THE ONE GREAT QUESTION

By

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A high school commencement address

I think I should start by saying what I think a philosopher is. As some of you probably know, it means a "lover of wisdom," somebody who seeks wisdom, who searches for wisdom—in that sense of love as the deep desire for something you do not have, but which you wish for more than anything else. And to say of someone they're a professional philosopher is very uncomfortable for me because it's a little like saying someone is a professional lover.

So I'm a professor of philosophy, which means I teach about philosophy. I try to help people and myself to open up the great questions of the heart. And let me also explain what I mean by that, because for me philosophy has to do mainly with questions. As I sometimes say-- only half jokingly-- we philosophers don't do answers, we do questions.

We need to understand that there is a certain kind of questioning that comes from a very deep place in our self. And we need to understand that the great questions that arise from this source in us do not have answers, in the usual sense of questions that you can answer by getting information, or reading books, or conducting scientific research. They are questions that have been asked for thousands of years. And some people, very mistakenly I believe, that if even after thousands of years there are no fixed answers of

the kind that we can have when we ask scientific or informational questions, then these questions should be finally let go of or ignored. I say just the opposite.

Now let me tell you a little what I mean by these questions, and why I think they are of paramount importance to your life and my life – our life. If we ever stop asking these questions, probably we'll stop being human.

Some years ago, through a friend of mine who was heading up a newly formed philanthropic foundation, I was offered the opportunity to do some private research on my own. He asked me what I would like to do. I had been teaching philosophy at San Francisco State University for many years, but I found myself saying that I would like to teach philosophy to a high school class. It was almost as though the words just jumped out of my mouth. I almost regretted them the moment I said them, because immediately after I said them I was given the grant, and then I was committed to trying something I had never done before. And I found a place, a very fine private high school, University High School, which some of you who know San Francisco know is one of the best high schools in the area. And suddenly there I was in front of a special class, of about 11 or 12 boys and girls just like yourselves, 10th and 11th graders mainly. I'd been used to teaching university students, college-age students. And college-age students you can fool much more easily than high school students. So I was a little nervous.

Standing in front of the class for the first time, I decided to get right to the point. I said to the class: "Imagine you were as though in a fairy tale, and you were standing in front of the wisest man or woman in the world – someone like the Buddha or Socrates –

and, as in a fairy tale, you could ask any question you wanted – only one. If you had one question to ask, I said to them, what would it be?"

"Take your time" I said, "think about it." At first, some of them started giggling, and I could imagine that somebody was thinking of asking a trick question, like "How can I have three more questions?" or something like that. But they soon saw that I was very serious, and they also became very serious about the task, and they got quiet. And if you even take ten seconds now to think what you would ask, whether you're a high school student or whether you're a grown-up or whether you're an old man or woman, you'll find that it's not so easy. Take a moment to think for yourself: if you could really ask only one question to the wisest man or woman in the world, what would it be? I'm not going to ask you to speak it out right now. I just want you to take a moment to go inside and think.

And I think for many of you who try this sometime, you'll find that it makes you go inside yourself very seriously, in a way that we rarely do in our everyday lives. Just to become quiet inside and look and ask oneself, What do I wish? What do I want to know? What do I need to understand? That act of going in like that makes us already more human, closer to what we wish to be. And the questions that come forward sometimes are like questions we've always had, even when we were very, very young. And what I received from those students – and this leads us into what I want to open up in this talk with you – was something very remarkable, and if we did it here something similar might happen here. I got back twelve sheets of paper, and on half of these sheets of paper there was something written in very small handwriting at the bottom of the page or over

at the margins-- and the center of the page was blank. And at the bottom of the page in these little letters in little handwriting there were questions like, "What's it all about?" "Where's it all going?" "Why do we live? Why do we die?" "Does God exist?" "What's the brain for?" "What can we know?"

