

## TALKS AND DIALOGUES, QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

*'Questions are more important than answers when they make people think. Answers are more important than questions when such answers have no questions.'*

*Idries Shah*

### Transformative Power of the Spoken Word

There is a real, significant and transformative difference between a conventional religious sermon and a talk delivered by a spiritually realized being:

The preacher, didactic, etc., always has a theme which he affirms or tries to persuade the people about, or relates to some part of his or her beliefs. This is, in fact, largely indoctrination in action or in reinforcement. There is usually, too, a moral 'meaning,' and the use of logic, intellect or emotion, sometimes all of these. With the Sufis, the address or other initiative by the teacher is based on his perception of the needs of the individuals and collectivity in the audience. In other words, he casts a 'net' to find out how people are thinking, and then stimulates them in such a way as to help develop their consciousness. The two methods are entirely distinct. The former is one which is shared by religious people with political, national, tribal and other projections. The latter is only operative on the interior spiritual plane. As examples, using similar materials: the religionist may point to art or nature as wonders and encouraging and aesthetically and emotionally satisfying; the Sufi will use them to stimulate understanding and development rather than indulgence. (1)

In the hands of a skilful teacher, a talk can range over a variety of subjects, topics and ideas in order to "bring to the consciousness of the individuals a way of thinking and a means of looking at things which is not available in their ordinary experience." An instrumental talk or lecture is designed to have a precise effect on an audience. Because any varied group will contain people at different levels of understanding and potentiality, a teacher will tailor their address in such a way as to "say the right thing to each person." In some traditions important spiritual teachings may even be offered as 'nutrition' at a dinner gathering:

The discourse may be on any subject, but the address which the teacher gives is always regarded as answering the unspoken questions of the guests, as he ranges over a wide range of topics. For this reason, questions are not usually allowed at dinners. The guests have to reflect upon the application of the Sufi's words and actions in their individual cases. But they must not become imaginative, or assume that they are being 'tested.' So the routine is a kind of experience-teaching, with the way in which one can learn being compressed into a short time

due to the precise targeting of the address. The effect, too, can be cumulative: things done or said at one meeting being added to in future ones. (2)

A talk or discourse may have a hidden pattern or structure that is imperceptible to most members of an audience, but in reality is based on a perception of the actual spiritual needs of the group: Idries Shah: "In general, Sufis will only teach according to their impression of the individual and collective nature of their audience. The Sufi is believed to be reading the message emanating from the audience, and working with it accordingly."

Sheikh Daud maintained a guest-house, which was usually filled with people who came to hear his discourses. These talks, though they very often seemed to be general rather than specific, were yet said always to be directed at the people who were present, and to be of great use to them . . . The Sheikh did, in fact, as all believed, 'employ medicine and not discuss it.' I listened to many of these talks, and could certainly find no common denominator to them at first. This was entirely because I was using the Western habit of mind, the habit which demanded to know the theory and the didactic of the teaching, rather than experiencing any of it. But there was no theory, only experience on the part of the teacher. The didactic did not exist. All depended upon the instructor's perception of the needs of his audience, and his ability to fulfil these. (3)

Exchanges between a teacher and student(s) often take the form of questions and answers. Insightful or perceptive spiritual teachers invariably adapt their answers to the level of understanding of the questioner and the circumstances. Thus at different times the same teacher may give different answers to the same question. "One of the big differences between questions and answers is that a question may be asked at almost any time and place, but its answer may come only at a special time and place."

A teacher will take great care in responding to a question and tailor the answer to the needs of each individual student. Zen roshi Philip Kapleau: "In listening to a question a teacher must ascertain where the questioner stands, so to speak, so that he knows how best to direct his answer. Just as truth itself is not static, but dynamically alive, so the 'right' answer can never be fixed. For this reason, a reply that does not reflect the questioner's particular needs is a mere abstraction."

