

A Question

Alan Zundel at the HeartAwake Center, May 16th 2007

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If I were to ask you a question and say, “What’s outside this window?” First your attention would be directed to your visual sense, and you’d move your eyes to look out the window—except for Len, because it seems like it’s too much trouble to turn his head around to the side [*laughs*]*—*and you’d scan through the window to see what’s out there. And then you might focus your attention on something or just keep scanning to describe different parts of the picture out there. You might focus on something in particular that you think I’m referring to, like if there was a bird going into the birdhouse, you’d say “oh, there’s a bird out there.” Or if you didn’t see anything unusual you might just direct your attention and say, “well, there’s trees and hills and other houses.” Or if you’re expecting to see something unusual you may look around and say, “well there’s nothing there”—as though I was asking the question expecting to see something different out there. So first your attention goes to your visual sense, and then you begin directing it outward through the window and identifying different things, picking them out of the whole landscape to focus on.

And if I were to ask, “What’s that sound?”—a similar process, right? First your attention goes to your auditory sense, and you note something unusual—sounds like an airplane going overhead, yeah? Or if not that, you’d hear that bird that just chirped, or a car passing by—although the airplane’s getting awful loud. [*laughs*] Right on cue, huh? Or you might hear the refrigerator. So first, your attention moves into your auditory sense, and you scan, and you focus on particular features, right?

Now, I’m going to ask you another question. And when I ask this question, I want you to be very conscious of that process of directing your attention. Where does it start from, where does it go to, and then what kind of things does it seem to settle on or focus on? Okay? Are you ready for this?

Who are you?

Now ideally, when I first asked that question there’s at least a moment when you’re not sure where to direct your attention. It’s not visual, it’s not auditory, and you’re thrown back on yourself, and there’s a moment when your attention just steps back and does not know where to go. Now if you experienced that, I want you to try to recall that sense and fix it in your memory for a moment, because this is the doorway to what I’ve been calling the true self, or the larger self—you can call it any one of a number of things.

The second step, though, is usually after that momentary sense of maybe confusion or just open possibilities, your attention goes to something. Who am I? Well, maybe a name: “I’m Alan Zundel.” Or roles that you play: I’m a father, I’m a mother, I’m a nurse, I’m a husband, I’m a wife. These are elements of what I’ve been calling the false self, the illusory

self, the small self. There's an interplay between these two: the true self being that moment of open possibilities and bare attention, the false self being our attention directed to thoughts about who we are or some sense of identity that's more specific.

I'm going to talk about each of those a little bit.

Now that true self, I said it's the door to—really it's the door to everything: it's the door to wisdom; it's the door to freedom; it's the door to encountering God. That sense of stepping back from all that you think you are, all that you imagine yourself to be, into just this bare openness and sense of possibility, and even a sense of disorientation and confusion at first, not sure where to rest your attention, not sure *who* you are, who is supposed to respond or how you're supposed to respond—to experience that more and more deeply, to go into that and identify that, is what you're aiming at in meditation. To find that place and to go deeply into it. Sometimes it can open up in a very dramatic way and you fall right into it and experience it very powerfully; sometimes it's just stepping back a little bit and getting a flavor of it. But the object is to become aware of that, to know experientially for yourself in your own experience that that's there. That that's there—to identify that and to know that, and then to move into it a little more freely by gradually disentangling yourself from all these other aspects of yourself that you usually direct your attention to, that you're usually habitually oriented toward. So to be able to identify that, and move back into that, and even move into that very deeply where you just suspend all other sense of attaching your attention to who you might be, and remain in the sense of not knowing, not identifying—just being, just being aware.

Now it might seem like that's nothingness, that's just emptiness, that's just being aware without having anything—well what can you do with that? But in my experience, what comes out of that is a sense of *guidance*, and you have to quiet all these other things going on in your mind or at least be able to step back from that to be able to hear it more clearly, using “hear” in a metaphorical sense, to be able to get that sense of guidance. That's what we do, I think, when we pray about an important decision—or at least ideally that's what we do when we pray about an important decision, people can do it all kind of ways, but—is trying to reach down more deeply into that and bring forward everything that's troubling you, and get beyond that and find that place in yourself that says, “no, this is what you're really being led to do, where you can have this sense of peace in making this decision.” So there is a sense of guidance, but it's very subtle and it's very quiet; so to be able to be sensitive to that you have to disentangle yourself from those elements of the false self that usually distract you. So there's guidance, there's movement, there's will.

There's also *knowingness*. Creative things come from that place—ideas, insights, intuitions; a kind of knowledge. Not the knowledge that comes out of abstracting from your sense impressions or getting information from books or speakers; it's the knowledge that comes from somewhere else. And it wells up from this place and you can translate it then into thoughts and explain it to people, or you can translate it into images and paint pictures with it. This is where creative things come from; this is where insights—there's some kind of source of knowledge.