In other words, these were the kind of great, "unanswerable," but essential questions that have been asked by human beings in every culture and every place and every time for thousands of years and which are asked by every one of us – one or another of them – in critical moments of our life. But I couldn't understand why these questions were written in little letters at the bottom of the page or at the side, and I just pondered that, and after a while I realized it was as though they were saying-- these students fifteen, seventeen years ago-- "Do you really give us permission to ask this question? Are we really allowed to expose this part of ourselves that we haven't had anyone honor or anyone support or anyone to talk to really about in our lives?"

It is as though something has been repressed in our culture that was being manifested in that particular phenomenon, a kind of repression of something in ourselves, very central in ourselves, a kind of cultural repression of what I would call this metaphysical or philosophical impulse, this wish to understand, to know the meaning of things, and to ask it.

There is a force in us, a part of the mind, part of the human psyche, that modern psychology, with all its successes and all its extraordinary theories and ability to help people and to study the mind and behavior-- there is something, some part of ourselves which modern psychology has not acknowledged or honored. It's a part of the mind, a

part of the human psyche, which twenty-five hundred years ago the most influential philosopher of the western world, Plato, named. He identified this force, this impulse, as something even more fundamental to our human nature than the need for food and shelter and family and success and comfort and safety. This part of ourselves, Plato said, was the most essential element of human nature. And he gave it the name which we have misunderstood a little bit, *eros*, which is also a word that means love. But for Plato, it was a love of understanding what is greater than ourselves in order to participate in it, and to serve it, and to live one's life in relationship to it. This impulse to understand the meaning of things, to relate to the meaning of things, and particularly to the meaning of one's own life and the meaning of one's own self – that's the philosophical impulse. That's what I've tried to study, and what I think many of you wish to study, whether you give it that name or not.

There's an awakening that is taking place in this culture, in this country. It's taking many forms. Many of the important elements of our society, institutions and patterns of living that we have taken for granted, are in danger, are now being threatened. We don't understand any more what they are for, or what will become of them. We have many, many problems in our life, in our culture, that need to be related to the great questions of philosophy.

Now the great questions of the heart-- Who am I? Does God exist? Is there a soul and is it immortal? What can we know? What ought we to do? What is good and evil? – these questions have been dealt with and not answered in the sense that they're finished with, but they've been struggled with for thousands of years. And a great body

of wisdom-- what I call the wisdom tradition-- a great body of ideas about the universe, about man and woman, about life, about good and evil, about ethics, about knowledge, about science, about art and beauty, why we're here and what is this being called man, the human being that we are, about why we have consciousness, and why do we live and why do we die – a great body of teaching has taken place in every culture of the world, in the East and West, north and south, in language that we might recognize as well as in ways we might not recognize; in words, sometimes in pictures and symbols, modes of behavior, forms of art – a body of ideas which provide not so much answers – although sometimes they may seem to do that – but they provide a basis for thinking about these questions, and a kind of encouragement and guidance toward seeking the answers for yourself.

And this body of wisdom of great ideas is at the root of all the great religious traditions and spiritual philosophies of the world, of the Western world as well as the Eastern world, the teachings of Native American and tribal societies, in China, Japan, India, Europe – they all have a common root. All the great religious traditions emerge out of this root, although on the surface they sometimes are radically different from each other; and sometimes they're distorted in such a way that they become violent and divisive. But if you go deeply into these traditions, and really study the great exponents of them-- the mystics, the saints, the great philosophers who took them very seriously and studied them and practiced them throughout their own lives-- you'll find a startling commonality. It's like many, many different paths leading up one mountain. They start from different places, perhaps, different geographical locations as it were; but as they go

up the mountain, toward the transformation of human nature which is their aim, they become similar, so that what looks very different over here and over here, becomes very similar as they go up the mountain, until at the top of the mountain, which is the state of wisdom, they are practically identical.