A teacher must resort to expedient means, stepping down to the level of verbal communication in order to reach the listener. Especially in our Western culture, where even the most rudimentary principles of Zen Buddhism are still largely unknown – or misunderstood – the teacher is obliged to speak to beginners in a language they can understand . . . The Zen newcomer needs to feel his way slowly, first satisfying his intellect that he is traveling in the right direction and then gaining the faith and confidence to go eventually he 'knows not where by a road he knows not of.' Questions from the heart, not the head, are the lifeblood of a Zen teacher. But theoretical questions have their place too, restricted though it is,

for more than anything else they reveal exactly where the questioner stands and how firmly he is rooted there. This knowledge is useful to the teacher. (4)

In order to provoke the student's learning capacity a teacher may sometimes not answer a question or respond with a counter-question. Sometimes the answer or lack of an answer may seem enigmatic or even irrational to the student, yet it is designed to stimulate a deeper understanding: "An *alive* expression is one in which we don't give the person anything to hold on to, but rather something that forces them to re-evaluate what they've been doing, or to see it in a different light. An *alive* expression can be verbal or non-verbal."

To refuse to answer a question, or to say something that, in appearance, has nothing to do with the question, does not signify that the Master refuses to help the disciple. The Master seeks only to bar the disciple from the world of speculation, which is foreign to Awakening. In fact, the Master can always cite passages from the scriptures and give detailed explanations . . . If he does not do it, it is because he knows that explanations are not useful in the Awakening of the disciple. Certainly there are cases where such explanations can help the disciple in their efforts to get rid of false views about the doctrine and the methods. But the Master refuses to give a reply or explanation that could destroy the chances of Awakening and do harm to the disciple. Wei-Shan once asked Po Chang: 'Can one speak without using the throat, lips and tongue?' And Po Chang replied, 'Certainly, but if I do I destroy my whole posterity.' (5)

The classical Zen master Hui-neng used language in such a way as to liberate his students from the shackles of the either/or assumptions of language: "If someone asks you a question expecting 'yes' for an answer, answer 'no' and vice versa." The answers "yes" and "no" are to be seen as skilful means intended to produce appropriate effects in the minds and hearts of the students. Each reply is not to be taken as objective truth.

Some answers to questions are designed to 'shock' or break habitual patterns of thought and highlight unexamined assumptions: "A teacher will often pursue a course of thought and then switch over to the opposite seeming opinion, simply to show you how fallacious or incomplete a single way of thought may be." Certain interchanges between a teacher and an individual student are designed to act as a form of "indirect teaching" to provide illustrations to others: '*Speak to the wall so that the door may hear.*'

A skilful teacher will not press or force an answer from a student but rather will try to make them think about their own question in a deeper light. The great Zen master Dogen once said: "When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it intellectually. Do not argue with him, just listen to his objections until he himself finds something wrong with them."

Not all questions that are posed by a student are useful or can be answered directly. They must be structured in such a manner that the answers are actually helpful. Providing answers when someone cannot understand or profit from it is pointless. And, although a question may be considered by a teacher, it may not always be answered if it has already, in some form, been covered by answers already given or readily available in written texts.

Sometimes a response to a question is immediate in its effect, while sometimes it requires the passage of time to be properly digested and understood. When someone carefully formulates a question of significant personal importance, they often find the answer they need spontaneously through the process of reflection and consideration of the phrasing of the question.

People often ask questions compulsively or without forethought, when they could readily supply their own answers with a little investigation, study and effort:

You see this behaviour in children; when they ask questions that they could have answered themselves, with a little thought. In the adult it is a symptom of someone who is not taking the trouble to do his own thinking. In the process, of course, he is in fact using the person whom he questions as a substitute for doing this work. Experience shows (which is why I make so much of this) that people who have not troubled themselves to absorb information from readily available sources and who instead continue asking questions from others in this way do not profit from the answers. The reason is that the effort of looking for the answer and registering it is part of the learning process. To apply for an answer, to get it too easily, almost always results in this individual again failing to digest the material. If someone asks you a question, and you help him to find out for himself, or if a student you send him to a dictionary or research source, you do this because you know that this principle is correct, not because you weary of telling him. By contributing his own intelligent effort, he learns. (6)

In some instances providing an answer prematurely can defuse the dynamic power of questioning. If the answer comes too easily it can become a mere slogan or facile truism. In Zen there is a dictum: '*Great doubt, great awakening.*' Zen teacher Maurine Stuart talks about the responsibility on the part of the teacher to communicate effectively with the student:

