

## HSUEH-FENG'S SPIRITUAL LIGHT

### FIRST, A COMMENTARY ON QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

What are they, really? In an ordinary sense of things, we tend to think of a question as coming from one of two places:

1) a questioner, one who knows the answer and is presenting a test or a challenge, i.e.-

*How many fingers am I holding up? Can you roll your tongue?*

*It takes a boat 3 hours to travel down a river from point A to point B, and 5 hours to travel up the river from B to A. How long would it take the same boat to go from A to B in still water?*

2) a person looking for a guidance, who doesn't know the answer and asks someone who is likely to provide an answer, i.e.-

*How do I get to Blue Heron Zen Center from here? Where do I go to vote? Or in a more broad philosophical inquiry: What will become of us if democracy is dead?*

However, in kong-ans, we have to look at questions and answers a little differently. As active engagement. Mutual inquiry. And to help make that shift, let's use different words, and call this engagement, this dynamic exchange **a call and response**. Why?

Question and Answer implies that one person doesn't know something and the other one knows. Therein lies a complicit delusion, a bifurcation of what should otherwise be viewed the inconceivable breadth of how we can engage with inquiry together.

**The practice of call and a response, then, is an exploration of the place where we meet at the center of BEING, which invokes both the mystery of a before-thinking mind *and* the place where two unique minds (like two arrowpoints) meet in an instant of time.**

**To call** is to reach out, to extend ourselves, to be vulnerable, clear, and authentic

**To respond** is to reach out, to extend ourselves, to be vulnerable, clear and authentic.

#### BACKGROUND TO KONG-AN:

Source: *Transmission of the Lamp*; Chinese Ch'an

ZM Hseuh-feng: Tang Dynasty China. Traveled a great deal during his lifetime. He was the housemaster in another famous kong-an, *Te-shan Carrying His Bowls*. He was the one who was cooking rice in the kitchen, and according to one rendition of the story, he stepped outside to hang a rice cloth to dry, he spotted Master Deshan coming to the meal with bowls in hand. And he said to the master, "The bell hasn't been run and the drum hasn't been struck. Where are you going with your bowls?"

Coming and going in the midst of endless change, a call and response appears.

His awakening experience occurred while traveling, in the midst of conversation with a fellow student. Apparently, he traveled a great deal throughout his life.

How we teach is a reflection, an embodiment of who we are and how we have been taught, and also, how (in what context) our own awakening(s) occurred.

-Xuefeng's teacher may have launched this travel-themed line of inquiry himself with this exchange:

*-When Xuefeng was ready to leave Cave Mountain, he went to say farewell to the master.*

*Master Dongshan asked him, "Where are you going?"*

*Xuefeng said, "I'm traveling through the mountains."*

*The master said, "When you came here, what road did you take?"*

*Xuefeng said, "I came though Flying Monkey Peaks."*

*The master said, "What road will you take now?"*

*Xuefeng said, "I'll go through Flying Monkey Peaks as well."*

*The master said, "There is someone who doesn't go by way of Flying Monkey Peaks. Do you know this person?"*

*Xuefeng said, "I don't know this person."*

*The master said, "Why don't you know this person?"*

*Xuefeng said, "Because this person has no face."*

*The master said, "If you don't know this person, how do you know this person doesn't have a face?"*

*Xuefeng didn't respond.*

Our kong-an begins like this:

One day Hsueh-feng was standing in front of his temple when a traveling

monk came walking down the path. Hsueh-feng asked him, "Where are you

coming from?"

## THE CALL-WHERE ARE YOU COMING FROM?

There are potentially very different calls here. One might be suggesting a physical location. Another might be about a mental state. But ultimately there is only the one, the coalescing of all reference points into one clear momentary dharma exchange.

**How do we typically summon up a response? Almost immediately we frontload a narrative.**

What is your story? What do we pull out of the hat, out of that great storehouse consciousness in order to present our response? And what do we leave out?

How we respond demonstrates not only our karmic leanings and our habit energies, but also the movement of the great mass of the cosmos, of which we are perpetually alive at its center point. “Where are you coming from?” could be a reframing of our core question, “What am I?”

How do we tell our origin stories? How does what we pull out of our memory inform and even create our present moment reality? It changes everything.

For example, see if you can come up with a minute, pivotal event that was small in stature, but huge in impact in your life....

In my own case, I might say that I come from tiny figure of a toy parachute man. It was one of my earliest memories of childhood, something that I saw in the hand of a little boy, while I was at a large, festive event that had totally overwhelmed and frightened me. Seeing that ingenious little toy filled me with wonder and joy (and probably a little covetousness as well!). It embodied, for me, the power of art and craft and how the making of something could redeem us. The minute event, it could be said, is where I’m coming from.

When I have been asked, *“Where are you coming from?”* I have replied, variously, depending on my mood and what memories have been evoked most recently. After sitting a retreat I might say *that I come from stardust*. On meeting a neighbor, I might reply, *Detroit*. When asked after reading a novel about the Holocaust, I might reply--*straight out of the Holocaust*. A month after attending my daughter’s wedding in Ethiopia, *Ethiopia*.

How far back shall we go, in time and space to orient our origins?

#### PRACTICE EXPERIMENT:

- look at habitual responses. Shake them up, tease open the tightly knit go-to narratives and experiment with different replies to the question, “Where are you coming from?” Could be in a journal, or as an experimental dialog with a dharma friend.
- Look at habitual calls. What kind of energy and willed direction is implied within them? Are they open or are they closed? Note: it’s not just the words themselves, but the mind/heart that presents them.
  - o *Why are you always such a bitch?* - in different tones
  - o *What do you think you’re doing?* - *So, what’s this?*

“I COME FROM THE TEMPLE OF SPIRITUAL LIGHT.”

Next, I’ll read the whole kong-an:

*One day Hsueh-feng was standing in front of his temple when a traveling*

*monk came walking down the path. Hsueh-feng asked him, “Where are you coming from?”*

*The monk answered, "I come from the Temple of Spiritual Light."*

*Hsueh-feng then replied, "Here at my temple, in the daytime we have*

*sunlight and at night we use candlelight. But, what is spiritual light?"*

*The monk could not answer.*

How we respond to a call is revealed in a blueprint we Zen students have ready access to - the Zen circle.

"Oh, me? Why I come from the temple of spiritual light, of course!" (karma I, wherein there is attachment to an idea, to self, to grasping, etc.)

When we respond to a call, let's just look, for a moment, at what we're responding to.

Meet me where I am and visa versa. Truth World, clear mirror that has no stand, no fixed point.

Whether it's a literal time/space response or a heart/mind response, we take as prescription that it should reflect the truth world, i.e. - mirror/red)

Even though the past is sketchy and unknown. Even though our intention for the future is sketchy, unknown.

Moment world is the ultimate pivotal and fresh response wherein karma meets dharma, point to point, and all dualistic thinking explodes into awakening

The Whole, completely unknowable, can, nevertheless be realized right here, right now, and serve to awaken all beings throughout time and space.