What I've tried to do as a philosopher is to look at these great ideas and these great teachings, which have been the guiding light of humanity for thousands of years--to look at them and try to see if we can find a bridge between this timeless vision of reality on one hand, and the problems of our everyday culture, our everyday lives as we lead them, on the other hand. The aim is to see where these questions of the heart and these great ideas can throw light on the problems of our personal life, where they can illuminate – not solve, but illuminate – the problems of our time, of our culture. And for that, you need to have the burning questions of our culture, the burning problems of our lives, in one hand, and in the other hand this great wisdom and these deeply felt questions which they evoke, which they're related to. In one hand you have the problems – something I've got to do something about, I've got to act in solving the problems of poverty or injustice or environment, all these burning issues in our personal lives, including the great ethical and moral problems of our life, which for many of us are such tormenting questions now. In one hand you have the problems which have to be solved. In the other hand, you have the questions that have to be asked, that have to be felt. To feel the questions more deeply and at the same time to solve the problems effectively: those two things don't easily go together. The question is how to put them both on the

table next to each other, as it were, and see if the light of these ideas can fall onto those problems.

One of the most tormenting questions of our time, and of all times and cultures, has to do with our own human identity – what we are, or the question is sometimes simply, Who am I? A more abstract version of it is, What is man? What is a human being? A very personal version of it is, Who is *this* human being? What am I? Am I what I am told by my environment? Am I my ethnic identity? Am I my national identity? Am I my sexual identity? Am I my physical characteristics? Am I the opinions which have come into my mind from hearing people speak, from television, from newspapers, from my peers? Am I the desires to buy this, to have that, to own that, to succeed in that – desires which themselves may have been conditioned into me from outside? We don't necessarily know where these desires come from, whether they were "injected" into us from outside ourselves. But, nevertheless, we say "I" to all these things: I want, I am, I am this, I am that, I am a Republican, I am a Democrat, I am a boy, I am a girl, I am an Indian, I am black, I am white. But is that ***I***? Or is there something behind all that, something more intimate that is truly myself, something that these things aren't necessarily representative of, which in fact sometimes these things which I usually call "I" and "myself" actually are covering over – covering over this intimate reality called *I*?

This is a great question of the heart, and a great question of all these traditions and spiritualities of the world.

Now it sounds very strange. How can I not know who I am? I'm *me*!

I remember once I went to visit a wise man. I had just gotten out of college. I was pretty smart. I got out of a good college, got good grades, I had written a whole undergraduate thesis, long – much too long – on the subject of the nature of the self. I got quite interested in Zen Buddhism after a while, which was just coming into our society in a big way – I'm sure most of you have heard of Zen Buddhism; it's become sort of a familiar cliché now. But it was almost incomprehensible to Westerners when it first came into the culture, and the fact that it's become so supposedly comprehensible now is a sign that maybe it's already on the way out. But there was a great man whose name was D. T. Suzuki. He was a scholar from Japan, an outstanding scholar, and also a practicing Zen Buddhist, and many people considered him to be a Zen Master. That means a person of great wisdom who can pass on the tradition personally to a pupil.

He was living in New York, and I happened to be in graduate school. I had just started my graduate school in New Haven, Connecticut, and I had a chance to go meet this man. And he was an amazing little man. His eyebrows were the most remarkable eyebrows I ever saw. They were like wings. I sat down, I was very nervous, I was in front of one of the wisest men I had ever met. And since then I've met many others, and I can tell you they're worth hunting down.

And he said, "What would you like to ask?" –the same question I spoke about at the beginning of this talk.

Now, I had just written a big senior philosophy thesis about the self and I was tormented personally about that question and I said, "Dr. Suzuki, what is the self?" I thought that was a really top-notch question to ask this wise man.

He took a lot of time, and he had a light in his eyes

Finally, after a long pause, he simply said, "Who is asking the question?"

That really confused me. "What do you mean??" I said. "**I'm** asking the question."

After another long silence, he said it again, "Who is asking the question?"

And again I said, now somewhat annoyed, "I am."

That was the end of the conversation. I went to the railroad station and took the train back to New Haven. I couldn't say I was disappointed exactly, I was just completely befuddled. Nowadays that kind of an answer in certain circles is easily "understood." Or so it may seem. Many people now imagine that they know the answer to that kind of question. You may have read or heard something about Zen *koans*, for example; these are paradoxical statements which are given to a pupil in order to help him get around the confines of the overly rationalistic mind. But although I also had read many books about Zen Buddhism and *koans*, it was of no help in the face-to-face encounter with Dr. Suzuki, nor did it help me with his response: "Who is asking the question?" What kind of an answer is that?