We say that Zen cannot and should not be talked about, but then we go ahead and talk just the same, for the sake of opening up some doorway of understanding. And those of us who have to talk are aware of our responsibility; that what we say may have an effect that is encouraging or discouraging, confusing or clarifying. We must watch our steps closely. It's not a matter of just throwing some words out. Our hope is that in offering whatever little bit we have understood ourselves, the student's own inner eye will open. All our words, all our actions are for this. And we also know that it is not just our words, but everything around us that is delivering a message. The circumstances of the day, the work, each of you, everything and everyone is delivering the teaching. (7)

Sometimes people react to *how* a question is answered and misunderstand the motives of the teacher due to their own assumptions and subjectivity:

Q: You sometimes seem to be very rude to people, and I have seen you take something someone has said and answer it in a way that did not seem to be intended by the questioner. Then, at other times, you seem to misunderstand what is being said. Another thing, why do you show vehemence and even intolerance? Surely calm and a reasonable attitude are essential if we are to examine things with an open mind?

A: There are lots of questions there, and questions within questions. To many people the assumptions upon which they are built will be immediately obvious. Let us run through some of them. The first, of course, is that the questioner can assess what is happening. The answer to that, in the words of the run-of-the-mill schoolmaster, is 'if you could assess, Madam, you would be sitting here, and not me.' This remark immediately seems rude.

'Rude' is a difficult word. It implies that one has said something which is rough, or outside the accepted form for the group in which we find ourselves. It would be rude of a Sheikh not to offer you, as the guest of honour, a sheep's eye at a feast. But if you handed a sheep's eye to your guest at a genteel tea, it would be rude. You see the difference?

'Cruel to be kind,' is another factor not to be forgotten. You apply rough artificial respiration to a drowning man. The genteel convention that this method is not used in polite society does not apply on a different sort of occasion. Deliberately misunderstanding a person can be a 'polite' rebuke.

The point about the answer not being in the sense intended by the questioner is important. It gets to the root of a problem. You see, a great many questions are 'loaded.' That is, they are automatically intended to elicit a certain answer. This is an answer desired by the questioner. What kind of business are we in? Certainly not that of providing reassurance for people who get it by mutual admiration, over a cup of tea. The words 'calm' and 'reasonable attitude' are 'loaded.' For example, you can only know what a reasonable attitude is and what calm is in relation to the situation. (8)

Many teachers discourage their listeners from taking records and notes of their talks and then disseminating them to others to whom they may not apply in their current situation:

When a teaching master is acting upon an individual or a group, whether at meetings or otherwise, all depends upon the effect which his words and actions have on the specific people present. The entire teaching-situation has been specifically designed for that teacher and that learner, or those learners, alone, and for no other purpose. Indeed, it can be most harmful for the materials, the words, ideas or actions, to be used again by the participants. (9)

Although association with a sage is considered essential for spiritual realization, talks and lectures, questions and answers are also important to remove doubts and confusion in the mind of the aspirant. "The seed of knowledge is planted in you by these talks, now you have to follow it up. You must nurse it, ruminate over it, so that the tree of knowledge will grow." Repetition is often necessary to lay the groundwork for further understanding:

I repeat certain things very often. And I say again that the mind must be informed. It must come to intellectual clarity in order to be open to a new possibility. It is as if you know only six directions and someone suddenly says to you, "There is a seventh direction." When the mind knows it even if you don't yet know it for yourself, you are already open to the new direction. Don't doubt it. The "seventh direction" is your heart. (10)

A spiritually realized teacher offers a gift of inestimable value through their explications of the truth. A single word or sentence has the power to change a person's life. In the words of Advaita master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "The gospel of self-realization, once heard, will never be forgotten. Like a seed left in the ground, it will wait for the right season to sprout and grow into a mighty tree."

Q: As I listen to you, I find that it is useless to ask you questions. Whatever the question, you invariably turn it upon itself and bring me to the basic fact that I am living in an illusion of my own making and that reality is inexpressible in words. Words merely add to the confusion and the only wise course is the silent search within.

A: After all, it is the mind that creates illusion and it is the mind that gets free of it. Words may aggravate illusion, words may also help dispel it. There is nothing wrong in repeating the same truth again and again until it becomes reality. Mother's work is not over with the birth of the child. She feeds it day after day, year after year, until it needs her no longer. People need to hear words, until facts speak to them louder than words.

