

# The Critical Edge

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In Yatsutani-roshi's 'Introductory Lectures on Zen,' recorded in *The Three Pillars of Zen*, he outlines the three essentials of Zen practice: faith, doubt, and determination. A footnote in the text reminds the reader that 'in Zen, "doubt" implies not skepticism but a state of perplexity, of probing inquiry, of intense self-questioning.' Outside of the Zen school, however, it does mean skepticism, or unbelief. It is seen as the very enemy of faith. Early Buddhist doctrine lists it as one of the 'Five Hindrances,' along with desire, aversion, sloth, and restlessness. Among these, doubt is considered the worst since it incapacitates the mind. It raises questions that can cripple one's efforts: 'What is the point of this practice?' 'Why am I doing this?' 'Where's it getting me?'

In Zen, faith and doubt don't conflict, they co-arise. If we have faith that the world is in some way ultimately perfect, then how can we not wonder why there is so much suffering in the world? If we believe what Shakyamuni realized through his great Awakening, that all beings are intrinsically enlightened, how can we not be perplexed at the evidence that contradicts that statement, namely, the greed, hatred, and delusion that is endemic in human beings? Skepticism would lead us to conclude that the Buddha must have been wrong. When our faith is intact, however, it generates the need to resolve the contradiction between what we believe and how things appear.

The doubt that co-arises with faith is, like faith, an innate part of our nature, yet it changes form in the course of our maturation and development. Questioning first reveals itself when the child begins speaking, as early as age one and a half; before that, certainly, it couldn't be articulated, even in the mind. Until language is acquired, we experience the world as undivided, devoid of 'self' or 'other,' 'right' or 'wrong,' 'in-

side' or 'outside,' 'now' or 'then.' Once we learn 'I' and 'me' and other pronouns, and 'Mama,' and 'want,' we find ourselves, like Adam and Eve, banished from Paradise. The experience of simple oneness yields to a world of differentiation. The two-year-old tests his new powers of bifurcation, fascinated especially by the 'No!' that affirms his incipient sense of self.

With the arising of what Buddhism calls 'name and form,' then, comes verbal questioning, a uniquely human response to phenomena. In children it is often simple inquisitiveness, an eagerness to learn about things—their attributes and values and the relationships among them. The 'what,' 'where,' and 'why' questions of children sometimes seem endless and can get exasperating. But because they arise from such pure not-knowing, they can also be startling, even dumbfounding. A member of our Sangha was asked by her granddaughter, 'Who thought up dying?' There are also the comical questions. At one of the earliest weddings I performed, when I was still doing the service in my priest's robe, I entered the room of guests (to the strains of Pachelbel's Canon), proceeded to the altar, and turned to face everyone for the entrance of the bride and groom. At that moment, from the back of the room, a little girl's high-pitched voice rang out, 'Mommy, why is he wearing his pajamas?'

As we mature, our natural childhood perplexity shows itself less. What happens to it? No doubt, as we hear more and more explanations and other answers, we wonder less. We're told about the natural world and people, and the way things work—all vital information, of course, for our functioning in the world. We do need to learn and remember the nature of real dangers and threats, how to work and get along with others and manage our affairs. But along the

way we also accumulate mental freight we don't need. Parents, teachers, and siblings transmit as basic knowledge concepts with which they themselves were inculcated: assumptions about the world, ways of classifying and ranking people, opinions, judgments, and religious dogma. Anxious to make sense of the world, as children we soak up what we're told. The mind-sets we absorb most deeply are also the least visible to us, thus remaining unexamined.

Through schooling, too, our knowledge grows exponentially. We amass a prodigious body of facts, ideas, principles, and come to see this as 'the way things are.' But the more information computers enable us to harvest about the world, the more demonstrably complex, mysterious, and even chaotic our world is revealed to be. Thomas Edison, who must have had a keener and more probing mind than most of us, once declared, 'We don't know a millionth of one percent about anything.'

As we're heaping up data about the world, we're also steadily molding a self-construct from a plaster of memories, images, habitual reactions, and notions about our abilities and liabilities, our bodies, our personalities, our intelligence, and our relative worth, all gleaned from what others tell us and how they respond to us. It is a sculpture without substance. It has some relative validity to it, since we do have some relatively enduring traits and tendencies. But to the extent that we see this self as fixed, it is a fiction. Moreover, the older we get, the more we are likely to assume—erroneously—about the world and ourselves. Much of this amounts to nothing more than 'subjective emotional consciousness,' as the ancient Chinese masters called it. We become blinded by what we 'know,' and like vast cities blazing in artificial light every night, our minds are left with less and less of the darkness that inspires wonder. No wonder our natural inquisitiveness fades.