And it took me a long time, months passed. I forgot about it. I was a little disappointed. I was studying Buddhism in graduate school. And then something happened. I remember I literally woke up in the middle of the night. "***Oh! That's*** what he was doing." What he was doing? If I were to put it into words, I would say he was asking me to go inside and <u>look</u> at who was or wasn't there, because the question "***What***

is the self?" cannot be answered so much in words, but through experience. He was trying to guide me towards an experience.

I'll come back later to that whole way of exchanging between a spiritual teacher and student.

But now it is time for a story. Throughout the spiritual traditions of the world there are stories that are meant to transmit knowledge about this inner self, this deeper identity which is the true source of our being.

This story comes from India and speaks about the kind of help that is necessary in order for us to discover our true self.

It starts with a tiger, a hungry tiger, who happens to be late in her pregnancy, and who is hunting for food. Off in the distance she sees a herd of goats. Now, please remember this story is symbolic. This is not "tiger-centrism" or anything like that; this is symbolic. Well, the tiger sees the herd of goats in the distance and she charges down after them, and they of course run away in panic. But she, in her awkward physical condition, stumbles and strikes her head against a rock, and dies. Yet at the same time, the baby is born. The mother has died, but the baby is born.

The little tiger cub is there all alone, unprotected, and the mother has died. Gradually the goats come back and they see the cub, totally helpless, totally non-threatening. There's no more danger, and they take the cub with them and adopt him as one of their own. So the tiger begins to grow up imagining it's a goat. He learns all the things of goat life: he learns goat language; he learns to eat grass instead red, bloody meat. He just grows up as a "goat"--with goat-values, maybe he goes to a goat school,

maybe there are goat psychiatrists, goat priests, goat religions. It's a goat world, pure and simple. And he's a happy little goat. He looks kind of odd with his orange and black stripes, but, at least on the surface, he's a very well-adapted goat.

One day, another tiger comes, a big fierce male tiger, and he's not awkward at all. And he comes charging down the hill toward the goats, and the goats' eyes are wild with terror and they start scattering, running for their life. And they yell at the little cub, "Run, run, run!"

But for some reason the tiger cub does not feel any fear of this incredible creature bearing down on them. He just stands there as all his brother and sister goats disappear. The big tiger comes tearing down and sees the cub there and he stops dead in his tracks, and he looks at him and his big jaw drops, and he roars a tiger roar, translated as, "What the hell are you doing here?"

The little cub says, "M-a-a-a." He makes a goat noise.

And the tiger forgets all about his hunger and everything else. He looks at the little cub with lightning in his eyes: "What did you say?

"M-a-a-a-a."

He's furious. "Don't you know who you are? Don't you know what you are?"

And the cub just keeps looking and making these bleats like a goat.

The big tiger grabs the little tiger by the scruff of his neck and takes him away. "Come with me!" he says, in a thundering voice, and he takes him off into the forest where there's a reflecting pool, a mirror pool. He dangles the tiger cub over the water and says, "Look! See who you are? You're one of our tribe."

The little cub looks down and sees his own face, and he looks up and sees the huge face of the tiger, just like his, and he's amazed. He says, "M-a-a-a-a-a!"

The big tiger gets more and more furious and finally he roars, "Come with me."

He finds a fresh kill, an animal that has been killed by another predator and there's – excuse me, but there is all this bloody red meat there, which is the food of tigers. And the big tiger commands the cub, "Eat!"

But no way is that cub going to eat that meat. He's been brought up on grass. The very smell of it, the look of it, repulses him.

"Eat!"

No way. He goes, "M-a-a-a, m-a-a-a, m-a-a-a!"

But the big tiger knows what he has to do. With his giant paws, he forcibly opens the little cub's jaws and stuffs a piece of bloody down the throat of the little tiger. Well, the cub gags and chokes, but finally, due to the automatic peristaltic action of the throat, the meat goes down. And suddenly, something astonishing happens to the cub. His eyes light up, he feels an energy, a life, a force, a joy such as he's never known before.

