

A Mantra Question and Answer Session

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, May 30th 2007

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Q1: Monday when I go to work, on NPR, there's this thing called "This I Believe." Ever hear of that?

AZ: Uh huh.

Q1: Maybe it should add that.

AZ: [*laughs*] That would sound different, wouldn't it?

Q2: I had a teacher that, talking about communications, suggested a twist on that. She said when you're—when somebody is saying something and you're tempted to argue, you say, 'You could be right.'

AZ: Yeah, that's the necessary other side. [*laughs*] Thank you for adding that. It's not enough that you could be wrong, you have to acknowledge that other people could be right!

Q3: When you first said that, I thought 'Oh, I bet [*inaudible*] you're probably right.' It sounds like a non-violent kind of an etiquette, really. But it sounds like the real—besides that, being amongst other people, how it affects that—is what you're trying to say also is, when your own strongly held convictions, that when they're challenged or when something comes up, that's less of a problem?

AZ: Yeah. That's a way of saying it. Or to see in yourself that tendency to hang on and be defensive toward it, and to step back a little bit and say 'What is happening in my mind when I have that feeling that I have to defend my point of view? Why? What's at stake, really, here?' Is it simply that you want the truth to come out, or is it something else—that you're identified with that and you want to—what? Be proved right? You want to have your view prevail? There's an attachment to thoughts. When I have not talked about techniques there's a strategy in that, too; the whole thing is aimed, really, at bringing into greater awareness how the mind works, so that as it's doing these things you see it, and you're reminded, 'Oh, yeah, that's the mind working, that's not just *me*; that doesn't have to be how it is. That's how my mind is working.' And it allows you to step back a little bit from that; brings it into awareness. You start to dis-identify with what the mind is doing and fall into this larger self, this larger awareness, that realizes that whatever the mind's doing is a small part of the picture, and not something to get that worked up about. I guess that's part of what—how I would describe what this defensive feeling is about the thoughts. The feeling that, when you're identified with your beliefs, when you're strongly identified, when it becomes part of your identity, you feel like there's a challenge to your very person when

somebody challenges those beliefs. As though if that belief were to be not accepted, it means *you're* not accepted, and if that belief is regarded in ridicule, that *you're* being ridiculed, or if you were to let go of that belief, if someone were to challenge it and you were to find that you can't defend it, it would feel like a loss of your self. A scary feeling, right? That's part of what we're defending too, though it's probably the last thing we should defend.

Q4: I try to use tentative language, so that what I have learned myself I don't expect others to adhere to, or to pound them over the head with it. And so I like to use language like, 'My observation that,' 'It seems to me that.' My experience, talking from oneself, but not implying that others need to abide to those.

AZ: Yeah, that's a good way of distancing yourself too, a little bit.

Q4: And then it's nice to be able to get to the point of not having to be right, not having to one-up, prevail. It's just much better to be away from win-lose situations, but with a respect for all views.

AZ: That's a burden to carry, the need to be right. When you say that qualifying language, it reminds me of when I was an academic, and, every time you write something you realize as you're writing it, 'This can be criticized; this can be challenged; [*laughs*] they can poke holes in this.' So you tend to use all these weasel words of, you know, 'perhaps, 'maybe,' 'it appears that'—and it can get to a point where people say, 'Come on! Say what you mean, because you're so over-qualifying it you're not even saying anything.' [*laughs*] So there's a balance there, probably. I mean, to acknowledge your mind *does* have beliefs; there's nothing wrong with that. But to also acknowledge that you realize your mind is fallible, is the other side of it.

Q2: Well, whenever I tried 'You could be right' on one of my biggest teachers, she would always get angry—

AZ: [*laughs*]

Q2: —and know that I was patronizing her. And so her latest twist on that is another version of saying to somebody, 'You could be right,' by, uh—with a mudra. The mudra is like this, it's like— [*demonstrates*]. And it stands for, 'what-ever.'

[*general laughter*]

Q1: Reading just the other day, about the reason that we went to the left brain, back thousands of years ago, when the patriarchal took over, was language. That when we had an alphabet, and we got—that pushed us over the edge. And that now we're coming back to the right brain we [*inaudible*] with images, and so—just the fact that your mudra is a symbol, is a—

Q2: Well, it's just, it's 'W' and 'E,' so it's no—I was kidding about—

Q1: Oh, I see.

