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"Soul in Zen" - questions and answers after the lecture.

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JOHN TARRANT ROSHI

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS after "Soul in Zen" Lecture  
November 30, 1992, Berkeley, California

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1. QUESTION: (Question on what depth psychology is.)

JOHN: Well, I think depth psychology is anything that seems to take a  
long  
while and a lot of money. But my sense is that what it does about  
patient,  
would be one thing about it. And I think it's got a rather zen sense of  
inquiry  
about it. That when we go into it, we're not necessarily trying to fix  
our  
particular problem, like our fear of flying or whatever. That that might  
drive  
us into the room to pay attention to ourselves. It's more a question of  
where  
is my life going, and who am I, and those kind of questions tend to get  
addressed. In my case there's a kind of interest, a kind of trust in  
what the  
unconscious is trying to do as well as what my ego level awareness is  
interested  
in. In that way, it's rather like zen. Zen rather directly attacks the  
ego;  
whereas, depth psychology tends to more directly heal with it, rather  
than  
karate or something like that. But in both of them the unconscious is  
brought  
out more. What is greater than us that is also in us is invited into the  
room.

2. QUESTION: You didn't say very much about change and I just wondered what you thought was implicit in your remarks and your experience that was . . .

JOHN: That's a great question. Well, I think we do change enormously and we can't help it. There's absolutely no use in having a particular idea of how we're going to change because we're never going to change that way. We're somehow always willing to change A and B, but what always seems to get asked of us is to change C and D. The things we're willing to give up, often we can keep. The things we're not willing to give up are the very things we must surrender. Think in small things, not great awful things. But ways of thought, characteristic indulgences and particular feelings. My motive for change. What I think we do as best we can is we harmonize with the Tao and the change happens and we have to have the good grace to accept it.

(Question amplification. Same speaker.)

JOHN: Well, we listen, we're patient, we do our meditation. My experience of doing a lot of meditation was, my god, all sorts of things came up. I got very good at deep states of mind and rather calm, but as soon as I thought I was very good at it, something very tempestuous would appear. After awhile, again, this is part of this work that I'm sharing with you, after awhile I began to realize that that, too, was part of it. When the something--the pain, the sorrow or whatever it is--appears. Or arrogance or anger or some pomposity, whatever it is, appears because it's, in a sense, trying to come home. And that's a lot of the change, to notice that and somehow come to terms with that stuff when it comes up.

QUESTION: (Same questioner) I was thinking more in terms of the initial experience that you talked about.

JOHN: The enlightenment experience?

QUESTION: Yes.

JOHN: Well, the enlightenment experience is--I think somebody told me, sitting in the audience here, actually, that Suzuki Shunryu Roshi described it as a 360 degree point of view change. So there's the old saying in zen that when you begin to practice mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers and

everything--breakfast is breakfast--and that's how it is. Then after you've been practicing for awhile mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers so you begin to see the transparency of the world which is both the glow and the beauty and also the insubstantiality of things is just so evident. That this is a dream that we are living in. There's just no doubt about that. And the dream has different flavors and so on, but it's a dream. But then at the end of training mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers again. That in some way we do change our point of view enormously and then we let even that go and we don't hang onto that. And the point of view, I think--there are consequences. Joy is a consequence of a true enlightenment experience. Compassion seems to be a consequence. You can't help yourself. Compassion's not a willed thing. It's a sort of involuntary, genetically programmed twitch or something, emerging with people. The compassion just comes.

Conceptually, the Hua-yen (Jap. Kegon) philosophy, which was a great philosophy that died out because it was too complicated, really, I think, but very brilliant and interesting, tried to describe the philosophy of what you see under that change. Usually in zen we give operational definitions. We say, "Do this and then tell me what you see," rather than, "What you will see is this." Because people get fixated on what their idea of what those words are and it's very hard then. But typically, people start to see the subject-object barrier breaks down. You see that you are the universe and the universe is you, for example. You meet the people of the tradition. You understand what they were talking about.

