

Why Don't You Enter the Stream, Shariputra?

Leo Liebenauer-Welsch

Several years ago, I did a three-week solo retreat. During the first few days this question appeared: “Why don't you enter the stream, Shariputra?” I started the retreat with my own messy baggage from my everyday life, so I wondered if the question was about the stream of everyday life or the stream of reality itself?

I cannot remember if I had been working on some kind of kong-an “homework” at that time. Nevertheless this question attracted my attention right away and drew more and more energy, just like water leaking through a hole. Obviously there is one person asking another person. The person asking was Shakyamuni Buddha, and the person being asked was one of his disciples, Shariputra. The purpose of the question would lead to a discussion beyond the scope of this article.

Without focusing much on the background of the question, during the retreat it was the question itself that fascinated me, and I wondered what an appropriate Zen response would be. I tried to apply the teachings I've received over time, such as “Put it all down”—which I couldn't. Or, “Any kind of mantra is possible.” During sitting I used the mantra *Coca-Cola, Coca-Cola*, and it worked in some sense.

Over time, different answers appeared out of the blue, most likely from the same source as the question—a knowledge which didn't help much. Some answers that appeared fit and some didn't. Answers that were appropriate inspired a feeling of lightness and relief. But this feeling lasted only a short time, after which it gradually faded until it vanished. The question kept reappearing, along with another that I longed to answer: “How to resolve it?”

Questions and answers. An answer cannot exist without a question—otherwise it would be a statement. A question doesn't make much sense without an answer, although a question could already be the answer. Basically, questions and answers are mutually bound to each other.

I ended up with the question “What qualifies an answer as a good fit for a question?” Focusing on answering the question would lose the focus on questioning itself. I guess an appropriate response is one that doesn't lose this focus. How can question and answer fit perfectly together? All of these ideas have a common ground, which I would call *acceptance*—acceptance that the pieces are perfectly matching. Accepting cannot come from outside, regardless of how convincing it might seem.

There is a nice story about the dharma brothers Seol Bong (Ch. Xuefeng) and Am Du (Ch. Yantou). Both of

them appear in the case “Duk Sahn (Ch. Deshan) carrying his bowls.” Both were on a journey and trapped in a hut in the middle of a snow storm. While Seol Bong was practicing sitting meditation, Am Du was practicing sleeping meditation. After some discussion, Am Du was willing to support his dharma brother. Without going much into the details of the story, Seol Bong attained enlightenment by hearing Am Du say, “Haven't you heard it said ‘What comes through the front gate isn't the family treasure?’”

When I first heard the story I started thinking, “What else should it be?” While writing these lines I remember many questions I've asked and many answers received—but still don't know which one is the best.

Some years after that solo retreat I attended a Yong Maeng Jong Jin retreat. It was led by a Zen master and a brand new Ji Do Poep Sa. During one of the interviews, the Poep Sa Nim was teaching on his own—no Zen master around. I asked him about a situation that bothered me some time ago.

A friend of mine had tried practicing a Japanese style of Zen. At that time she told me there is not much sense in working on kong-ans. Perplexed, I asked why she would think that. She responded simply, “They taught me that we are all already enlightened. So there is no need to focus on kong-ans; just sitting is enough.”

Working with kong-ans means investigating situations and discovering appropriate reactions or replies. After practicing with the Kwan Um School for many years, I couldn't imagine another source of inspiration than to work with kong-ans. Her statement simply contradicted my experience. Nevertheless I didn't have any clue how to respond.

So I asked the Poep Sa Nim how he would reply to my friend's statement about kong-ans. He gave me some advice for which I was grateful, and I thanked him. But as I mentioned before, I feel that “answers” are tied to acceptance. I sat inspecting his answer, but ultimately it didn't relieve my doubts; more and more questions arose instead.

The next day, both the Zen master and the Poep Sa Nim were teaching together in the interview room. I expressed my concerns to the Poep Sa Nim, and the Zen master interrupted, saying that what my friend had said was from a famous quote from Dogen, the twelfth-century Japanese Zen master of the Soto school: “We all have Buddha nature. So why practice?” Dogen struggled a long time with this question.

Now my friend's opinion about kong-ans made sense, because I knew she practiced in a Soto Zen sangha. Later I found out that this question was Dogen's big

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inquiry, his big doubt for which he hadn't found an answer. But even though I knew some background now, I was still sitting with the question of how to respond to my friend.