Q: Your answer is always the same. A kind of clockwork which strikes the same hours again and again.

A: It cannot be helped. Just as the one Sun is reflected in a billion dew drops, so is the timeless endlessly repeated. When I repeat 'I am, I am,' I merely assert and re-assert an ever-present fact. You get tired of my words because you do not see the living truth behind them. Contact it and you will find the full meaning of both words and silence. (11)

## Limitations of Abstract Intellectual Questions

When Ramana Maharshi was asked if an intellectual understanding of the Truth was necessary he replied: "Yes. Otherwise why does not the person directly realize that God or the Self is all? They must ponder and gradually convince themselves of the Truth before their faith becomes firm." The relative importance of words and concepts in the spiritual journey is echoed by Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj:

Q: How inadequate are words for understanding!

A: Without words, what is there to understand? The need for understanding arises from misunderstanding. What I say is true, but to you it is only a theory. How will you come to know that it is true? Listen, remember, ponder, visualize, experience. Also apply it in your daily life. Have patience with me and, above all, have patience with yourself, for you are your only obstacle. The way leads through yourself beyond yourself. As long as you believe only the particular to be real, conscious and happy and reject the non-dual reality as something imagined, an abstract concept, you will find me doling out concepts and abstractions. But once you have touched the real within your own being, you will find me describing what for you is the nearest and the dearest. (12)

Most questions emerge from memory and identification with conditioned patterns of thought and belief. "We must very carefully distinguish between questions rooted in memory, in the past, and those which spring up in the moment itself free from second-hand information. These creative questions already contain the seeds of the answer. When we ask the question we do not yet know the answer but we intuitively feel it to be very near at hand."

The only appropriate questions are those that come up spontaneously from looking at the facts, your actual situation of doubt, agitation, insecurity, jealousy, hate, greed, and so on. You are accustomed to answers on the verbal plane and want me to give you such answers. But the answer to your real question can never come on the verbal level. Real questions come out of the answer itself because facing the situation is the answer. So you can only find the answer in yourself. You are yourself the answer you are looking for in all questions.

Q: It's true. I came here expecting you to give me answers. How can I come to my own answer?

A: The real answer is felt within, not heard without. It lies in the open question. You will never be happy with second-hand answers, so why look for them? Live with your real question. Don't go away from it. In your opening to it, it unfolds in you. In being open, you come to the living answer. (13)

When most seekers ask questions they do so through the prism of their own subjective ideas, preconceptions and assumptions. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "When people first come here they come with the purpose of exhibiting their own knowledge or of drawing me into a discussion. I am aware of this and I tell them not to start asking questions or discussing until they have listened to the talks for a while and absorbed at least some of what I say. Then you can begin asking questions."

People come here with a predetermined concept of what they want. You come here as if to a tailor with an order for a suit of particular measurements, colour, and material. But I will not give you what you want. I will not give knowledge according to your predetermined requirements. I will only tell you to see yourself as you are, find out who you are. Thousands of people come here, they will utilize this knowledge as it suits them only. This is not *the* Truth; it is the Truth as seen through their own concepts, according to their own point of view. This knowledge, filtered through their own point of view, is not knowledge, it is only a point of view. (14)

People often ask questions randomly, compulsively or through a desire to win attention – postures anathema to real understanding. They are unable to derive any real benefit from their questions because they are not in a suitable state to profit from the answers:

Q: What is the limit to the number of questions which can be asked – because I have so many?

A: You can have two reactions to this question as sufficient for the present. The first is that many of the questions which I am asked are the same question in different forms. Some people never ask more than the one question, even though it takes many different forms to them. The second observation is that the asking and answering of questions, among other things, follows the rule of saturation. If you get too many answers you will not be able to absorb them. Not be able, that is, to work on the question, make the answer 'your own property' and attain a permanent increase of cognition through experiencing the answer. Ponder questions and answers, because there is no short-cut to the *process* of which they are a part. If you do not digest the question and the answer, you will ask it again in another form and so we will go on until 'the penny drops.' Many questions are only asked in order to win attention. (15)

It is a false assumption that any question can be answered, especially on the questioner's terms. Questions are relative in nature. Mulla Nasrudin was asked: "What is the greatest question in life?" He replied: "How am I going to get my donkey to market tomorrow?"

