

"Find the consciousness you had before you were born."

In Zen they have a similar koan, but it goes, instead "What was your Original Face before your grandparents were born?" (sometimes phrased in terms of parents, though I prefer the "grandparents" formulation as it is more radical.) I think they use this formulation to get rid of any potential issue with thinking of "before you were born" as perhaps being the state in the womb, or something just prior to your conception, or something like this. The reference is to something that is so long ago it was before even the causes of your individual existence in the form of your parents and even your grandparents had come into being.

I don't think there is a conceptual answer to this question which can possibly suffice; but I do think there are hints in the way these aphorisms are formulated: going beyond ordinary notions of time and space: that is to say, if what we think of as "consciousness" or our identity is always wrapped up in this particular notion of myself, my current identity, etc., is there a radical alternative that goes beyond anything situated in this way, in time and space, identified with our life as we think of it? Is there some ground of Being that is beyond ordinary notions of causes and conditions, ordinary ideas of who we are at this moment, something that is beyond time and locality and identification?

To break our habit of thinking in terms of only that which we identify with in ordinary terms: that I think is the biggest effect of this aphorism; but not only conceptually, in terms of an idea, but it points at a direct participation in this "before you were born" consciousness, or "original face before your grandparents were born" -- not merely as an idea (because as an idea this is very hard to grasp), but as a direct, palpable, lived presence in life. Can one live in a participatory way with this consciousness before you were born, or before your parents or grandparents were born? Right now?