

Chapter 1

ANSWERING QUESTIONS ABOUT THE TRADITION

Function of questions because study course is not fixed; Using texts as constants; How they connect to personal nature of student; When the effort to formulate a question can enable the questioner to find the relevant answer.

I don't at all mind answering questions.

Not that I am specifically inviting them in the sense that one feels forced to formulate a question, but some naturally similar questions with the same basis tend to come up at an early stage of contact with the Tradition. Some such questions are just for clarifying certain points, and one also refers people to certain texts to be read or used, since there is no fixed course or schedule of study.

Part of the teaching, however, is and has to be of a personal nature, in the sense that certain texts, activities or exercises are suggested to individuals. It is a necessary function of the Tradition that a person's individual characteristics, problems, energies and capacities should be allowed for within the context of the Tradition, and within one's capacity to use it.

It is no good saying "Go off and read Jami, Hafiz, Saadi, Rumi" in the hope that a person will hit on something useful or which says something to them. This hit-and-miss type of thing causes confusion and makes people despondent: they blame themselves, the technique, somebody else, and of course everything ends in tears.

The degree of personal tuition applies in the sense that contact is kept up so that the person who is teaching can monitor the various stages of perception or being of the person, thus enabling the teacher to indicate at what specific time a person should do a particular activity.

Textbooks and other things are available and are referred to from time to time, but since there are no textbook rules laid down en bloc in the sense of "First do this, afterwards do that" it is often useful for a person to clarify their position and intention to themselves at different stages. One invites questions from time to time, but not with the intention of galvanizing people into tremendous activity: "I must come up with a question for next Thursday."

If someone has a question, they can certainly put it, but not at a specific preordained time, as if one had a question and answer session every fourth Monday in the month. More often than not I am the one who talks all the time: very infrequently, I allow other people to talk for one or two minutes and then I start talking again. Nevertheless, the teaching technique does allow for questions and answers, for the simple reason that when formulating a relevant question, people are more often than not already in possession of the factors that will give them the answers; and in formulating it, one very often finds the answer for oneself.

That is not to say that one should desperately formulate a question on the assumption that one will inevitably find the answer. Even if one doesn't find an answer, putting the question is still a valid thing and it is encouraged because it helps resolve areas of complexity or confusion, assuming, of course, that the question is not what I call a "show-off" question, as when a person rushes off, reads an obscure tract by somebody, then says: "I seem to remember that Al-Halka said that the cause of all illness was the Euphrates and what do I do about that?"

It may be very complex question and a tribute to their capacity of research, but unless they want to get an equally ridiculous and garbled answer from me, it is advisable not to ask it. If it is a real question, i.e. either a problem or something which a person feels, or else something that might be beneficial to other people in the group, then one can possibly ask it.

If the question is too wide or deep, i.e. "What is the meaning of life?": I don't think the person will necessarily be given an answer, whether I know it or not. I only answer questions if in my judgement a person and the other people listening, a) will benefit from the answer, and b) more importantly, have the competence to understand the answer. Otherwise it becomes just more jargon, and they go off more confused than when they started.

So if a question tends to be more complex than necessary, I won't necessarily compliment them on their intellect by replying on that level; I may answer them on a very much lower, and in my estimation, more comprehensible level.

So, any pertinent questions?

Q: Agha, is instinct significant to development in the Tradition?

A: Instinct, common sense or horse sense is a thing which unfortunately has become vastly underrated, because it's dismissed as unimportant: as when people say that a person wears "sensible shoes" or "sensible clothes": it implies something fuddy-duddy. They very often don't even know what they mean when they're saying that, but it carries a pejorative connotation.

To us, common sense is a basic human reaction to situations, a form of analysis which is a 'gut reaction', but this alone would be selling it short because there is more to it than that. No matter how many degrees one has, no matter how intellectual

one might consider oneself to be, what is it, for instance, that wakes you up at night when you smell smoke? It may be race memory, Neanderthal reactions or whatever, but you don't just dismiss it.

For instance, you hear people say "my old grandmother used to do" this or that or say this or that: and then they will laugh or be slightly shy or feel guilty and act silly, implicitly dismissing what grandmother felt. No: we hold that this sensing, i.e. the impression or feeling one gets from a person, a face, a situation or whatever, should not be ignored. It has a definite function.