Q: Why can some questions not be answered?

A: Because the fact that a person can ask a question does not mean that he can understand the answer. The question may be wrongly put. For instance, a child can ask the question 'Why is cheese cheese?' Or the person cannot understand the answer at all: 'Tell me all about nuclear physics.' The assumption that a mechanism capable of putting a question is capable of understanding both it and the answer, and that there is an answer in a certain form, is one of the most ludicrous of all. Questions do not differ in terms of importance, so far as their answerability is concerned. They differ in subtlety and nuance and in other ways. (16)

There are a number of unexamined assumptions underlying both the questions that students ask their teachers and the answers that they receive:

- The person posing the question is sincere, and not just asking for attention, approval or reassurance.
- The question is not asked merely to "show off" or please the teacher.
- Questions which on the surface appear to be impersonal or theoretical may actually be motivated by personal interests and preoccupations.
- The question is formulated correctly and expresses the real needs of the questioner.
- It is the right time place and circumstance to ask and answer the question.
- The individual who responds to the question has the capacity to answer it.
- The questioner is able to understand the answer and profit from it.

Abstract questions, speculations, arguments and premature conclusions, divorced from the reality of direct experience, are impediments to spiritual knowledge and understanding:

Zen teaching frowns on all theoretical questions as not conducive to direct, first-hand experience of the truth. This attitude can be traced back to the Buddha, who held to 'a noble silence' whenever asked such questions as "Are the universe and soul finite or infinite? Does the saint exist after death or not?" And Zen Buddhism, which is the quintessence of the Buddha's teaching, likewise refuses to deal with questions that ultimately have no answers, or with questions the answers to which can only be understood by a mind bathed in the light of full consciousness, that is perfect enlightenment. When abstract, theoretical questions are asked the roshi frequently throws them back at the questioner, to try to make him see the source from which they issue and to relate him to that source. (17)

There is an enormous difference between questions which arise from memory, the intellect and book knowledge and those that emerge from a genuine, open desire to understand:

The right question does not come from the intellect, books or hearsay. How, why, when, are all questions which stem from the ego. The latter is purely a figment

of the imagination, and it constantly seeks an explanation on its own level. There is no answer to be found on this level. A true question is one that arises in the moment itself. It is resplendently new and contains a foretaste of the answer. The reply comes unexpectedly from the living Answer. It is stillness; it cannot be thought. To receive it we must be open to it, listening without referring to past experience. This openness is the key, it is the nature of the question and the answer. Openness is our real nature. (18)

Ultimately words are symbols which point to a deeper reality. To convey ideas we need to make use of written and spoken language. At the same time it is important to “remain open and to transcend them and feel out our ideas in their true reality, beyond the verbal plane.” Jean Klein offers a useful analogy, that of listening to or reading poetry, to point to the transcending of logic and rationality to reach a state of openness which can directly experience the reality behind words and concepts:

When reading poetry we don't look for agreement or disagreement, the critical mind is suspended in order to let the impact of the poem make itself felt. When we read poetry, we are poets. We remain passively alert, letting the words be active, listening to how they echo on every level, how they sound, how they move in us, how we are moved by them. We wait attentively, without conclusion, for the poem to find us. This alert openness to all the resonances of the psychosomatic structure is vital to the truth-seeker. Like the poet, the truth-seeker lets go of his personality so that he is open to thoughts, feelings and reactions. Like the poet, the truth-seeker welcomes these as gifts, as pointers in the exploration. Only in this openness can the silence in the words come home to us, for openness *is* the “I am,” our real nature. The words are merely a catalyst to the real formulation which takes place in the reader. (19)

## The Art of Listening

It is important to learn how to listen free from expectation, anticipation, comparison, interpretation or evaluation and cultivate a state of open, innocent attention in order to truly understand “the gift of truth.” Jean Klein: “If you listen only to the words, you remain in the mental realm. When you stop seeking some result, listening is stillness. It is all-encompassing. The moment you stop emphasizing the words, what is heard strikes your real nature.”

Q: Presumably you answer questions because the answer has some effect. How should I listen to the answer so that it can be effective?

