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THE LUMINOUS LIFE

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There's a kind of circulation of energy on the path of Zen, whereby we
first go
inwards and even downwards and then try to set things right at the
centre, to
set our hearts and minds at rest and then naturally that energy carries
us
onwards and upwards into the world. Then after some time in the world, we
naturally get carried downwards and inwards, refreshing ourselves.

We begin the inward motion when we ask ourselves a question. Questions
have a
great magical power. Children ask them all the time because they sense
their
force and they have the added virtue of catching adults off balance.
Wallace
Stevens has a poem called "This green sprout - why?" And he also has a
line,
"questions are remarks".

If you think about a question, it is a marvellous thing. Suddenly we
don't just
expect that our breakfast will be there in the morning, the way the dog
does. We
wonder, where does it come from? How do I come to be here? Who am I? How
on
earth did I get to be doing this? And that question is a seed which grows
in us
and it changes us as it grows.

One of the first important things about the question occurs when we
realise that
other people cannot answer it for us. This is shocking at first and we
keep
thinking perhaps it's not true, but alas, it is true, other people cannot
answer
it for us.

The good news about this is that we have what need to answer it. And the
reason
other people can't answer it for us is because that it would not be our
own true
answer. It would not be our own unique response to life.

An old Zen student called Hsiang-yen went to dokusan with Keui-shan, the T'ang dynasty master, and Keui-shan gave him the koan, "What is your original face before your parents were born?" The koan is a ready made question.

The student was a considerable scholar and a learned person and decided to do a little research and read through all the books, which seemed a reasonable approach to him. Nowadays we may find that approach naive, but there is something good about his sincerity and thoroughness that he decided to exhaust the avenues he knew before embarking on avenues he did not know. However, he couldn't find anything that answered this question, so he went back a few times and prodded and poked his teacher, but the clam didn't give out any pearls, because clams don't give pearls.

And he eventually went back in desperation and he threw away his notes and said, "You must tell me, I am obsessed, I can't sleep, I can't rest, what is the answer to this question?" And Keui-shan said, "Well, I could tell you, but you would blame me later."

And so this is a situation where both the teacher and the student have integrity. The student has integrity, he comes up and grabs the teacher by the lapels. There's another famous case in which the student said, "If you don't tell me I'll hit you," and the teacher said, "You can hit me but I won't tell you." So the student hit him. So it was like that. And the teacher's integrity was not to diminish the force of the question.

So this student Hsiang-yen decided that it was all too much for him and he would surrender, he would give up. He decided that perhaps the best he could do in this life, given his karma, was to accumulate a little virtue and maybe get a better rebirth next time around. He wasn't going to make it this time but he decided that if he led a blameless life, perhaps in the future he would do better and he wouldn't have to deal with questions like this. But you can see that he understood that there is a reality, just that he couldn't see it.

So he went away and found a sacred site, the grave of the sixth of the great founding ancestors of Chinese Zen, and maintained it as a shrine. He had no thought about the world except his sweeping. And one day of course, sweeping

away, he swept a pebble into a bamboo grove and the pebble hit a piece of hollow bamboo and went "tock!" and he jumped up and down.

This "tock!" shook him to pieces and he said, "One tock! and I have forgotten all I knew!" and he composed a number of poems in his excitement. He said, "Last year's poverty was not true poverty" and another fine line, "This year even the wind can get through".

He went rushing back to his teacher and said, "I know, I know!" And Keui-shan accepted his first poem, but Keui-shan's great student said, "I don't accept it."

Hsiang-yen then immediately composed another poem, in which in the last line he said, "If you don't believe me, ask the newest person in the Zendo" and this convinced the doubter.

So the question was working in him as he lived his devoted life. And questions will do that for us. They are sacred things that open us, they open our hearts. They can of course be misused, or poorly used. Sometimes the question just grinds around in our heads and it really doesn't seem to go any deeper. We just chase it around and around. And if it is an event that doesn't really engage us then, perhaps all that happens is that we get a headache. Somehow we are not in the place from which we can answer the question.