And then he lefts his little head high and looks directly into the eyes of the big tiger and his tiny voice suddenly becomes louder and deeper, and he goes, "**Roar**!"

And the big tiger is smiling. "Now you know who you are," he says. "Come, let us hunt."

Now you may not like some parts of that story, but it's meant to symbolize that inside we are something greater than we know, something greater than what our society makes us out to be. And the story is telling us that there's a kind of nourishment we need,

which we lack because we are brought up in a goat world, with goat values. The real values are the tiger values, the values of the great self within. That's what that story symbolizes. Nothing to do with vegetarianism, it has nothing to do with violence. The great myths and stories of the traditions, even when they speak of war and killing, are almost never about literal violence; they are about forces at work within people and the world of human beings.

Well, now we come to the question, What is this self within ourselves? And how could our discovery of that self be the answer to the questions of the heart, which are the questions of a real philosopher? And how do we search for this inner truth, how do we come together to help each other search? Because we need each other for that; we absolutely need other people. In the history of the world, in all the cultures of the world, the search to come in touch with the voice of the great self within, which is sometimes reflected in what we call <u>conscience</u> – the search for that contact requires the support of companions, friends, community. And that contact with a greater reality within and above ourselves is a fundamental need of human beings, without which nothing else has ultimate meaning. That need is what Plato called ***eros.***

It's not that human beings do not need comfort, success, and family and all the things which we consider necessary and good; it's just that without that central discovery of oneself, all those other things sooner or later, for most sensitive people, lose much of their meaning.

Now, the political and social freedom to search for this inner conscience, the freedom to pursue this inner search, is a very precious thing. Not every society, not every

government, not every culture allows for that. And if we look into one of the most agonizing and urgent questions of our time, "What is America?" "What is the meaning of this country?-- if you look into the values of the Founding Fathers, you will find that one of the most important, if not the most important, elements that they are seeking to protect is the freedom to search for one's own true conscience, one's own inner virtue, one's own inner morality. Freedom in that sense is a much deeper thing than we usually mean when we say freedom.

I was recently at Concord, Massachusetts and went to the Old North Bridge, the site of "the shot heard round the world." It is a historically very important and symbolic place, where a small band of American Minutemen beat back a representation of the greatest army in the world. There's a plaque there that speaks about the love of freedom, and I asked myself, when I looked at that, "What do you love when you love freedom?" If you ask yourself that question – "I love freedom, but what is it that I love when I love freedom?"-- it's not just the freedom to buy things, to do what I want, when I want, how I want – that's for children. But real freedom, for the Founders, and, as the country went on, for those who kept renewing the meaning of the country – people like Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, the keepers of the Native American tradition – freedom meant the freedom to live one's life in relation to something higher, within oneself or above oneself; the freedom to search for conscience. And that is still protected by the government, however many mistakes and crimes America has been guilty of over the years. That's one way of looking at the meaning of some of America's ideals and values, a way that bases American democracy on deep spiritual and philosophical principles.

But we need to return to our main question. The fundamental question we're speaking about is how to understand what our deeper human identity is, and where it comes from, and how it is manifested, and how I find it.

But let me tell you another story. It's not a mythic story; it refers to a real event, which I attach great importance to, which was told to me when I was teaching a class at a business school in Mexico. I was teaching a class in business ethics, and we were dealing with the question, What is a good human being? Can you be a successful businessman and also be a morally good man or woman at the same time, or do these two goals work against each other? Or to what extent do they coincide and to what extent do they oppose each other? It's a very interesting question, and a very central question for our society now in all kinds of ways.

At a certain point during the discussion, one of the students—a young man of about thirty-- described an event that took place at Christmas. He and his five-year-old son were decorating the tree, and a little boy came to the front door begging. If you ever visit Mexico, you will see that there the people take begging as very much a normal part of life, nothing to get all upset about and nothing to get embarrassed by or excited about. You just accept it and you give what you can. It's very much a way of life to help the poor. So, this little boy came to the door, a boy about the same age as my student's son. The father and the son went to the front door, and the father went back with his five-year-old son and said to him, "Give him one of your toys."