Most things which communicate to a person's common sense are not capable of being measured, labelled, or weighed in social, political or any other terms. They cannot be put in a category.

People say "Oh yes I felt something" or "It was a sensation" and very often people won't talk that way, because in this day and age you unfortunately get people who will then say "Well, was it thick, or happy, sad, hot, cold, excited, wet or dry?" And you reply "Well, you know...", and either they say "Oh yes" and call in the men in white coats, or else they say "You don't want to talk to that person, he's a bit off."

This sort of thing has been understood to the degree that people are reluctant or even ashamed to say anything in that area, they keep it to themselves. Sometimes they themselves don't understand it and they get worried about it and say to themselves "Am I going mad?" or "Is this a genetic or race thing?"; whereas we hold that this is one of the perfectly normal senses that a person has.

There are the five senses, and people say there is a sixth sense or seventh or whatever: why not? Why should this be considered something incredibly rare and supernatural, either

fraught with danger so “Don’t touch it” or else one goes overboard on it?

It is simply an instinct which is capable of being developed, and a sense which we use within the Tradition to talk to and communicate with, on levels which are not touched by the conventionally accepted five senses.

For instance, the effect on an individual of a micro-climatic situation is something which a person can’t put a name to. What we say is: “Do you need to?” Must it be codified? Must it be labelled? If it is useful, if it is something that feels good, must it necessarily be traced down to some thing specific or particular? Why can’t it be just accepted as being “Grug!” and either used or accepted?

If you have a woolly scarf and it keeps you warm, and somebody says “Oh that’s not Harrod’s, that’s Woolworth’s” is it any less warm? The answer is yes if you’re sold upon Harrod’s, because it becomes warmer to you; but have you given your neck the vote?

So, to answer the question: yes, very definitely, the sixth-sense unconscious-self level, which has been called all sorts of things, is important, and should be given adequate attention along with other senses like the tactile. If something appears hard or soft or whatever by tactile examination, you accept it as being that on the basis of experience. You don’t then re-examine the tactile with another of your senses, because the only judgement which is required for that particular situation is: this smooth enough or shall I polish it some more?

You can listen to or look at it till kingdom come, but it does not change the necessity that you have. When people start swapping things around, they get into error.

Equally, if for whatever reason something appears to be good, bad, useful or capable of being looked at in terms of basic

horse sense, this is a capacity one does use and which one should work on, and recognize, within the Tradition.

Without going into an overly-elaborate fundamental examination, one has to make a delicate distinction between a basic feeling and one's personal hang-ups, because people can easily confuse the two, and it can lead to complications.

Instinct is not the "subconscious" people talk about all the time, it is the deep consciousness communicating on a very human and basic level. It is very often something nudging you in an unsophisticated way, and calling your attention to something which is hostile or alien because you have already measured it from other points of view.

Q: Does reaction or impulse differ basically from person to person?

A: Well, there are people who by personality and nature are sort of professional understanders or professional worriers. They take this sort of thing as a challenge, as if they saw bits written down on an old stone and therefore "I must read and understand it" and "I must use it."

Very often that feeling is followed by another thing: "I must use it immediately!"

This is impatience and greed, and it can also be a result of education, conditioning, and previous terms of reference. "Unless you've learnt that book by the end of term, forget it" or you get punished as a result of asking a question and have to learn it off by heart: this is the more familiar sort of conditioning.

People very often think they need to learn about everything altogether, all the time, and on all levels. This is very desirable but there is such a thing as mental indigestion, when you absorb too much at a time.

Everything you take up, say in the form of useful pieces of practical information, is stored and brought out at the right time. If you follow a technique like driving a car, the knowledge is stored: there's a known technique and you don't worry about it; when you have to drive a car you bring out that piece of memory and use it.

If you have several different techniques, all of which you are trying to remember at the same time, and then you bring them all out and have to flip through all of them to see which one you apply to drive the car, you have a problem, because the purpose of getting knowledge is to be able to use it. It's not just to file it and say "I have got so much knowledge" or else, again, you say to somebody "Why don't you read this book?" and they say "I've read one." Neither extreme is correct.

Say you've learned a piece of knowledge or a technique; you allow enough of it to come in, at the moment, to satisfy your requirements. You use that knowledge or technique at the same time as practising it a bit more, both to increase your knowledge and also your capacity to use it, but you don't try and hold onto everything.