I think much of zazen is a refinement of the question so that we come to discover what the question truly is in our own lives, rather than in the lives of the people whom we take as our models. And it's a refinement too of our sense of place in the interior terrain, so that we find the location from which the question can be answered. We accept that perhaps now we are not in the place from which the response comes, but we honour our intimations and we keep working with the question. When we have refined it sufficiently or when it has refined us we may say, this is a reciprocal alchemy going on here, everything that appears becomes the question. Then we can say that we are intimate with it.

Rilke has a lovely letter to a young poet, who was not otherwise remarkable except that for some reason Rilke decided among all his letters to respond to

him. The young poet asks him many questions, "I would like to beg you to have patience" Rilke says, "with everything unresolved in your heart and to try and love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a foreign language. Don't search for the answers which cannot be given to you now because you would not be able to live them."

And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now, perhaps then some day far in the future you'll gradually without even noticing it, live your way into the answer. That was Hsiang-yen's mode. You notice that Hsiang-yen didn't decide just to get drunk all the time and forget about it. He maintained some sort of minimal level of integrity here. And that helped. There are things you can do to yourself that are so harmful and distracting that it won't allow the question to work in you.

Hakuin too gave up at one stage in his practice and decided that he would eke out his miserable existence reading poetry with his friends, drinking wine. But soon the questions drew him back.

Rilke was talking about how to become a poet and he thought that this was a matter of doing something from the inside out. The famous last line of "Archaic Torso of Apollo", one of his New Poems, which mark a period of transformation in his work, goes, "You must change your life." In order to be better at something, you must become a better person. He thought everything was a matter of life and death.

So to do anything well is to do the great thing well. We must have a relationship with our questions. We must value them and not think of them as stupid because we can't answer them. My grandmother always thought the car was a stupid thing and would not last, and still thought that in the fifties when I knew her best, because she didn't understand the car, she understood horses and carriages that she had grown up with. But just because she had not grown up with the car, or just because she did not understand it, did not mean that it would not endure. Perhaps she was right in the long run but in the medium term she was not. She was a sage but not recognised in her time.

So we must honour these alien, repulsive questions when they appear.

What is it? Who am I? Where am I going? Who is this one who walks about and eats breakfast? Why do I feel such anguish for no good reason? Why does this person not love me the way I love them? All these questions. We must honour the one who hears and sees and tastes and walks about. Only if we honour our own lives can we approach the question. We cannot answer the question if we do not value it and if we do not value our own lives, then it's not worth answering questions to clear up our own lives. So the question inevitably leads us inwards. Leading us to value the inner life. Knowing that just because it is not always visible, does not mean it is not important.

It's like the pumpkin flower that grows in the night. Suddenly there it is in the morning, in full bloom with bees all around it. So the question as we hold it and love it and care for it, it begins to refine itself of itself, whether it is one of the great questions or one of the perhaps simpler, but in a way often more perplexing questions, such as "what should I do for my career?" or "will this relationship work or not?"

If we just do not know, then that is a very pure thing, the value of the haziness in the mist. And our intimate "not knowing" creates the place in which the questions become valuable and this is where we can stand while the question changes itself. And as it changes itself, we discover it in ourselves in a much deeper way than we thought. We discover that we had always asked it from the beginning. This is the tricky part of the method.

I was seduced into zazen because I wanted knowledge and clarity. The idea of wisdom was not so strong in me. The idea of having a better character was not so strong in me. So gradually I was seduced. I've mentioned how the development of conduct in our culture has often a rather Victorian air to it. We have become aware of how hypocritical many of the virtues that were handed down to us have been. But it's not that the virtues were bad, but that they weren't upheld. They were breached, rather than observed. But out of the inwardness, out of the going into the centre of things, I've come very much to trust that character also transforms and it transforms slowly over time. It has a vegetable speed to its

processes. I think of it in terms of peristalsis, something slow and digestive.
Nobody wakes up and overnight has become a better person. When people come to the zendo and spend two weeks and say, "It has changed my life", usually we say,
"Oh, I'm so glad, it hasn't changed mine."

