular ritual, which it isn't so much any more. But that whole process you're taught of self-examination and then going into the confessional, which then was a little box where you couldn't see the priest on the other side—all very mysterious. Then you'd speak out what your sins were and your secret thoughts and things like that; I think it was a—it had a lot of value to it, although probably it'd be better to talk to somebody face to face that you know, or know that you have some confidence in.

So, that first part is honesty. That's indispensable: honesty, the ability to speak the truth of yourself.

The second indispensable then is openness. This openness is even harder to describe, but I'll make a stab at it. By 'openness' I mean the willingness to fully experience what is going on at the moment. Now, there's some overlap with honesty because part of it's the willingness to experience what's really going on inside yourself. If you're angry, don't try to evade that or avoid that or suppress that, but experience that. Now that doesn't mean you have to act upon it; that doesn't mean that you have to act out from whatever it is you're experiencing. But it means allowing yourself to really be present to that.

Rather than—the image that comes to mind of the opposite of openness, is throwing up a barrier between your own conscious awareness and the experience that you're having. A kind of a tension, putting a tension between that which you're experiencing and your—what? Allowing it into your consciousness. And the problem with that kind of a barrier—it has two problems. One is that, once you throw up barriers between yourself and experience it's hard to bring them back down, totally. You build barriers and they don't come down that easily. The second one is that that experience is still there somewhere inside you. You really can't shut out experience simply by withdrawing part of yourself from that, what actually happens is it remains somewhere within your mind-body consciousness waiting to be fully experienced at some point. And to take down this barrier means to allow that to come back in so you can experience it more fully. So allowing yourself to experience what emotions you're having, what thoughts you're having, without trying to evade them.

It also has the outer aspect of experiencing what's going on in your life. And here the best word that captures this is defensiveness. I guess you could apply this to yourself as well, because you could be defensive about your own inner life, not wanting to acknowledge what you're experiencing.

In fact, going back to that for a second, an image that comes to mind—of not wanting to acknowledge a part of yourself and throwing up a barrier to it—the image that comes to mind, is

suppose you're a kindergarten teacher, or a grade school teacher. And you have a child in your class that for some reason is very obnoxious to you; they do something that really just sets you on edge. Say they—what? What's something that a kid does that could be obnoxious? Shout—they're always shouting or impatient, or they won't sit still or something like this. It's the difference between approaching that child with acceptance so that you can influence them out of this space of love, or having this resentment and resistance to this child and trying to influence them from that space. People always try to do that; they try to approach children with this barrier between them and the child and then actually have some kind of an influence on the behavior of the child. And the child picks that up, and is just going to become more agitated because they sense that barrier, whereas if you approach them in love and accept, 'Alright, I'm feeling irritated but I can accept this behavior'—not accept in the sense of not evaluate it or not take action to try to mitigate it, but accept in the sense that 'I'm not putting this barrier between myself and the child.' Then you can have that influence.

It's the same way with parts of yourself. If there's parts of yourself that you don't like, treat them as you would a child you don't like. You have to fully accept them and embrace them to be able to have any influence over them. If you resist them, if you try to exclude them, if you keep judging them in the sense of, not just saying 'That's something I'd like to see changed; it's not very good behavior,' but resist them in the sense of, 'I don't really want to acknowledge that's part of me, and I'm just going to hold it off, hold it off,' you give strength to that. It's harder to get rid of.

We have the same kind of barriers towards our experience in general. Embarrassing or uncomfortable situations—we can withdraw part of ourselves and throw up a barrier to fully experiencing that. Something in us withdraws, something in us kind of steps outside of ourselves and doesn't fully experience it because it's uncomfortable. Defensiveness toward other people is a big one—when people say things that we don't like to hear, whether it be opinions that we disagree with or if they're criticizing us, or just viewing us in a different light than we view ourselves, that defensiveness goes up and it creates a barrier between ourselves and other people—this unwillingness to be fully present to what we're experiencing without casting up those kinds of inner barriers. That's not to say you can't step outside the presence of somebody that's very obnoxious to you, or try to change behaviors that you have that you feel ought to be changed. It's more that inner resistance, that inner sense of stepping back—of putting them in a different category than yourself. The feeling that you want to keep this at arm's length, rather than opening yourself up to it and then responding from this more open place. Very hard to describe, but maybe if I haven't done a good job of it you can ask me about it in the questions and answers some more.

But this sense of openness is the other indispensable to my mind. So, honesty—the ability to look inside, correctly identify what's going on in us, and then the ability to speak that truth to another person—and openness—not casting up barriers between ourselves and whatever experiences are coming into our lives, so that we can be fully present to those experiences—are the two indispensables to becoming more awake.

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