So the little boy picked up some old toy, and his father said to him, "No, no – give him your favorite toy."

And the little boy, like the little tiger, said, "No way!" He cried, he refused.

But the father – this is a true story – the father, like the big tiger in a way, insisted gently, "No, you must give him one of your favorite toys."

And finally the boy, with his head down, picked up a toy he had just gotten, and the father waited in the living room, and the boy walked to the front door with the toy in his hand. And the father waited and waited. And what do you think happened? After a couple of minutes his son came running back into the living room, his face radiant. "Daddy," he said, "can I do that again?"

What did he discover? What kind of food was he just fed that he had never gotten before? He discovered something about himself that he didn't know. He was like most of us. Pleasure, happiness meant for him getting what he wanted, getting the toys, having the pleasure, having the success – whatever word you give it. But through the action of this big tiger-father, he discovered he was meant for another kind of food, another kind of nourishment. And he discovered a life in him that he didn't know he had.

Remember that story, even if you don't like the tiger story, because many of my students get upset with the tiger story, they want to start a political movement urging equality for goats. Remember that story of the little boy: that was tiger food that he was fed. And out of that comes the source of all real ethics, because you need rules from the outside, but ultimately what you need is the source of all rules, which is from the inside; and studying great ideas is one way of beginning to approach goodness from inside yourself, starting with your own mind and its power to think together with others.

So if I could leave you with just one idea, one image, one possibility to relate to this eternal question of the search for oneself, it would be that story of the little boy. And remember: when you read about great ideas and teachings, you're reading about yourself. So maybe just to remember that little boy running joyfully to his father after giving away his favorite toy will be a start for you, just to hold that image in your mind-- because the great stories and images of the world don't usually reveal their meaning to us right away. These great stories, these fairy tales, these Biblical images, these myths, these great works of art – sometimes they're not there to convince the brain, the head which is rational-- though God knows we need the great power of the rational mind-- but they're there to make a kind of end run around the rational mind, which is sometimes connected to the superficial sense of ego; to do an end run, and go down in the direction of the heart. And later on, as the years pass, and suddenly life does something to you, some shock, some disappointment, some triumph, some extraordinary thing, and suddenly, Ah! that's what the story meant, that's what the story was telling us! So try to let these stories come into you and slowly radiate their meaning.

An example that I'll close with is from an exchange between a pupil and a *rebbe*. You should know that a rebbe is not exactly the same thing as a rabbi. This is because there are certain rabbis in the Jewish tradition who are like the big tiger and other rabbis who are no more or less than good, old-fashioned clergymen. Nothing wrong with clergymen, but there are rabbis who are unusually wise and powerful and such rabbis were called rebbes.

And so, the pupil asks the wise rebbe, just as I asked the man with the winged eyebrows, about a certain passage in the Old Testament, in the Book of Deuteronomy, which is part of what is called the Torah, the heart of the Old Testament. There is an important sentence in this part of the Bible, which can be translated into English as "Lay these words upon your heart." And those words referred to summarize the fundamental belief of the Hebraic tradition, which is the source in certain ways of the Christian, as well as Islamic tradition, which are all rooted in one common source. "Lay these words upon your heart," and these are the words, the simple, profound words: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." (Deuteronomy 6: 4-6)

And the pupil asks the rebbe, "Why does it tell us to lay these words ***upon*** our heart? Why doesn't it tell us to put them ***in*** our heart?"

And the rebbe answers, "It is because as we are, our hearts are closed, and the words can't get it in. So we just put them on top of the heart. And there they stay. There they stay until someday, when the heart breaks, they fall in."

The great wisdom: study it in all its forms, and someday when the heart breaks, either in great sorrow or in uncontainable joy, it will fall in, and you'll understand this other level of human values that every school worthy of the name is trying to lead you toward.

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