So we trust in duration. We trust that the Tao is working for us. And this is what the question does, it holds our attention while the Tao works in us and changes us from the bottom up, from the cells out.

We don't necessarily originally want to be changed from the bottom up, perhaps we want a solution. We want to be treated the way sometimes we treat medicine, please give me a drug and make this pain go away. But we have to live the pain, and we get something greater than what we asked for.

Daesetz Suzuki, whose name means Great Donkey, in one of those backhanded Zen compliments, was quite open about the dingo-like trickery of the Dharma in this regard. He said, "The koan has the flavour of something that can be resolved by the intellect, but it cannot. So it keeps the intellect busy while something else happens. Then the real change occurs." So the magician is doing something with one hand while we don't notice what is happening in the other hand.

So, what kind of changes go on in us? Someone gave me one of those lovely fourfold processes recently. She came and said, "I felt very angry and I wondered what the anger was about, and then I realised I felt envy. I noticed other people changing around me and I felt shut out and envious. And then I wondered what the envy was about and I realised I felt shame because I felt envy and then I wondered what the shame was about and I realised I felt longing - longing for the Tao. And then I realised I was quite happy, longing for the Tao." It's very beautiful, isn't it? And she realised that that was her treasure.

Shame is something we do feel often in the character work. It starts down deep and is subtle at first and then seems to spread up and out through the body until it's not subtle at all. And that's when we look and say, "Damn, I thought nobody knew that I did that and here I realise everybody can see. Or I can see, which is even worse. I really did that." And we must value it and we can't do

without it, even if we can't sit still when it is upon us. It's evidence of sincerity, and so we begin to value things that normally we would have fled. We begin even to steer by them. So, when something really difficult comes up, we can have this attitude - "Well, this is really interesting, I wonder how the practice works here? Well, I guess I don't know how the practice works here. I shall have to find out." So something new is born, something unique enters the world, and we are stretched in ways where we did not expect to be stretched.

Somebody gave me a good example of this stretching some time ago. He had one of the fairly typical paths in Zen. He was a talented and perhaps charismatic person who had studied Zen with a number of good teachers and had rather neglected his inner life, although this wasn't apparent because he meditated a lot and was quite creative. But then, as will happen when we neglect our inner life, it came crashing around him.

Everybody basically got sick of him. He made a mess of his domestic life and his marriage broke up. He experienced a kind of pain he had never experienced before, the kind of pain he couldn't get away from. None of his brilliance could help him with it, and he began to go downwards, become depressed and think of suicide. A familiar path, I think. And he thought maybe he didn't need to do zazen, because zazen didn't really seem at all related to this pain. And then eventually the pain took him over, so that for the first time he was in difficulty in his life, and he could find no way to flee it. And so for the first time he had the possibility of a real practice and a deep level of experience.

Some pain forces us inwards when we are not willing to go inwards, forces us to experience who we are, when everybody else had merely suffered it before, but we had not experienced it. Sickness will do this too. There's nothing like getting a cancer diagnosis to realise it's not important who takes out the garbage. Who really gives a damn? So pain has a beneficent quality as well as its dark side. We are very aware of the dark side, but the shadow of pain is the brightness and the healing quality that it can bring with it. So we go down and we go further into things in our zazen.

Sometimes we sit in zazen and things appear to get worse. Many people come to me and say, "My mind was actually much calmer before I did so much zazen." Well, this may be true. I think we notice our condition and what is in us begins to work its way to the surface when we do zazen. Usually at first things get better when we start to do zazen but there always comes a time when things get worse, fortunately, and that's not because we are insufficiently honouring the questions, it's really because the question is spreading through our whole life and we realise that we are trying to live in one illuminated corner of our universe but that we must go into the shadows as well. We must honour the whole of the mandala and not sit in one corner of it.