Is that your question?

QUESTION: Sort of.

JOHN: It's too vague, isn't it, for you?

QUESTION: Yes.

JOHN: Well, what would you like? Ask me a very specific question.

QUESTION: Well, when you said, 'you are the universe and the universe is you,' that certainly that would have some affect on behavior. I just want to go back

to something that you said about behavior and that this black thing might just grab you. I was thinking more in terms about being consciously aware of what one does.

JOHN: Yes. Well, I think the things is how much of container is there. I think character is in some sense a container for insight. Soul is the container for spirit in the same way. If we've done a lot of work and we're already patient and we've worked with our own fallibility some and we're humble and we have integrity and we're honest about our weaknesses, then there's a much better container there. The insight will come in and won't tear us up too much. We'll be happy and compassionate and people will probably think we're a little bit better in our lives. People around us will notice the difference and we might change our career paths or something, but generally I value steadiness a lot. Being a child of the sixties, I suppose. In spiritual training putting one foot after the other and accepting the darkness when it's here is very important. Then the light comes. I think there's a trust and a patience in that. That we don't believe the propaganda from the ministry of the mood when it comes. We're patient and we wait for things that are hard to pass because we know underneath that there's a knowledge. We don't have to trust so much because we know. That's for me the fine difference. But then we still have to do that soul work I described, the character work. Actually to have a good eye and a poor character is a horrible thing, I think. Terrible thing. Torment really. And I think in the tradition when I look back, I can see who were in that dilemma.

3. QUESTIONER: First, I want to see if I'm understanding what your saying. What you're saying is that you have the enlightenment experience, and there's that part of it. Then there's also the human being and all the faults of the human being and everything else. What I'm wondering, it seems like the main thing people are trying to get when they're looking for enlightenment is the enlightenment experience. From what I understand that you say, you're saying that there's more to it than that. There's more that needs to be done. I'm just wondering what would you say the purpose of enlightenment is. What would

you say the goal is for people that . . .

JOHN: Well, the purpose of enlightenment is to forget that you're enlightened. That is one thing that is very true. Yamada Koun Roshi was one of my teachers, my grandfather, who David and I shared as a teacher. He was very strong on this. If somebody was visible in a crowd, they weren't enlightened. His idea was that he had to go and shuffle into the subway like everybody else in Tokyo, smoked a cigar. He embodied that very beautifully, I think. `The stink of zen' is an old zen saying. That people with their fresh enlightenment experience are kind of obnoxious in some way. That it needs to be tended like everything young. It's beautiful; it's marvelous and it needs to grow old like everything else.

Our fantasies of enlightenment are rather mechanistic. That we think that everything grows and changes. We'd never approach a work of art the way that we approach our minds. But we think that if I have an enlightenment experience, something static will happen. But nothing static ever happens. It's a river. It's always changing. Your contact with your enlightenment experience will die to the extent that you hang onto it in my own experience. So there's a lot about letting go and then you can have multiple enlightenment experiences. In the tradition. Today. Over and over again we have to let it go. We have to be a person--Lin-chi called it a person without rank. Because if you've got rank, you're a person walking around with a hat on, a fancy hat of some kind. A red barretta (sp??) or something. And some of your role and you're not living. And the ecstatic is there everywhere. It's in every moment. It's not just in an enlightenment experience.

4. QUESTION: The question might have been what's the movement of the whole thing. What's the direction of the whole business?

JOHN: What's our fantasy of development?

QUESTION: What's the purpose of enlightenment in humanity, or would you say there is one?