There is no point in lamenting this filling of the mind; it is an inevitable part of childhood development. Nor does it occur only in technologically advanced cultures. Even primitive

peoples come to acquire mental structures that then determine how they interpret reality. In *The User Illusion*, Tor Norretranders recounts how a Pygmy guide became disoriented when an anthropologist took him out of the Congo forest where he had spent his entire life without the experience of judging the size of objects at great distances. The Pygmy looked out over the plain at a herd of buffalo in the far distance and identified them as insects. When driven by jeep to see the buffalo up close, he became increasingly frightened and then bewildered, ascribing the transformation of the 'insects' to witchcraft. 'Believing is seeing,' a Buddhist might note.

As children move into adolescence, their questions become weightier, gravitating toward their crystallizing sense of separate identity. They question matters of responsibilities and rights—'Why do I have to ... (go to bed so early, do the dishes, etc.)?' 'Why can't I ... (wear, have, take, go to see, etc.)?' Such questions are protests, yes, but they signify a sharpening sense of oneself and one's limits. The teen's self-concept has now congealed enough for her to feel apart from the world, but not enough to feel secure. (As long as we imagine we are apart from the world, how secure can we ever feel?)

Even as the adolescent is coming to feel more at odds with the world, he finds himself in possession of a developing new faculty: critical intelligence. Brandishing this new weapon, he often finds fault everywhere: with parents, siblings, teachers and friends, school, church, society and the wider culture—and, of course, with himself. The individual's criticism of people and things reveals a growing ability to discern what is false, and without this no questioning is possible. But without faith in something that is beyond both self and other, our critical faculties may be used merely to reject, and this leads us to the ordinary, negative doubt of unbelief.

Skepticism itself, however, may be a cover for unrealized faith. A young Philip Kapleau was the founder and first president of his high school's Atheists Club. Conversely, what passes for religious belief may be devoid of the doubt



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that confirms true spiritual faith. A recent survey of American teens ages 13–17 summarized their faith as ‘wide but shallow,’ finding that although a majority of them ‘believe in God and worship in conventional congregations,’ their religious knowledge is ‘meager, nebulous, and often fallacious.’ The study points to the prevalence of blind belief, which, to use a Buddhist expression is the ‘near enemy’ of true faith. This ‘knowing’ forecloses genuine questioning.

When the mind is girded with even an inchoate faith, the person can use her critical intelligence not just to criticize or deny, in the presumption of knowing, but to question. The potential targets of our condemnation can then be subjects of inquiry: ‘What makes him so mean?’ ‘Why can’t Mom and Dad get along?’ ‘How do I take care of myself without being selfish?’ Two especially loaded questions aimed at religious dogma are: ‘In what sense are children “sinners”?’ And ‘Did Adam and Eve have belly buttons?’

The normal trajectory of human doubt shows the questioning of childhood and adolescence sputtering out as full maturity sets in. It can’t seem to survive the growing weight of our belief systems, the pressures of adulthood. Before that, however, our various perplexities may, as if in a last stand, coalesce around a single, ultimate question. Among the most common of these are: ‘What is the meaning (or purpose) of life?’ ‘How do I live in Truth?’ ‘Who am I?’ ‘Where did I come from before I was born, and where will I go after I die?’ Such potent questioning signifies a breathtaking spiritual opportunity, and the last time that most people—unless they take up meditation—will gaze unflinchingly at the naked mystery of being. Few of those who are gripped by ultimate questions have them persist long enough to effect an overturning of the mind. One for whom this did happen was Flora Courtois, who as a college student in the 1940s came to spontaneous awakening after several months in which she was consumed by the

question, 'What is Reality?' As a sixteen-year-old, Ramana Maharshi, who became one of the greatest masters of the twentieth century, suddenly was overcome by a fear of death that plunged him into the deepest doubt: 'What really is it, then, to die?' In just half an hour his self-inquiry brought him to profound enlightenment.

Such spectacular eruptions of faith-doubt, whether in adolescence or later, are exceedingly rare. Most young people who are not walking in lock-step to their parents' religion seem to navigate their way through faith and doubt as did the character in one of Nathaniel Hawthorne's novels who, he wrote, 'can neither believe, nor be comfortable in his unbelief.' It is hard to imagine, though, that the questioning unique to our species can ever be extinguished. At times of adult crisis, the parents who may have once dismissed their children's existential questions as pointless, and the clergy who reflexively offered church doctrine in response to such queries, may find their own former doubt resurfacing.

When someone close to us dies, in our grief we may for the first time find ourselves seized by religious or philosophical questions: 'Where did she go?' 'What is the meaning of it all?' 'Why now, why her?' Or, in the case of a violent crime, 'Why would a just God permit this?' The same or other probing questions may well up after a diagnosis of a terminal disease, or a divorce, or even losing a job. Our assumptions, expectations, or hopes are left shattered, and we *don't understand*. Such profound perplexity may erupt in the face of stunning evil as well. For Philip Kapleau it took four months of courtroom testimony at Nuremberg to provoke the doubt that, supported by faith, drove him to the mat. His previous understanding of human nature and cosmic order had been torn, leaving him in the darkness of doubt.