A: The answer comes out of silence, out of being, and brings the perfume of silence with it. Therefore it is important that you don't immediately try to grasp the answer mentally. Don't make any effort to understand it. Sustain the non-

concluding. You can only interpret through memory, the already known. Don't emphasize the formulation, but let the stillness, the presence in which the formulation is found come to you. This presence is your real nature. (20)

There is a certain purity of intention when a talk is just listened to and not thought about. A mind that is full of preconceived ideas and subjective opinions is not open to the truth, to the nature of things as they are. Spiritual teacher Toni Packer speaks to this point:

What kind of listening is going on as one is hearing the talk? Is there anticipation of what is going to be said, and, as something is pointed out, is the memory-mind listening, already "knowing" what the words are all about? And what about the speaker, having given talks before? Do the words in a talk given now come out of memory mechanically, in a rote fashion? There are different states of mind, and the state that is reacting most of the time when we are talking to each other is the state of memory. Our language comes out of memory, and we usually don't take time to think about the way we say things, let alone look carefully at what we are saying. We usually talk to each other and to ourselves in habitual, automatic ways. So we're asking, can there be talking and listening that are not solely governed by memory and habit, except for remembrance of the language and the various examples that are given? Can there be fresh speaking and fresh listening right now, undisturbed by what is known? Seeing is never from memory. It has no memory. It is looking now. The total organism is involved in seeing. Not thinking about what is said from memory, but listening and looking openly *now*. No one can do that for us. We can only do that ourselves, discovering directly whether what is heard, said, or read is actually so. (21)

The inner dynamic of a talk or lecture cannot be captured by memory or immersing oneself in the secondary elements of ambience, surface flavour and external considerations:

Q: I find it difficult to remember your conversations, even though I sometimes go away and try to write them down. Why is this?

A: It is not always necessary to remember conversations. Some of them take such a shape as to defy the kind of memory which we are accustomed to using. There is, however, another point, more relevant to your individual case, and also to that of several others present here this afternoon. People can get into the habit of coming and listening to talks. They surrender themselves to what they think the atmosphere is. This is a form of autohypnosis or it may be laziness. They are not taking the essence of the conversation, but simply riding along on the sound. (22)

Many teachers discourage note-taking in order to facilitate the assimilations of their talks. They encourage a "passive-active attitude" in which the student listens to the words with open awareness while at the same time paying careful attention to their own inner state and conditioned reactions:

As did the great philosophers in Classical time, so do the Sages of traditional India continue to use the dialogue form to impart true knowledge. If it is to bear its fruit, such a dialogue requires a particular type of listening. That is, an effortless attention devoid of any strain, which reveals the deepest recess of the listener's mind. It is indeed most important to listen not only to the teacher but also to everything which surges up from the depths of one's inner self. Through such an attitude we are spontaneously led, without conflict, to a state where we are receptive to essential knowledge. Then arise those true questions which are the props and the starting points of the search. This search proceeds by the reduction and the elimination of questions. These become more and more inadequate until the moment when the disciple sees that perfect understanding can only be reached by the absence of questions, by silence. This silence has in itself a taste of peace and bliss. It is fullness and complete knowledge. (23)

When the listener is receptive and open, free from memory and habit, the full impact and spiritual 'nutrient' of the words can penetrate to the deeper levels of the psyche. The attention should be relaxed yet focused without any element of tension and strain. "You should listen in the same relaxed and receptive way that you might read a poem or look at a painting. Feel the rhythm, sound and colour, and do not analyze or interpret."

Students must sit and listen to the teacher until understanding comes to them. This requires a form of alertness and concentration – while relaxed, which alone allows the meanings to penetrate. People have to unlearn the compulsive habit of trying to puzzle things out as their *only* response to a teaching situation. This effectively means that they have to *add* a capacity, not to lose anything. This can only be done by practice and by allowing the teacher to guide the student's thinking, at least at the beginning. This 'dynamic attention' enables the psychological breakthrough to take place, where the word and writings of the teaching become plain, and the student no longer needs the guidance of the teacher. (24)

## Pointing to the Direct Experience of Truth

Spiritual Truth is beyond speech and intellect although these may point to the direct perception and experience of ultimate Reality. "Spoken words are pointers and seeds which bring you one day to understanding. In the understanding there are glimpses of this reality, and one day the understanding also vanishes in *being* the understanding."