As you examine it, you are not trying to use it at the same time as you explain it to yourself. You have to be patient with yourself, because the way knowledge is stored in the human brain is very sophisticated. It's not a question of volume: it's stored in wafer-thin layers.

You can acquire so much that something very familiar happens, and I'm sure we've all done it; if you're looking for something, and you start looking through an old box of papers, you get to the fifth piece of paper in the tin, and your memory goes off on something else and you get taken off track — this is a very familiar thing. So it's all about trying to keep something, and bring it out and use it.

When you work through all the terms of reference and

everything you have already acquired, your search becomes confused. You're looking through lots and lots of files and trying to say "Does that apply to this?" or "This apply to that?"

I'm afraid that what I am saying is a horrific thing from the practical and educational point of view, and that is: don't learn so much, but what you do learn, learn well, and be able to use it correctly, otherwise you get into the very familiar situation which some ladies get into when they fill their kitchens and larders with every possible thing in case they might need it.

It is, in fact, an aspect of greed. If you have impatience, coupled with: "I want to use this piece of knowledge," what you have is really a technique for amassing knowledge.

Once again, this can lead to one's getting uptight and nervous, saying "Why can't I use this? What's the matter with me? I'm stupid." And then you have the vicious circle.

Applied knowledge or an applied technique in a context which is useful, is obviously much more worthwhile than any amount of theory. It is a failure of some educational techniques that they fill a person up with information. Now that is okay up to a point; you go to school and you come out at the age of sixteen or whatever, you have learnt hundreds of things which you only need for your final examinations at school. After that, you never use them again, but you need them up to that point. After that point, you should have worked out what you want to do, either University or whatever.

That means you can leave aside certain things which are unnecessary and gradually narrow down the area of education you want to follow. You don't take the whole lot along with you at all times, because the feeling is then going to be "Oh dear, there's a book, maybe I should read it now" or something like that. It is a form of greed; some people just amass what is called information.

As for facts: if it is in one's profession, or part of one's requirement to need facts, then one learns the facts which one applies to one's profession or requirement. Other things become what is called incidental information.

If there's a train which leaves from Paddington to Oxford every morning at 7.40, that is a fact. I don't necessarily have to remember that, or remember that there's another one that leaves at 9.20, another that leaves at 11.40 and another that leaves at 2.30, right? Those facts are only important to me if I regularly travel between London and Oxford, otherwise they are incidental information. If I need them, I can phone the station or look it up: I don't have to carry the timetable with me the whole time, nor do I have to carry all the London Telephone Directories with me all the time in case I might need them.

So the "just in case" kind of thing applies if there's only one telephone directory for London in the whole world: then of course you don't carry it with you, you set up a business, because if you've got the only one in the world, you can make a fortune by selling people other people's numbers. But you don't carry all the information, and, just because you've got it, therefore plan to apply it.

You must remember that, in the Tradition, everybody started somewhere. All right, some people were born into it, some people have family associations with it, some people heard of it, some people knew people who were in it; and many people have read things about the Tradition, which, depending on the way they interpreted or heard about it or found it have given it all sorts of names: good, bad, silly, unnecessary, and so forth.

But it is basically a teaching, and the purpose of it is to develop people by a series of techniques: hearing, reading, exercising: cutting out a lot of unnecessary over-intellectualisation because it is not necessarily the pressure of time that makes people say: "We don't have enough time"

or “We must push it.”

Q: Why are people like that?

A: The answer to that question is that people don't have to be like that. They don't have to go through life confused and stumbling: they have the basic capacity to develop themselves. There are techniques, one of which happens to be the Tradition, which were put together very carefully and clearly as a path to be followed. I am committed to it, therefore I must obviously say that I think that it is a person's duty towards themselves to look for such a path and to find it.

If people are not prepared to be motivated by their own personal interest, there is such a thing as intelligent self-interest: this is not greed, everybody has a self-interest that is balanced. Intelligent self-interest means that one is using a certain amount of intelligence to choose things, and to think and act in an intelligent way rather than in a reactive way.