What further evidence suggests that doubt, coupled with faith, is integral to our True Nature? The whole history of human achievement! It is most obvious in the realms of discovery and invention. Leif Eriksson, Lewis and Clark, and Amelia Earhart all had faith that there were new

lands beyond their horizons, and with this came the questions 'Where?' 'What?' and 'How?'—and the need to find out. What else but an inquiring mind working in tandem with faith enabled Jonas Salk to find the polio vaccine, Madame Curie to discover radium, and James Watson and Francis Crick the structure of DNA? It was faith in the yet-to-be-realized, yoked to questioning, that drove Chester Carlson to invent the copy machine, Sigmund Freud psychoanalysis, and George Washington Carver his three-hundred uses of the peanut. Late in his life, Albert Einstein, recounting what he went through in developing his theory of relativity, used words that echo the classic spiritual journey. He recalled 'the years of anxious searching in the dark, with their intense longing, their alternations of confidence and exhaustion, and the final emergence into the light.'

These are just a handful of the most illustrious cases of faith-doubt actualized. But we can see the same force at work in far humbler ways. It fuels the investigations of journalists ('What's going on here?'), detectives ('Who did it?'), physicians ('What's wrong?'), social workers ('What's to be done?'), and teachers and parents ('How do I reach him?'), as well as all the rest of us when we're probing, pondering, and puzzling in the faith that we can know: 'What's the answer?' 'What am I missing?' 'What's the way out?' In every case the questioning, arising out of not-knowing, is generated by faith, either in an underlying order to the world or in a basic soundness, balance, and wellness of the body-mind.

Zen doubt refers, of course, to an *inner* process. Both 'wondering' and 'perplexity' suggest this introspective quality more clearly than 'questioning' (the same distinction is highlighted in Spanish, where to ask or question is 'preguntar,' whereas to wonder is the reflexive 'preguntarse,' to ask oneself). But 'questioning' better conveys the active engagement of the mind that is implied in the word 'doubt.' (When applied to a koan, it has been compared to 'turning the soil' rather than just watching and waiting.)

Dynamic inner questioning seems to work

differently than any other type of mental functioning. When allowed to gain traction it empties the mind, erasing thought-clutter. Anyone who has had the experience of falling into deep perplexity will recognize this effect. For example, upon having misplaced one's car keys, the effect is most dramatic when you know they must be within a particular room. Yet you've looked there, thoroughly, and more than once. Wondering turns to increasingly intense perplexity, until finally you come to a complete stop, utterly lost in doubt. Such is the centripetal force of doubt yoked to faith. Brain imaging techniques may someday confirm the uniqueness of this mode of brain functioning.

While nothing, then, engages the mind like a question, that questioning can be evoked from outside us. Those in marketing know that to compete for the attention of readers in certain niches, one of their best strategies is to introduce the product or service in question form. We see this on the covers of the popular magazines arrayed along supermarket check-out lines: 'Is Madonna Pregnant?' 'Will Brad and Jennifer Split Up?' Most of us really don't know for sure, and publishers have learned that we may be prompted to wonder just enough to buy the magazine. Promotional mailings use the same device, their creators knowing that they can count on only a fraction of a second of the recipient's attention, at most.

Zen teachers are in marketing, too, faced with the task of 'selling water by the river.' Through their own direct experience they know the titanic potential of focused questioning. They know that the capacity to wonder is a priceless human endowment, but that for most of us it sinks under the weight of conceptualization and other conditioning that tends to thicken as we grow older. They also know that Zen practice will reverse this process of mental coagulation and yield a more youthful openness. They face a question of their own, then: how to activate the dormant perplexity that is embedded in the human condition itself. We alone of all creatures have self-consciousness, the ability to conceive of our existence and our inevitable death. Who



among us, then, could not harbor questioning in his heart? Who could not wonder, at least unconsciously, at the mystery of our very being?



Among the resources used by the Ch'an masters of the Sung dynasty were the stories and dialogues of their predecessors tossing out confounding responses to their own monks in an effort to stir them to awaken. They collected these records and called them *kung-an* (Jap., *koan*), or 'precedents.' The genius of the koan as a meditative device lies in its ability to mobilize the student's latent doubt by bringing it to a focus. It functions as does a magnifying glass under the sun. Natural sunlight is relatively diffuse, but upon passing through a magnifying glass, its warmth can be transformed into a spot

of fire in seconds. In the same way, the koan has the power to gather together the relatively weak and sporadic perplexity of the student into a single, burning question—a *doubt-mass*—that empties the mind and leads to awakening more quickly than any other method. Throughout history, Zen masters in Asia have repeated the same formula:

The greater the doubt,  
the greater the Awakening.  
The smaller the doubt,  
the smaller the Awakening.  
No doubt, no awakening.