Words without the spirit that infuses them are dry and without transformative power. Philip Kapleau: "Words that merely analyze and explain are dead, while words that issue from the heart and gut, that stir our depths and fire the imagination, are alive. We *feel* their power."

What leads to understanding is not the surface words but the spirit behind the words. "In Zen there are what are called live words and dead ones. The admired live word is the gut word, concrete and vibrant with feeling; the dead word is the explanatory word, dry and lifeless, issuing from the head. The first unifies, the second separates and divides."

When the Zen master gives you any answer, you must remember that his standpoint is not at all conceptual. It is always deeply rooted in his innermost experience itself, and must be referred back to this experience to make it meaningful in relation to your question. Intellectually or logically, his utterances are unintelligible and nonsensical. Most people are unable to take his utterances or gestures on a level qualitatively different from their own. But you will find the master's standpoint already present in your question though deeply hidden. If this were not the case you would or rather could not have thought of asking the question. (25)

When spoken teachings are grounded in a direct experience of the source of all that is, they carry a power and transformative energy that touches the deepest levels of the human psyche. In the words of Jean Klein: "When contemplating the sayings of the guru you recall them, not so much from the mind but from the Truth from which they spring. It is not the verbal syntax that has transformative power but the source from which the words come, and with which they are impregnated."

The understanding of these dialogues does not occur in the mind. Of course the words, acting on the verbal level, bring the mind to greater clarity so that it has a clear geometrical representation of what is beyond it and also realizes the boundaries of its comprehension. But the fullness and real significance of these words lies in the fact that they do not arise from thinking but from the silence behind thought, the "I am." The answers appear in this silence, the openness that is present in the absence of a personal entity, and they are permeated with "the perfume" of their source. In this lies their transformative power: they arise out of and point to our real nature, our autonomy, at every moment. They are thus a constant challenge, a challenge to belief, education and common sense. They free us from the reflex to take ourselves for a somebody, a thinker, a seeker, a doer, a sufferer. (26)

There is a natural simplicity and direct expression of ultimate Truth in the teachings of those who have experienced spiritual realization and enlightenment themselves:

Q: What exactly does Maharaj want to tell me?

A: You are the proof that there is God. If you are not there, there is no God. This "I Amness" is the proof. You think that it is limited to the body, but it is universal. It is the source of manifestation . . . I am doing nothing every day but telling you, in different words each day, but always the same thing. It is for you to see. It is for you to understand. The flow is continually coming, but you are

not hearing. In this very body, in this very birth, you must realize what I have told you. Leave all other concepts and hold on to this. (27)

To truly and deeply understand the answer to a question it must be lived and experienced, not just processed on the verbal level:

Q: Why do people ask questions?

A: One important answer is because they need experience. Answers are nothing. Experience is everything. But the answer gives you the wherewithal to acquire experience. This is why teachers insist upon humility. But it must be constructive humility, not the artificial 'veiling' (rationalizing) kind which is just assumed, or unctuousness.

Q: But you once said that the very fact that a person asked a certain question often showed that he was incapable of understanding the answer.

A: Exactly. Incapable of answering his own question within him, so he externalizes it. Incapable, too, of understanding the answer merely by mulling over the words which he receives back. The answer must be used as a starting-place to feed his ability to *live* or experience the answer. A question is asked because the answer is difficult. It has to be absorbed. As Mulla Nasrudin says: 'People don't ask whether it is possible to drink water.' This is because they are so thoroughly permeated by the experience of drinking water that they drink water without needing any problem about it resolved. (28)

Real answers do not derive from memory but flow directly from *being* knowledge. The words should be welcomed with awakened attention "so that the essence behind the words may spring to life within the questioner." The words of truth and wisdom emanating from a spiritual teacher can have a profound effect on the listener(s) that bring real change into their lives. Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "I speak from truth, stretch out your hand and take it."

Q: How can we know that what you say is true? While it is self-contained and free from inner contradictions, how can we know that it is not a product of fertile imagination, nurtured and enriched by constant repetition?

A: The proof of the truth lies in its effect on the listener.

Q: Words can have a most powerful effect. By hearing, or repeating words, one can experience various kinds of trances. The listener's experiences may be induced and cannot be considered as a proof.