We will have temporary achievements like the person I spoke of if we sit in one corner, and often we will seem rather brilliant and you can probably think of people who are like this, but it is a miserable life ultimately, just getting by. So this is what pain is good for, we learn to include rather shut out, it gives us compassion so that we embrace others, even people very different from us.

And when someone else is in pain and acting very weirdly, our first thought isn't to get that person out of my hair, our first thought might be, "Oh, I remember"

So the heart naturally begins to open and this too comes from the inward life, from that moment of turning, at the bottom of the interior life. And then we find that it is rather luminous down there. I have the image of a coral reef with colourful creatures pulsing and crossing to and fro before our eyes.

Then we begin to value the reality of the Tao, even though we have no mastery of it and sometimes we think of it as something that is happening to us. We can see its workings. If we are happy, we notice it and we count it and put it in the scales too, we don't just pass it by obliviously. If we are sad, we live it. In a large sense our happiness and sadness are a dream, just as everything is a marvellous dream, but in the small sense, if we ignore the place where we are standing, then we can't answer the questions and we cannot encompass this great dream.

We must acknowledge that where we are, this is the sense of place. Then the sacred, luminous quality of the inner life becomes very evident to us. Everything changes, our instant reactions, our dreams, our whole sense of who we are and where we stand.

Fu Da-shi, an early Zen figure, who lived most of his life very poor as a labourer, would hire himself out in order to get money to give to the poor. He kept giving away all his money and the people who cared about his Dharma found it hard to keep him fed. He said,

"Empty-handed I work with the plough,
while walking I ride the water buffalo."

There was a sense of complete ease in everything he did - riding the water buffalo, playing the flute,

In a well that has not been dug,
someone with no shadow or form
is drawing the water.

- little poems so strong that we use them as koans still. He saw the magical quality of that well that we draw from, the pure empty quality.

Strange things start to happen around this time when we're at this place. Sometimes they're rather entertaining. A woman who was preparing for a retreat told me this story. She had been working at a Hospice for a long time. Hospice workers usually burn out after a few intense and florid years but she had endured by keeping her head low and being anonymous.

She had decided to take time for a retreat and was preparing for it, talking to me. She had spent these many years being present while people were dying and that was her job and she'd found it both marvellous and draining and she had found how wonderful, how rich a part of life dying can be, and also how miserable and disappointing an event it can be sometimes. The family starts taking drugs and having fist fights over the body. So she didn't hold much of the romance of that work any longer but still thought it was good and important work.

And then as she decided to turn away and go inwards into her own rich life, she found this interesting phenomenon, that wherever she walked - down the street - into the supermarket - she would see one of the dead people she had held. And she would walk into the bank and she would see in the face and the gesture of

the person giving her money another of the dead people. And all the people who had died, she had seen, and this marvellous sort of feeling returned. She realised that everything comes back, nothing is lost At the mall, at the supermarket counter. And she heard the sound of their footsteps walking away, the turn of their shoulders rounding a building. And this marked the change for her that was beginning to happen. The outward movement was starting when she was quite securely grounded in the Tao, and there's something inevitable about the process, perhaps irreversible.

So when we go down, we can say we become intimate with the world and the texture of the world becomes alive. It's not dead anymore. Our thinking is inclined to be Cartesian, and to see the world as objects with bed space between them, and there is a power to this view, a reality to this view. It allows us to manipulate objects. It is rather consoling to that part of us that does not want to stretch and find danger, a part of us that just wants to battle along and be safe.

Yet there is another view that is immensely powerful and that overwhelms this Cartesian sense. And this is of the world as an interconnected web, the great image of the Net of Indra in which each link, each cross-thread in the Net holds a jewel and each jewel holds the image of every other jewel, each moment, each person, each twig, infinitely valuable and infintely connected.