[*general laughter*]

AZ: Flashing a gang sign.

Q1: ‘Whatever.’

Q2: Right. Speaking of images, you reminded me of in Judaism, the second utterance, called ‘commandment,’ is “Have no other gods before me, and don’t make any images of me.” And images includes concepts, and so if God is first then you’re not to have a concept of God, and anything else is subordinate to that.

Q5: So there shouldn’t be a concept of God?

Q2: Well, you have to hold it lightly. It’s also similar to the first precept that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, you know, to have no absolute beliefs, including Buddhist ones. They’re all just fingers pointing at the moon.

AZ: It’s the same problem of mistaking the representation for the reality. You have an image of God, then people start worshipping the image instead of the God it’s supposed to represent. We use language to represent things, and then we start to become entranced by the words and they take on a greater reality than what it is we’re trying to represent. It’s what political ideologies are all about. This is partially where I’ve come to this, through studying political language. That sets of ideas, that get generated originally as a way to try to describe something in the world, take on a life of their own and people treat it as a reality. The way that you describe the world becomes real, and if someone else describes it differently, they’re deluded. I’m also thinking of how people look for other people that think like them to be comfortable with. There’s not only the hostility between people of different beliefs, but people look for people with similar beliefs to feel comfortable.

Q2: No danger of that here.

[*general laughter*]

Q5: So where I have problems is—I’m noticing this more lately—somebody is giving their view as though it’s the absolute truth. I always want them to say, ‘The way I see it is—’ Something like that, but they don’t. So I need something to say so I’m not upset by that.

AZ: Uh huh.

Q1: Well, Barry had something there.

[*general laughter*]

AZ: They could be right, huh?

Q5: Can I also say they could be wrong?

AZ: They could be right, they could be wrong.

Q1: But it depends on what you want; if you want an argument, then—

Q5: Oh, I just need something in my mind so it doesn't upset me.

AZ: Well, there's two things going on here. You can see somebody enmeshed in their own view and want them to be free of that. But when you're getting upset something else is going on, because that's not a desire for their freedom; that anger is a certain kind of distancing. This person becomes less than human, and becomes something then that you want to make a break with or change in some way. Seeing them as enmeshed in illusion brings out your compassionate side, right? Then you think, well, they don't have the ability to just let go of that, so in what kind of subtle way can I help them? Because if you hit them head on, they're going to get defensive, they're going to perceive it as an attack that they have to defend themselves against. If you really seeing them as somebody that's suffering because they're stuck in this mindset, you'll try to find some skillful way of bringing them out of it. But if you're getting angry at them that means that something's going on in you. You're being defensive of an opposite position. You're wanting not only to help them overcome their view, but to adopt your view, because you see your view as having more value than theirs. Now it's a different thing to say, 'I think my view is more truthful than theirs,' because you can only think that—you wouldn't hold that view, you'd discard it if you didn't believe it. But to say it has more value is, again, attaching yourself to it and saying, somehow my mind is less fallible than other minds, you know. They're wrong, but I couldn't be wrong. If you truly take this into yourself and the feeling is, 'Whatever view I'm having, that I'm thinking of that's in opposition to theirs, I really think I could be wrong so I need to listen to hear what they're saying that may be showing me something new or different,' your approach will be different. If there's anger, if there's defensiveness, there's something in you that's identifying and attaching to your own set of beliefs.

Q4: Obviously there needs to be attentive listening. You can put the ego aside; a chance to have openness, to broaden awareness.

Q5: Even if I agree with them it's still upsetting.

AZ: Really?

Q5: Yes. It's just that they're—

AZ: Something about the way they're expressing themselves?

Q5: —putting it out that they're—that it's the absolute truth.

AZ: Oh, I can see that. Yeah. Yeah, I can see that. I can only think that when I've experienced any kind of anger or resistance toward what somebody's saying, whether I agree with them or not, it's always because I'm clinging to my own view, and I want it to be seen in the best possible light. I mean, if I agree with them but yet they're expressing it in a way that I think is bringing discredit to that belief, it's upsetting me because I have such an attachment to that belief. So that emotional charge always means there's some kind of attachment.

Q3: So how do you let go, how do you do more of this detachment? Your saying, 'Well, I could be wrong'?