A: The effect need not necessarily be an experience. It can be a change in character, in motivation, in relationship to people and one's self. Trances and visions induced

by words, or drugs, or any other sensory or mental means are temporary and inconclusive. The truth of what is said here is immovable and everlasting. And the proof of it is in the listener, in the deep and permanent changes in his entire being. It is not something he can doubt, unless he doubts his own existence, which is unthinkable. When my experience becomes your own experience also, what better proof do you want? (29)

A real teaching master directs the seeker back to their own lived experience and reality through the answers to their questions. When the 'perfume' of the words penetrates deeply they resonate in the heart and mind of the listener and open their awareness to higher levels of perception and understanding. "Abide in the Self, in the consciousness that you are."

Q: People come to you for advice. How do you know what to answer?

A: As I hear the question, so do I hear the answer.

Q: And how do you know that your answer is right?

A: Once I know the true source of the answers, I need not doubt them. From a pure source only pure water will flow. I am not concerned with people's desires and fears. I am in tune with facts, not with opinions. Man takes his name and shape to be himself, while I take nothing to be myself. If I were to think myself to be a body known by its name, I would not have been able to answer your questions. Were I to take you to be a mere body, there would be no benefit to you from my answers. No true teacher indulges in opinions. He sees things as they are and shows them as they are. If you take people to be what they think themselves to be, you will only hurt them, as they hurt themselves so grievously all the time. But if you see them as they are in reality, it will do them enormous good. If they ask you what to do, what practices to adopt, which way of life to follow, answer: 'Do nothing, just *be*. In being all happens naturally.' (30)

## Silent Non-Verbal Teaching

There is a famous verse in the *Zenrin*: "Words! The Way is beyond language for in it there is no yesterday, no tomorrow, no today." In one sense this refers to the silence that is the background of all speech and sound. "Sound and silence are interrelated. You cannot hear a sound without hearing silence. Explore this silence. See how sound is born out of it. Sounds born from silence are powerful and can penetrate."

Every sound is born out of silence, dies back into silence, and during its life span is surrounded by silence. Silence enables the sound to be. It is an intrinsic but unmanifested part of every sound, every musical note, every song, every word. The

Unmanifested is present in this world as silence. This is why it has been said that nothing in this world is so like God as silence. All you have to do is pay attention to it. Even during a conversation, become conscious of the gaps between words, the brief silent intervals between sentences. As you do that, the dimension of stillness grows within you. You cannot pay attention to silence without simultaneously becoming still within. Silence without, stillness within. You have entered the Unmanifested. (31)

A spiritual teacher may remain silent in certain circumstances, knowing that the best way to communicate may be just to sit and not say anything. Such a teacher may give a 'silent lecture' which creates a definite spiritual effect without articulating any words at all.

Although most people require words to explain the Truth, advanced seekers may be able to reach spiritual understanding through silence or other non-verbal teachings. "First words, then silence. One must be ripe for silence." Ramana Maharshi exemplified this silent teaching:

Silence is ever-speaking; it is the perennial flow of "language." It is interrupted by speaking, for words obstruct this mute language. Lectures may entertain individuals for hours without improving them. Silence, on the other hand, is permanent and benefits the whole of humanity . . . By silence, eloquence is meant. Oral lectures are not so eloquent as silence. It is the best language. There is a state when words cease and silence prevails. (32)

In order to effectively transmit their teachings to others a teacher will respond to questions from the background of silence and emptiness:

Q: What goes on in you when you hear a question and give an answer?

A: The question is heard in stillness and the answer comes out of stillness. They don't go through the mind, memory or a point of reference. We use words as symbols to point to understanding. As symbols they only have significance in the given moment. The answer comes out of silence. Receive it in silence. When you classify it, it loses the flavour of its source. Savour this taste and sooner or later it will attract you back to where it comes from, the living silence. (33)

Ordinary language is clouded by a subjective element whereas silence is a pure expression of universal truth. In the words of Zen master Shunryu Suzuki:

When we say something, our subjective intention or situation is always involved. So there is no perfect word; some distortion is always present in a statement. But nevertheless, through our master's statement we have to understand objective fact itself – the ultimate fact. By ultimate fact we do not mean something eternal or something constant, we mean things as they are in each moment. You may call it "being" or "reality." (34)

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