So when we've really gone in for a while and held the question, it does begin to open. It does resolve itself. There are a couple of characteristics about this. One is joy - joy really does come. Sometimes sorrow comes first, oddly enough, and so people end up grieving their dead father or the father they never knew or something like that, and then suddenly they find themselves laughing in the midst of tears and the great engines of satori have taken them off. But sometimes there's just the joy alone. So joy is very characteristic. One old teacher asked his student, "Are you joyful yet?" And he said, "It's like finding a pearl in a pile of shit." They say even the shit is pearl, all pearl.

So we get intimations, we get those little touches of joy where we laugh in the Zendo, something ridiculous occurs to us and it's funny, or we see somebody's bare feet and realise they're exquisitely beautiful with the mud sticking to

them. A tiny taste of awakening.

The other characteristic is that doubt is set at rest, that core doubt in which we think, "It's not quite enough. We really need to be doing something else or experiencing something else or being somebody else. We need to be doing it differently, we're not doing it right and will we survive? and what if?" - all that stuff. While we can still get interested in this stuff, somehow it doesn't have the substantial force that it previously had, it's not thick and veiling the way it was.

And so we begin to get happy and then naturally we are carried into the outward movement. We can't just sit there, hoarding our treasure like a dragon in a cave. We are led into the world and when we come into the world, we find again that we have to keep up the character work. The character work is vegetable and slow. We find again we do things foolishly. Typically in fact we get very enthusiastic about our first glimpses and we run out and take too much on and then drop it and then start feeling bad. We make mistakes that we realise we could have avoided and we just have to accept that this too is the truth of the Way.

Two images come to me. The first is that the inside is often patchy. It is like some sun shining through the cloud, but the cloud keeps shifting and the place where the light hits keeps moving over the paddock and suddenly we're not in it anymore and we wonder what we did. We get a glimpse and it's gone and then we get a stronger glimpse but damn, it's gone again. And then we get a stronger glimpse and we're really sure we saw the ox, but the next day we're not sure if we saw the ox and we begin to doubt.

So this is where the character work really counts. If you've been working with yourself, understanding that you must live your own life, even while you're working for insight, then this will hold you through the doubt. We can bear it and endure it. It is like childbirth, we just have to wait and go through all those phases and the transition hurts a great deal sometimes, but in the end inevitably there is a child and we have to trust that the child will come.

Anyway there is no choice but to trust, because you can't do anything once you're launched. You are giving birth and when it seems like nothing is happening, there's no use panicking and running around, it really doesn't help the birth. You're welcome to if you wish, but you will just have to give birth. And when it happens and in a sense you have given birth, it's not the patchiness and the haziness so much as a discontinuity, a post-Einsteinian event.

The term "interleaving" comes to me, where the world of enlightenment and the world in which we can't find enlightenment are wedged into each other, like a lattice. Someone talking about this invented the term "inter-tissuing", which seems both Shakespearean and medical to me. Where the sunlight and the darkness form lines together and we're always stumbling across one or the other and we will simultaneously have difficulty and ease, have a sense of a great clarity about the world and a sense of not knowing what to do in our life right now.

I think at this stage we begin to trust that we can really see it, even though sometimes we can't really see it. I think that discontinuity, this interleaving is steadier than the phase where everything is patchy. We are closer to resolving the question for good because we are more in the place from which questions can be resolved.

Someone once described what I think of this place to mean quite well. She came in and told me about this wonderful glimpse - that everything in the universe and all the trees and the children all sing the great song of the Buddha and she is them and they are her and all those good things. And she was very excited and interested, but had to hold onto it a little bit and then went out and at her work and she lost it all. She felt that in clinging onto her glimpse, she had not done her work very well, and felt ashamed and guilty about this very characteristic movement I spoke of before.

And then she said something that I thought was really good, and indicated her willingness to do the character work. "I don't want to be where I'm not. I don't want to be someone I am not. I will be where I am." And there's the integrity coming through and if we are willing to have that, it will carry us and the next opening will be greater. And then we'll fall again on our face and then the next

opening will be great but we can trust that it will take us along.