JOHN: What's the grand vision here? Grand visions are not my strong point, but

I'll try. I think it's a noble question. I think that we can have. I think there are a number of things. I really do want to emphasize that the first purpose has always got to be--In Buddhist tradition the fantasy of the bodhisattva, it's a legend, is the person who actually puts off their own complete enlightenment in order to save other beings. Because if they became completely enlightened, they'd just disappear off the planet somehow. That's obviously a fantasy, but it's a very interesting fantasy to me. In other words, what makes the bodhisattva way is the person who has their floors and knows them, is doing character work in that way. And that the grand vision always comes from the very simple integrity happening now in your meditation practice, in your life. You do something stupid; somebody busts you; you can lie and get away with it, but you don't lie. It's a very important task. The more individually we can do our work that has ripple effects. If you really do your zazen, you have consequences beyond what you can see. They're invisible to you. I do believe that although it's a nutty belief. It's really true. We can't measure what those consequences will be. North Americans have a progressive fantasy where the graph goes up like this. I have an associate who is an Argentinean zen master and they have this fantasy. Where everything is going down to the dogs and that's why you need to practice Buddhism. It's just so hopeless. Our fantasy is that we need to practice Buddhism because it will make everything better for everyone. And that's my fantasy. I think that there are possibilities of greater consciousness without splitting--I suppose that's why I'm talking tonight. You can split off and leave all this mess or you can try and not split off so much, not be so pure, and try to have the whole thing get a little bit more enlightened. That's my fantasy about what we do.

5. QUESTION: (Question on enlightenment, Trungpa.) How do you explain something like that?

JOHN: Well, it's a conundrum, isn't it? It's very interesting and painful and difficult. My explanation is that it's very seductive to be a spiritual teacher. When you become a spiritual teacher, people immediately start treating you a little bit differently. Not everybody. Hopefully, if you're married, that helps because they won't treat you any differently. But it's very seductive and there's always going to be traps that you haven't seen before.

I'm always falling into something that I thought I was wise at, but then a new trap comes along and I fall into it. I think that what we're talking about--You can say it in two ways. You can say that the insight wasn't good enough. It was great, but it wasn't great enough. That's the traditional Buddhist answer. But I think I'm saying something else. That there wasn't enough work on the character containment level. There wasn't enough work on being patient and stupid and humble and working with your own darkness. When you're a teacher if you're in pain, it's very easy to go out and teach and it's very difficult to stop and listen to the pain because everybody's always asking you to go out to teach. To go out to teach is a natural thing, but to say, 'no,' is not somehow. So teacher's often end up not having any inner life. Very great teachers can turn into a shell quickly because that happens.

(Questioner comment ???)

JOHN: Yes, yes. You can get very good at the techniques of meditation that allow you to not have to sleep much and things like that,

(Some text missing. Tape had to be turned over.)

But I see the goal as this lived enlightenment, is the expression, it's the lived thing.

6. QUESTION: (Zen and bringing things together ???)

JOHN: I'm just beginning to feel myself to start talking about things I don't know shit about. That's one of those things that destroys teachers, really. Let people think we know things. Then, dammit, I start giving advice. So with that proviso, that I don't know anything either, let me say that I think it's good to practice in the time of chaos. I think that that's fine. I wouldn't want someone else to have to put up with the chaos and not me. Zen specifically was developed exactly in a time of civil war and the great koan tradition was coalesced when Ghengis Khan was coming through with his horsemen and burning the cities. People thought it would be very good to do a little zazen. It might help. The great tradition was designed for the many ways, the different possible ways. Some people just wanted to go off into the mountains and meditate and hold the world in that way in some way. The way the Hopis doing

their ceremonies hold the world for us. Other people wanted to go and talk to the Mongol overlords and try to get them to stop burning cities and to rule the place. Some zen masters did that, too. So there are many opportunities. There's not one way to go. The great traditions always should be good in hard times. Any tradition can be good in easy times.

7. QUESTION: I wanted to ask you another question about this. I want to ask how you see how--The person has this enlightenment experience, let's say, and is coming back to themselves and working on the character or purifying the vehicle, something like that. How would you say or how do you see how that could, or would it, have an impact in the world and what would that impact be?