So it's a source of knowledge and it's a source of movement, and this is why I often say that this is the place where wisdom and compassion grow from. Wisdom is this knowingness from this place of not knowing, because it's disentangled from our usual ways of knowing. And compassion is this movement that moves us towards what to do, the right thing to do, how to respond. And the very openness, the letting down of our blinders about who we are, connects us with the world around us and the people around us with less of an obstacle—there's more of a sense of unity and oneness, so that compassion and that wisdom can flow more freely. So identifying that place, experiencing it, going more deeply into it, and then finally living from that place, is what you're after.

[Voice:] How does one live from that place?

You consciously remain there and act from that place. I'll explain it in a minute; don't get too far ahead of me. [laughs] Hold that question!

Now let's go into the elements of the false self. This is where we habitually reside. Who are we? Well, we come up with a name maybe. And what's behind that name? If you're introducing yourself to somebody who's just met you and they say, "Well, who are you?", you usually give them a name and then you start with your roles, right? I'm a father, mother, what kind of work I did, group identifications that might seem appropriate at that time—you know, I'm a Christian, I'm a Buddhist, I'm a Democrat, a Republican, an American—things you like or dislike, things you identify with: I like to go out to eat, I like to ride my bicycle, I play guitar, I garden—identifying these specific things that you do or you identify with or that you feel yourself to be somehow affiliated with.

Beyond that, we get into stories—selective, taking out pieces from our memory and weaving them into a story suited to the situation. Now, it's never the whole truth. *None* of that is the whole truth—our roles, we're not limited to the roles we play. We're something more than that, because we function outside those roles and sometimes those roles are given up: we're no longer a spouse because of a divorce or a death; we're no longer the child of a parent because the parent has passed on; we're no longer a professor because we've left our job, or we're no longer this because we retired or something. Roles aren't constituent parts of us, they come and they go.

These stories are not us either, although it's very, very easy to start to think of yourself as being who your story is and seeing yourself as just that part of that story. They're very selective; you can't ever remember or express to somebody, or even in your own head tell the entire story of who you are. Even if you could remember everything you've done, there'd be all these elements of the story that influenced what you did and what happened to you that you may not have been aware of. You know, somebody that made the decision to hire you and you didn't know that they made that decision or why, or somebody that decided that they were going to drink that day and they rammed into your car and gave you that bum leg or something—things that you're not aware of in your story, that you don't know. So you're selecting parts of whatever you can remember or be aware of, those parts, and you're weaving

them into a little story. Who are you? Well, I grew up in Michigan and then I started on a spiritual search, I ended up going to college for a long time, became a professor, left that, and now I spend time every week sitting in my front room talking to people who look sleepy. *[laughs]* Or relaxed, anyway!

[Voice:] Successfully meditated.

Successfully meditated; now they're very relaxed and attentive.

So that story is one story that I could tell; I could tell other stories. I can tell a story of, I grew up with a father who used physical punishment, that made me angry and I had problems with my temper through most of my life, and now when I encounter people in positions of authority that seem to be abusing it I respond with anger. It's a different story I could tell, right? Or I could tell yet another story: I'm somebody who grew up in the sixties, and I experimented with drugs, and I got into popular music and was in a couple bands, took up guitar and still play guitar. All stories that have some truth in them, but none of them is the whole truth. But this is where we usually go in thinking about who we are and living out our life. We usually go to these parts of stories that we wove and live out those stories; we're living out the story of—the continuation of something that's only a fiction, or a partial view of who we are, and becoming enmeshed in those stories. And living them out without that sense of open possibility, without that sense of new creative ideas or intuitions that can arise, limits us and feels constricting, and feels limited, partial, incomplete.

So finding that part of ourselves that's the much bigger part, that encompasses everything else—that openness, that perception that can perceive these memories, perceive these thoughts, perceive all these different senses of who you are, has all of them within its field of awareness and possibility, and yet can choose among them or go beyond them and change and be something entirely different—that openness, that sense of possibility, that potential for creative change, for new ideas, for intuitions—can remake who you are, and give you more of a sense of freedom, of openness, of fulfillment in your life.

How do you live out of that place? Living right on the edge of the two is where, ideally, I think you should be. How do you live out of that? You maintain a space that's right between them; you just take a step back from all these thoughts about who you are, resting in this other place, but yet operating through this usual self. Is this making any sense? So first you have to get in touch with this, and then you have to go deeper into it, and then you have to move your sense of stability, your anchor—move your anchor from being set in these ideas about who you are, to this open place; you set the anchor there. And then you can move your ship in and out as you choose. But living from there means always being in touch with that, always resting in that and when you move out of it never moving so far out of it that you lose connection with it.

Because ordinary life, for most people most of the time, is losing connection with that—becoming so enmeshed in their habits, their thoughts about who they've been and who they're supposed to be and who they're trying to become, what roles they're playing, what

stories they're telling—all these things become so absorbing to the attention that it just moves outward and becomes anchored there, and doesn't have any connection or loses its connection, loses its awareness of this other, larger self.

So, who are you?

You choose.

The HeartAwake Center

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