A friend of mine I have often spoken about was given a leukemia diagnosis quite a long time ago. After he received his diagnosis he and his wife decided to have a son, who is now five years old. And recently I stopped off to speak to him in Honolulu on the way to come to Australia. And we were talking about this interleaving as something that happens also between life and death and sickness and health. He is really getting much sicker these days and is rather thin and his hair is all spikey from the chemotherapy he's taking. He's a physician and manages his own medications, so he's doing that as well as lots of zazen and other shamanic work.

Somedays he said he's really healthy. He doesn't have cancer. And other days he is dying, really dying. And on those days he really is dying and the other days he really is completely alive, there's not a trace of sickness about him. And they are completely wedged together, these two experiences. And they don't cancel each other out. The times when the way is dark and difficult do not write off the times when the way is luminous and clear, and we must be as interested in the dark and difficult times as my friend is. His dying is a part of his living and he asks himself, "Well, what is this dying? How can I do it well? What is my task here? What action must I take from this place? This is very interesting, I seem to be dying, but even then I'm not sure because some days I seem to be living more vividly and joyfully than ever."

One old Zen personage was ordered to kill himself because he ran afoul of the Shogun of the time, not always a difficult thing to do. And in his last poem he wrote, "Seventy years and now a sword." He was interested in what was coming, interested in his death, too.

So this interleaving is the brightness and darkness coming together and we realise we can have sadness and an underlying joy. We can be in pain and still the song is there, pure and strong. It doesn't matter who did it to us. It doesn't matter why. That is interesting at another time but at this moment there is just that underlying song that doesn't really ever go away.

It is the happiness we find deep in sesshin, a current in the universe that is there even when we cannot hear it. We can feel it and make these swimming motions as it carries us along. When we don't put anything in front of it, there it is, and we may be sad but the deep current of happiness interpenetrates that sadness. The movement into the world of joy and light becomes very strong and we just have to follow it and allow it. Somebody asks and we do. It is very clear. One old Zen teacher asks another, "What's it like?" and he says, "It's like a donkey sees a well." Just instantly reflected like that. His companion says, "Oh, I don't think it's like that at all," and his friend asks, "Well, what do you think it's like then? "It's like a well sees a donkey." Even less going on there, even more natural and pure.

So here we are, we are that donkey walking out into the world. We are that well that the donkey walks by, pauses and looks into. The interleaving goes on also between character and insight. The character work really does go on.

We really do have to address our prejudices about the other people in the Sangha.

We really do have to address our timidity and the way we tend to cling to what we know. We tend to cling to what is powerful in us. Perhaps what is powerful in us is a helplessness, what is powerful in us is maybe a stubbornness. Some of us powerfully cling to the Cartesian universe where we know there are separate objects and there is no illumination but it's safe, and we can do things with the objects. It is like having a bulldozer and pushing down all those trees along the track, a very strong thing to do. It is rather despairing but it's very powerful too.

So we have to work on our courage, on coming and going and doing things and our steadfastness and our humility. But it's easier because the light is clear and it seems foolish not to work on those things. Not foolish in a bad way, but sad. It seems foolish not to accept that we are human and fallible and that we make mistakes. It is so evident and obvious that it is a good thing to do the character work, and then we realise the insight and the character work have started to coalesce, to interleave and we can't say which is which. At that

stage the koan is not just lodged in your heart, it is all the way down
to your
dirty toes, becomes part of your toes. How will you walk with the koan
stuck
between them? The question has become completely one with us. We have
met it
and have encountered the world and have breathed in a deeper sense. We
open our
mouths and something comes out and we know it is the right thing because
we do
not think whether it is the right thing or not.

Interleaving then is between the love of life and the love of people and
the
love of the world. The insight and the purity and the clarity about
things are
just naturally attendant, naturally inhabited. Everything rises and
passes away
and these two are interleaved and one.

PLEASE DO NOT BELIEVE MY WORDS, PLEASE LOOK FOR YOURSELVES.

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