JOHN: Well, you will feel yourself moved to do something. What do you do? If you're a carpenter, you'll make different kinds of furniture eventually. You'll do something in the world. You'll have an influence on the people. You'll touch people. You won't be able to help touching people and they will be changed a little by interacting with you.

QUESTION: In what way would that change them? What will that do, inspire them?

JOHN: Mostly people. What's the big change? To find out that there's a way is the greatest change. To realize there really is a way through the world. To acknowledge that the world really is a dark wood and very chaotic and is full of these animals jumping out and baring their teeth and it's full of our own weakness and self-indulgence and getting lost. Yet there really is a trail through the woods. There's really a path. So to acknowledge the truth of the difficulty and that there really is a path, I think, are the greatest treasures. Actually, they're the first noble truths of Buddhism. That you don't even need to have learned that to get that that's a great treasure. When you have a path, people will see that. You don't have to beat them over the head with it.

8. QUESTION: We've talked a little bit about some of the abuses and ethics of the teachers. I tend to be more lax and think that they're just people. (???) But I think that there is much more difficulty with the ethics of psychotherapists. I'm confronted with a personal problem right now with a friend who's in therapy and would like to get out and somehow can't escape

because of that closed relationship. I have a personal conundrum of trying to get in there and offer advice without being asked for advice and I don't know exactly how to do it. But I'm more concerned about that kind of closed group of the therapy session or the group which doesn't allow--I don't think it allows as much examination or interaction from the outside as from the inside. Do you have any comments about that?

JOHN: Anything can be a cult. Zen can be. Psychotherapy can be. It can be a folie a deux, a folie a infinitely receding series. So, I don't know. There are many psychotherapists who are manipulative, just like a good many zen senior people who are manipulative. So, I'm not sure. I'm more interested in healing zen than in healing psychotherapy, I suppose, is what you ask brings up for me. What I'm interested in--Michael and I were talking today about that very question, what's the concept of redemption. Spiritual leaders have screwed up in some way. We're being very dualistic about the way we've handled this. We've either thrown the bastards out or abused them, reviled them for years, or denied that there was a problem. Somehow neither of those is quite right, is it? But people who have harmed us can also have given us a great deal. People who have wounded us mend our hearts in some ways. Something better needs to be done here. We need to hold that idea and stop abusing people, but also look at what is true and what will really work, what do we want. So I'm not looking at that from the point of view of the student. I never really felt--I felt very pissed off with my spiritual teachers, but never felt that they ever really did any bad ethically or morals. I think anybody who's not hated their spiritual teacher with a passion hasn't really walked the spiritual path, at some stage. Anybody who hasn't walked through that hatred, hasn't walked it either. Something comes up where you've just got to find your own way in some way. I'm meandering. I think we have to hold these two things together. People really do screw up and we can't say, "Oh well, boys will be boys." On the other hand, you can't say, "Oh, they're a demon. Let's cast them out and purify the tradition," because then you just produce another demon.

With your friend, I don't know. My friends are very recalcitrant to my wisdom as I am to theirs. All I can do is love them and hope they don't damage

themselves too much.

9. QUESTION: I was wondering why you talk--you said at one point about the enlightenment experience, that it was important to drop it. I was wondering why you said that because it seems to me that it's important to maintain that perspective so that you can act with integrity.

JOHN: It's like if you want to write a poem, you can't be a poet. That's something different from writing a poem. If you want to throw a pot-- Anything that you're going to do if it's going to be any good, you've got to throw yourself away. Any great action that you do, you can't do it from a position that you already have. You must throw everything away. You must just trust that that experience will work in you and lead you. But you can't go around referring back to some inner model experience that you had. You meet people who do this with drug experiences. I sometimes think that a good drug experience is quite damaging because people would have quite powerful, sort of spiritual experiences often with hallucinogens. You meet people who spend twenty years trying to recreate that experience. I have a real empathy for some of my friends because they did that. You've got to throw it away. Whatever's real you can't throw away. It's like tightrope walking. You can't be up there trying to do a performance, you've just got to put one foot after the other.