What the masters meant by ‘doubt’ didn’t always involve koans. After all, koans were not used for the first five-hundred years of Zen, a golden age in which there were probably more deeply enlightened masters than in any period since. How many of them, we have to wonder, were driven to realization by their own spontaneously-erupting inquiries, like Ramana Maharshi and Flora Courtois? Or was their faith so great, and their minds so pure, that their attainments came without questioning? In any case, most of us must rely on the koan to ‘raise the doubt-sensation’ and bring our largely unconscious questioning up to consciousness.

A koan usually contains in its very wording a contradictory element that cannot be resolved with our ordinary, discriminating mind. This alone would make it puzzling. But even a koan with no linguistic paradox becomes puzzling simply through our seriously engaging with it. With the koan Mu, for example, most teachers do not recommend pondering the original dialogue between Chao-chou and a monk. Rather, just putting one’s whole mind into the question ‘What is Mu?’ or even just ‘Mu’ will eventually raise the doubt-mass. This happens as the apparent split between the koan and oneself becomes increasingly dubious—and perplexing.

Every koan is a unique expression of our own essential nature, just as is every flower, every stone, every insect. To work effectively on a koan, one must have faith in his ultimate iden-

tity with it, and that in working on it he is really working on himself. With this faith comes the conviction that he himself can resolve the contradiction implied in it—for example, ‘Mu and I are not two, yet it still seems separate from me.’ These two convictions together form the faith-ground out of which doubt arises.

Theoretically, the same dynamics of koan work could evolve while one is persistently inquiring into the nature of any supposed object, whether physical or mental: an image, a candle flame, a sound, a cloud, a tree, a partner, an idea. When Isaac Newton was asked how he discovered the Law of Gravity, he replied, ‘My mind never ceased thinking about it.’ By focusing all our questioning on one thing, we become more intimate with it even as it becomes still more puzzling—until eventually the doubt shatters, bringing about a radically new understanding of it.

The essential point is that illusion cannot survive intense scrutiny pursued to the end. The most fundamental illusion of all, separation, dissolves. We can’t cling to our delusions while sincerely inquiring into the koan. ‘Knowing’ and questioning are mutually exclusive. And the more thoroughly we probe the koan, the sooner the ‘known’ world of self and other dissolves, revealing—what?



If doubt is essential to Zen practice, how does it operate in breath practice, or in *shikan-taza* (‘just sitting’)? Questioning plays no role in these practices. Strictly speaking, a question must be articulated somehow; it cannot exist in the absence of words.

In koan-less practice, doubt is implicit rather than explicit. Like faith, it must be there, otherwise we wouldn’t be sitting. But with no actual question in the mind, doubt here is to be understood more loosely as a sense that something needs to be resolved. Our sitting testifies to a dissonance between our faith and our experience. It may be, for example, that faith in the inherent unity of phenomena is at variance with

one's experience of disunity; faith in the basic completeness of people is at odds with one's perception of their shortcomings; faith in the immanent silence of things is at odds with one's experience of disquiet. In all such examples the perception of incongruity creates a spiritual tension that one seeks to resolve through sitting.

Just as the innate human impulse to question reveals itself in exploration, invention, investigation, and other kinds of inquiring pursuits, so we can see non-questioning doubt at work in worldly aspirations. It may be most obvious in the drive for mastery, whether in athletics, music and art, body work, or academics. Those who dedicate themselves to these and other disciplines are yearning to resolve the disparity between what they believe they are capable of and what they have already achieved. Why else would a world-class tennis player, pianist, or chess player go on training eight hours a day? Questioning, as such, is not involved in these pursuits, but they are bristling with doubt in a movement toward

resolution. Unlike zazen, however, they do not lead to ultimate liberation.

In non-koan zazen, doubt—or faith-doubt—reveals itself not through questioning but rather as a *looking*. Not just looking *at*, but looking *into*, searchingly, and with bare attention. Doubt here implies looking while not knowing—peering out of darkness into darkness. It is what Wittgenstein meant when he urged, 'Don't think, look!' This is the same place to which koan practice leads us, the realm of non-abiding, 'holding to nothing whatever but dwelling in *prajna* wisdom.' In this realm of no-form, mind as spacious as the blue sky, the world of phenomena is born anew. If, as Socrates said, 'wisdom begins in wonder,' it also ends there. Life becomes wondrous.

*This article appeared in the following issue of Zen Bow: 'Doubt', Vol. 28, No. 1, 2005. For permission to reprint, please contact the Rochester Zen Center.*