The Zen master continued, "Well, you have to know that the quote is not complete." Somehow I really needed to hold my horses back while listening to his answer, waiting about how it would resolve. "The complete quote is: We all already have Buddha nature—but nobody believes in it!" This was the perfect match to my friend's statement, which I thankfully accepted.

Acceptance obviously cannot enter through the front door—as wide and open as it might be. Neither can having trust in or believing in something enter through this door—and not only trust in something but trust in *oneself*. If it cannot enter through the front door, then how else can it enter? I think each of us has our own approach.

One of the jobs of a Zen teacher is to test our approach to acceptance. But we're tested not only by Zen teachers, but also by our daily meetings with friends, random persons, and life partners (or ex-partners). Especially with ex-partners, the ability to stay in contact with oneself is tested in the hardest way. Try to get an answer by asking them "What kind of improvements

should I make to be of benefit for others?"

To return to my initial question with an understanding of acceptance: If you find a way of trusting yourself, then entering the stream of reality wouldn't be that hard. Finding a way of entering would answer the question of "How do you enter the stream?"

One way to enter is to be thankful for the cup of tea you've received. Mine is to thank you for reading to the end of my article.

And all of these words—did they clarify the question "Why don't you enter the stream, Shariputra?" One question was raised, many doubts are following. If holding the question with acceptance is possible, then finding an answer is also possible. Not only finding an answer—it's also possible to bring it into everyday life for the sake of all beings and for the whole world. ♦

Leo Liebenauer-Welsch got in contact with Kwan Um School of Zen 1993 after already practicing Zen for three years. The breakup of his personal relationship in 2014 led him to do a three-week solo retreat. He found love again not only with his new wife (within a challenging patchwork family), but he also found it with his newly intensified practice. He now holds sixteen precepts and lives in Vienna.

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Advancing on my knees in the bushes, I suddenly hear a loud sound of branches breaking a few feet away from me. A moment after that something very heavy starts to run and trample the ground. Without thinking, a strong *one mind* takes over, and I just start running. I had reached his lair. Luckily, I and the wild boar run in opposite directions.

GREAT FAITH

Every week I travel to the forest, stroll along trails, climb hills, and get into a thicket. Each time before setting out on a tour, the hope of finding the deer's footprints resurfaces. Maybe they're in an area I have not yet searched. Maybe they will show up in the winter when they come out of the thicket to eat pine leaves, mushrooms, and grass. Or rather in the summer when they go down the slopes to the peach groves to eat the young leaves. In the summer, the paths turn to powder, and it is much easier to notice the shape of the footprints.

"WHERE ARE YOU GOING? WATCH YOUR STEP."

Many tracks are discovered during the months of search: the badger tracks with the rounded pads and long claws, the heavy wild boar leaving deep hoofprints, the heart-shaped gazelle footprints, its pile of dung midden, niches of the nightingale and of a band of partridges, the foot of the porcupine which is shaped like a human baby, leaving behind signs of its dragging spines. Researching the deer's behavior in an attempt to figure out their habitat. Random conversations with the farmers who own

the plantations, and with park rangers. A particularly moving encounter with the caretaker responsible for raising the deer before releasing them into the wild, tears in his eyes as he recounts raising the herd.

Two years of searching without a trace. The park ranger who was in charge of the deer's reintroduction lost hope long ago, estimating that they were probably preyed upon by jackals.

BORISA TEMPLE, SPAIN, 2019: WINTER RETREAT

Afternoon walk in the damp forest, the path winding between the tall pines. Walking in a column. The ground is wet with melted snow. My eyes carefully follow signs on the ground. Suddenly a beautiful pair of distinct roe deer footprints appear before my eyes. A brief moment of joy. A smile. The walk continues.

ISRAEL, 2021

A random conversation with a close friend and park ranger. He mentions rumors of a planned roe deer reintroduction attempt planned for the near future. Fingers crossed. "How can I help?" ♦

Boaz Franklin has been studying animal tracking since 2017 and is certified as a tracker by the Cybertracker organization. He has been practicing with the Kwan Um School of Zen in Israel since 2006. He is a dharma teacher and the abbot of the Pardes-Hanna Zen Group.