QUESTION: (Cont'd) I wasn't talking about continuously having the experience, but within the experience there's an understanding or perspective that's given.

JOHN: Right. But you can't help having that, you see. That's just a deeper trust.

QUESTION: (Cont'd) So you're not saying to drop that.

JOHN: I'm saying anything if you hang onto something, let it go. If you're not hanging onto it, don't pick it up. Enlightenment. I'm not sure it's any different. You get up in the morning and drink your coffee or your tea or whatever it is. And there's a beauty in that. You're still participating and wouldn't want it to be otherwise. It's important to be born and to live your life and die and the right way to do it.

QUESTION: I wonder if you had a comment on the idea that most psychological

problems are clusters of deep trance phenomena and that the therapist's role should be, in effect, to hypnotise the client and that the end result of that would be a kind of zen mindfulness instead of trance state.

JOHN: No I don't think I have a comment on that. I'm not sure I completely understand your terms and I don't want to just construct something.

9. QUESTION: (Could you say something about responsibility?)

JOHN: You mean if you have an experience, what is your responsibility to that?

QUESTION: Yes.

JOHN: I've been quite interested in the precepts. There are sixteen bodhisattva precepts. Taking refuge is very interesting to me. Then there are ten, essentially, codes of conduct. I take up the way of not lying, or not stealing, whatever, killing. I've been very interested in them as this form that contains something, allows it to cook; and on the other hand, as something, a freeing thing, liberating. So I think of responsibility. Responsibility is not something that we take and put on like a cloak. We're too small for that. I think of it as something that's just, again, like compassion, it's a natural consequence of developing that you want to express in certain ways. You want to help people in certain ways. How that responsibility will work itself out in each of us is really such an individual thing. Some people need to become political activists; some people need to sit on a mountain. I can never make up my mind which one I need to do. Yes, there is a responsibility for wisdom. Wisdom comes with its own rather fierce demands.

QUESTION: (Cont'd) (Other teachers and their realization and their responsibility towards that. How they conduct their own lives.)

JOHN: I don't want it to be thought that I'm condemning someone else for what they did, but I puzzle, and I worry, and I'm interested.

10. QUESTION: There is a contemporary Christian teacher, Brother David Steindl-Rast, who talks about how we can translate our spiritual life into our everyday life. One of the things he said was to cultivate a sense of surprise everyday throughout our daily activities. What would be the parallel for that Buddhist thinking or in Zen Buddhism? How do you do that in painful circumstances?

JOHN: Brother David, as you know, has had a lot of interaction with the zen world. It's a rather zen thing to say about cultivating surprise. It's a bit like one of those 'be spontaneous' double binds, isn't it? But there's a truth there. I think that we are open. If you come home every night and you see your child, it's very easy to stop seeing your child and you just see your expectation and your image and don't realize that this child is unique at this moment and has a unique gift and request for you. And if you're just attentive and don't come home with the idea that you need to read the paper or you need to do whatever it is, but are open to that child, then something will surprise you, surely. Attention leads to surprise or astonishment.

The other thing is that there are times when you are in darkness and you can't--Maybe one of the features of the dark descent that everybody needs to undergo at some time is that we can't be surprised any more at that moment. Perhaps that's one of the losses of the descent. A true descent is such a powerful process it just takes us over and we don't have a lot of choice. The darkness is very thick. Not until we honor that and start to acknowledge that does it start to thin a little. I think it's quite important to honor the fact that part of the spiritual path is often darkness. The darkness doesn't come just at the beginning. You may have a round of it when you're quite far along. It can, in its own strange way, be a blessing, but it's a very hard blessing sometimes. The fierce reality of that I stand for as well.

11. QUESTION: (I was just wondering if you felt it was possible to live a life of perfection and also if ????)

JOHN: If I say, yes, what will you do?