There is a difference between instinctive and reactive. Instinctive is something which one feels, for instance, which suggests that this is reasonable, this other thing isn't, and this thing here is a bit doubtful. Reactive is as a result of conditioning, and because of personality fixations or hang-ups a person reacts in a given way. Reactive is more a lack of thought. The difference between the two is that reactive tends to be as a result of some condition or attitude: instinctive is something which is coming to the surface and is triggering off a feeling or a train of thought.

Nobody wants to fall from one hole into another. People don't do it deliberately in the sense that they see a puddle of water and they deliberately jump straight into it. It isn't even a considered judgement: it is sometimes “Oh well, I suppose I might as well jump into that hole.” This doesn't do them any great credit, but people do these things. They may jump into a cactus and then say “It seemed like a good idea at the time”

but the alternatives are, in fact, never really quite as drastic as that.

People are endowed with capacities which they can develop if they know how, and there's no reason why they shouldn't do it. I get angry with people when they don't take advantage of their own capacity in any way. I don't often show it because it would demonstrate my arrogance a bit too openly, as if I was saying "I know, so therefore I am fed up with you, so why don't you do it?" Also, if I acted this way, people would get fed up with this treatment. But my function is to teach, and it will be done.

We don't pursue people, we don't chase them up. We have a technique which is on offer. The books, the tactics and the techniques are there, and we go on pushing, talking about it, offering, indicating it to people.

You are not necessarily dunces, so don't think that the "It's all right for you" and "I was born and brought up in it" resolves the problem. In order to have a mandate to teach, one has to know very fundamentally not only what one is teaching, but the people one is teaching to, and understand what makes them tick.

Anybody who teaches anything wants people to learn. Can you imagine for instance, the dream of some unfortunate piano teacher listening all day long to children who can't remember their scales, going and having a toddler who will sit down and play Beethoven from morning to night after being given one lesson? It's the dream of anybody who teaches anything.

When you are dealing with a material which in this case happens to be human, you have to know exactly what you're dealing with. If you expect people to learn or understand the music immediately, you are living in a Utopian world: it won't help them and it won't help you. You have to understand their shortcomings, problems, negativity, positivity, the ups and

downs, the whole thing, and use whichever technique applies to that situation.

If a person has faults or problems, I don't like the faults or approve of them, but I can understand that they have them, and I can understand they don't like them. It is not good enough for me to continue to say to them: "You're like this" and "You're like that" and "Why don't you do this" and "Why don't you do that?" without telling them how: because then it just becomes a sort of one-way criticism. After all, people are usually very critical of themselves, and they are fed up with criticism or confusion.

One therefore says "This is not the way to the stars: there are no promises or things like that, because the people themselves do the work." We will provide the technique, and you will do the work.

It doesn't suit everybody. As people go along, they may find it very different from what they imagined it to be: but at the same time the intention is to develop people, allow them to develop themselves and help them to develop to the point where they can use the energy and the capacity with which they were born and which they can develop.

Unless you give them contexts or situations in which they can use their capacity, you have to be a sheepdog and push them along.

One of the natural conditionings or reservations which have to be overcome is the ever-present suspicion or thought of a cult situation.

Cults, per se, can be good, bad, indifferent or pernicious. We claim very strongly that we are not a cult in the sense that there is no question of any kind of promise/menace situations around us.

A person is basically responsible to himself or herself. The

teaching is there and the people involved are getting flexibility within the teaching. They owe themselves a responsibility.

They are not political or in any other way associated with anything except humanity: and this is not a sort of "Me, me, goodness of humanity" type of thing. I don't care particularly for humanity as such: the majority of humanity are slobs.

But they can be pushed, pulled, shoved and developed if they once recognize they are slobs. If they're happy to be slobs, I'm not going to go and flush them out and draft them in.

I don't work on a headcount basis: if people feel the necessity to look for something, it is available. If they're happy in their Slobbovian way, then I am no revivalist saying "The end of the world is nigh" and all that sort of thing.

This teaching is a developmental technique and it demands self-discipline, tenacity, and a fair amount of solid common sense. It is also necessary to detach the teaching from the "paranormal," especially now, with so many cults operating in this spooky, mysterious, crystal-ball type of area.

Ours is a very precise technique. It manifests itself in different and curious ways. What I mean when I say this, is, for instance, when you might do or read something, and all of a sudden say "Good heavens, that's familiar" or "I understood it" or as they say: "Suddenly everything became wonderfully clear."