AZ: 'They could be right, 'I could be wrong,' they're both good techniques. Ultimately it's that same self-examination, spending the time becoming aware of how your mind works—seeing it in operation, bringing it into greater awareness. And the more you're aware of what's happening in your mind, the less you'll want to be attached to it, because you realize the kind of suffering it causes you. One thing that Adyashanti said was that—somebody said, "Well, how do I let go of an attachment?" He said, "Well, if you really see it as an attachment, you won't have any problem letting go. It's like picking up a red-hot poker; you know, once you feel that pain you'll let go."

Q4: If you deny the little of "whatever," then probably [*inaudible*] to let go.

AZ: If that attachment is more important to you than the pain it's causing, you'll hold on to it even though your hand is burning. And probably blame somebody else [*laughs*] for the burning sensation. Any final thoughts?

Q2: I just wanted to say that during the mediation—I didn't think of the word 'mantra,' but a mantra came to me, which is pretty unusual, and so it was funny that that was the theme of your talk. And it's one that's definitely related to what you were talking about, although it's slightly different, in that it was, 'Consider the context.'

AZ: By 'context' you mean like the cause-and-effect relationship and the overall circumstances in which something arises?

Q2: I think that's close to it, but the—David Hawkins, he's that guy that I showed you the book—and he talks about 'content' and 'context,' and it's in the sense of, thoughts are content of the mind and context is that which is beyond, in the sense, not in the sense I don't think that you're using 'mind' and you need go outside the mind, but the more Buddhist sense of that mind is unlimited and personal mind is small. And so, 'Consider the context' is like, there's a vast space of awareness that surrounds whatever it is, you know, that you're focused on, and attachment—anything you're attached to, 'Consider the context' is a way of letting go.

AZ: When the mind's really focused on identification it's like focusing on a fish that's in a fishbowl. It seems like that fish is so large. But when you let go, you realize that that fish is in an ocean, and it's really trivial in the larger scheme of things. That's what you mean?

Q5: So this will help when I'm meditating and suddenly start planning what to have for dinner?

AZ: I don't know if this is directly related to that, but—

Q5: Whatever I wander off on.

AZ: Whenever thoughts arise and you realize you're doing that, you just come back to the focus of your meditation.

Q5: The focus is what?

AZ: If it's your breathing—

Q5: Oh, whatever mine is.

AZ: Yeah, whatever your focus device is. And the point is, that you become aware of the mind's tendencies to go in different directions and see it as mind doing that, and not you. You're not thinking, thoughts are being thought within your field of awareness. Don't get too balled up in it. [*laughs*] It's enough to say, when my mind goes off just bring it back to the focus when you become aware of that. Bring it back. And there's a point to that.

Q4: I have an issue I'd like to hear people comment on. Might there be wisdom of the universe? Might there be things to learn, cognitive-, feeling-wise, life-wise? Or is everything relative, and we're just in a sea and things come in and out and such? What do we praise and recognize? Or is that not a part of how you think that we should relate to other people? Looking for the good, for example, in raising children, I think we try to catch them doing something successful, good, whatever, and acknowledge it and give reinforcement. So I'd like to hear about that from all around.

AZ: That's a big question. Where our standards of right and wrong come from is a complicated thing, but I think ultimately what it's meant to do is to bring your behavior and thinking more in alignment with what would be this deeper sense of wisdom, so that the wisdom can then express itself more freely. In other words, if you have this outer false self, you can have a false self that's a real badly-behaving, obnoxiously self, right? And you can train that self to some degree to become a better-behaving less obnoxious self, and I think that has value. But it doesn't have ultimate value because it's still the false self; it's still going to inhibit you from replying in a spontaneous way with this larger mind. So the aim is to bring that behavior and thinking more in correspondence with this larger, inner self, so that then it can break through. So it's a complicated thing, but that's where I would start with thinking about that.

Q4: Might there be a commonality of the deeper sense of self amongst humankind? I think of Carl Jung, we have a collective unconscious—

AZ: Well sure, I would think so. That we all are fundamentally the same.

Q4: —that puts you in touch with God, and eternal verities.

AZ: Uh huh. Well, you're getting really philosophical now. We started out on a practical note, and now you want to get really philosophical. [*laughs*]

Q4: I know. I'm noted for being very practical, and also idealistic.

AZ: Uh huh. Well, if that's your path, you should pursue it.

[*general laughter*]

Q1: Whatever.

[*more laughter*]

Q2: You really like that one, huh?

AZ: Thank you.

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