QUESTION: (Cont'd) (That the realization understanding is something that's not quite matched with the fact that one is human. . . )

JOHN: Yes, you see the really most important way you can engage with a question is to really live it. I'm an inferior substitute for that. Anything I say. It's really important. If you have a question about perfection, which is a classic koan kind of question you've just brought out and I suppose that's why I have this impulse to answer you very seriously, that you must live that

question. Ask yourself before you go to bed at night and when you get up in the morning ask yourself that question and find out what it means and find out how the question transforms and do zazen holding. As Rilke said, if you're very fortunate and very faithful, you will live your way into the resolution of the question. If you are fortunate and faithful, I'm not quoting accurately here, you will live your way into the resolution of the question. I don't think so much of perfection as a goal in zen, really myself, but I think that you have that question is marvelous and if you really honor it and are sincere with it, it will chase you around and it will make something of your life. Flora Courtois, if anybody knows of her, was a woman who just followed her question and had an enlightenment experience. She's got this really badly produced little book somebody put out called An Experience of Enlightenment, which shows a good example of some naively following a question and being too stupid to know that she shouldn't get enlightened that way, so she got enlightened.

13. QUESTION: Did it answer her question?

JOHN: I don't know. It was rather philosophical. She was rather philosophically minded so it was something like 'What is life?' or something like that. Perfection is a common zen--Some zen masters have taken up that question. I think of integrity as being more of a pertinent goal for me. Perfection is not something I ever felt was in my fate. Integrity is interesting and even that is a sort of approach to wholeness, isn't it? True wholeness sort of stops. We always need something that can flow.

QUESTION: (Question 12 cont'd) (I was thinking of how perfection relates to the living ????)

JOHN: Yes, and really we can only answer those questions from the bottom of our hearts. We must answer it with our own lives, with our own bodies.

14. QUESTION: About the darkness that you just mentioned before. You said we have to experience the darkness in our lives, this is part of our lives being in darkness. Confusion.???

JOHN: It may be anything. It may be cancer. It may be depression. It may be that things just don't work. It may be something awful happening to

QUESTION: (Cont'd) My question was that the way I see it is that spiritual

teachings like zen or any other spiritual teaching would have different means to look through this darkness and have this path, have a way to deal with darkness. In that way I was wondering how you understand zen to solve this problem and whether it does do that today for the people of today.

JOHN: You can't go into life thinking you're going to solve it. It just doesn't work. There's just too much of the ego level tinkering going on. It's like an engineer in a garage in Akron, Ohio making an invention and getting a patent. What we've got to is zazen. Do your zazen. You absolutely have to do zazen. If you're going to walk a spiritual path, you can't get away without a spiritual discipline. You have to zazen every day of your life and accept that you're going to do that for the rest of your life. One. Two. Start noticing your life. Sometimes you feel awful when you do zazen. It makes you feel worse. Start noticing that. It's very intriguing. It doesn't always make you feel better. Maybe your fantasies about better and worse aren't so good. Maybe they're not so important. So it softens our idea of darkness in that way. But if you're really in darkness and in pain, it will take you over and--It's like having the right attitude when you're in a hurricane. Nobody has the right attitude in a hurricane. You're just in a hurricane and that's true zen. Be in your hurricane. Some way it will set you down. Something will happen to you in that hurricane. Maybe that hurricane has a beauty and a value that you can't conceive of because you keep trying to get out of it or adopt the right spiritual attitude towards it. A good hurricane will blow away your spiritual attitude. You won't have one any more. And then what you're left with is the true dharma. Something that's very real and you can really bite into and it's really solid, but there's something intransigent about it, too. It's got to stand up under the worst conditions.

Thank you very much bodhisattvas.

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Some supplementary notes:

A book referred to in the course of the Questions & Answers time is:  
Courtois,  
Flora. 1986. An experience of enlightenment. Wheaton. Ill: The  
Theosophical  
Publishing House, A Quest Book.

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