Not everything actually, but merely a little precise thing which might have been a little bit confused or unclear before, now becomes clear. And at that point you can give everything or anybody the credit: but you can also tell yourself "I worked that out."

Also, as I say, there are limits to that. You don't take all the credit because if you're not feeling so marvellous the next day, you say "It was only silly old me who did it, and I've been a fool for years, therefore I couldn't really have done it and it

wasn't worth it anyway."

You have to give yourself credit for the effort you've put in and the energy you have generated in a particular context, plus the teaching, to produce the equation. If you add nothing to something, you still have the something, but if you add something to something you get a plus path.

We have every sort of technique which fits every sort of situation, and we apply them according to the demands of the person, situation and context.

The reason it is so skilful is because the fundamental basis has already been worked out: the permutations are innumerable because they have one central basis.

When something happens as a result of doing something, it is not a transcendental breakthrough: it breaks through in little areas. They can be of a physical satisfaction area, they can be a "Aha I see" sort of thing, or "I think I see": some sort of taste, some sort of feeling, according to the amount of prescience a person can handle.

It is theoretically very easy for a person to blow their top. In fact it is not easy, because there are safeguards, but if one did suddenly understand everything in the world or what have you, it would really frighten or confuse a person more than having it fed to them in reasonable doses.

It's not a stop-start. It's really a question of momentum. If you have a heavy and big wheel, the initial energy to get it moving is considerable, after which the rotation can be kept up with a certain minimum amount of energy. It can be spun a little bit faster with a little bit more energy, but it does not require a constant and frenetic energy to keep it moving, because what is the speed of a wheel? How long is a piece of string? It has to be intimately geared and associated with that particular context or other wheel, otherwise, as I say, there is confusion.

It means concentrating an initial amount of energy, and then a constant raising of the amount of energy which is not dissipating but concentrating, and it doesn't detract: the person is manufacturing and generating enough energy consonant with the speed of their wheel and consonant with the amount of extra energy they might need to push it all the time a little faster.

It is a gradual activity, but again what is gradual in terms of time i.e. days, months or years, is not the same thing as gradual according to the person. It is a personalized thing in the sense that there is no great book of words which you look up.

If there were, it would be even more confusing and probably dangerous, because while going over the words, time changes. What you did on the 7th of November last year is probably not remotely associated with what you're going to do this next year. You may do exactly the same thing, but the one thing which will probably have changed is time, and the whole context thereof.

The overall existence of a book of words is a very dangerous thing. We're not dealing with that.

There's a varying momentum of people in a group. So what does one do? If I say something, is it different to everybody? Well, not necessarily, because as you have noticed, I constantly repeat myself in variations on a theme. Because though this is something fundamental, to be shared by everybody, yet I tend to put in the things which refer to people or which can stimulate them to a train of thought.

They then go off and worry the bone: hopefully the bone, and not themselves, because if they worry themselves, i.e. "I didn't understand what that was about" and "What does this mean?" and so forth and so on, they are chasing a phantom bone. But if they have got a real bone which they are able to take away to examine and relate to themselves, then this is more

useful than having to have constant recall of everything which was conceivably said in every particular relationship, and which leads only to confusion.

If you float into Trafalgar Square six feet off the ground, you can get a million people tomorrow. But this includes scaffolders who want to kill you, because if you teach everybody levitation, nobody needs scaffolds, or else you get airline pilots who want to know how it's done: everybody has a reason. They want to know how you did it for their own purposes, they don't want to know what went into doing it. Everybody says "I want to learn to do this": but if you wonder what they went through to do that and whether it's useful, by the time you do learn to do it, you don't want to do it any more.

Admittedly, any technique of this nature, i.e. the Tradition, has certain overtones of "the East" and "mysterious things" and so forth. Well, they're not really mysterious at all. For instance people refer to the "paranormal": no.

You can call it, "super-normal" or "normal": para-normal is really, at this stage, too exalted a step. The word 'supernatural' has already become old-fashioned, because everything is 'fantastic'. I mean if you talk like this, it means it's from fantasy, and therefore unreal, which is not the case.

More than the normal, yes.

The normal state of a person is not horrid, depressed, abominable or confused. This is subnormal. People shuffle along in a sort of life as a form of subnormal existing: they're existing, not alive.