

## TEN ZEN QUESTIONS

- p. 10 Susan Blackmore writes that all her troubles lay in the thoughts she was getting hold of—not in the immediate situation. Any thoughts about that?
- p. 12 Blackmore says there are dangers in living in the moment. Are there?
- p. 23 Can we agree that if there is anything it is like to be a bat, then the bat is conscious?
- p. 25 The “hard problem” of consciousness: how can objective, physical processes in the brain give rise to subjective experience? Any takers?
- p. 26 Susan Blackmore says that the more we learn about how the brain works the more it seems consciousness is left out. If so, why do you suppose that is?
- p. 27 If the body is nothing more than a collection of parts, can we say the self is nothing more than a collection of parts?
- p. 29 Why do scientists and philosophers reject dualism when doing so gives them so much trouble? Why is dualism so hard to avoid?
- p. 33 Blackmore questions that we necessarily know what our own consciousness is like. Is that true?
- pp. 37–8 People seem to commit to motor action before they’re conscious of it. How can this be?
- pp. 38–9 What do you think of her list of common assumptions? She doubts them. Do you?

### 1. Am I conscious now?

- p. 41 Blackmore notes that it seems we only become conscious the moment we turn our attention to being conscious. She then asks, “Was I not conscious before?” Have you ever experienced what she is referring to? If so, how

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would you answer her question? Before answering, consider her observations 2 paragraphs below.

- p. 41–2 Blackmore then considers the possibility that she wasn't really conscious before she asked the question and finds this troubling. Do you? Consider her ruminations that immediately follow. Are there other things that "make her conscious" apart from that particular question?
- p. 42 [same ¶] Blackmore notes that it seems as though she must spend a lot of her time unconscious. Is this possible? What do you suppose she means by "conscious" or "unconscious"? Assuming you've correctly discerned her understanding of consciousness, can you see any problems with it? If there are problems with it, can you remedy them?
- p. 42–3 Blackmore notes that it's hard to remember to ask the question and later asks why? Can you answer her?
- p. 43–4 Blackmore notes how quickly she wanders off. She refers to this as being unconscious—a kind of darkness or gloom. She wants to explore the darkness but notes that looking into the darkness makes it light. Is there a way to resolve her problem? If so, what is it?
- p. 45 Blackmore asks, "What does it mean to ask a question?" What would you say?
- p. 46 (mid page) Blackmore says, "gradually it is possible to keep asking the question.... Am I conscious now? Yes, I am, keep it that way." Then, in the next section she asks, "What is this continuity?" What do you suppose it is, if anything?
- p. 47 She ends that section noting that her mind is "calm enough to really look into the simplest of simple questions." She then reports that she does. Would you say this a worthwhile approach to understanding "this continuity"? Does anything about her approach strike you as problematic? If so, what?
- p. 47 (near bottom) Blackmore asks, "When is this now?" Is that a sensible question?
- p. 47 She goes on to note, "The only way to find out is to look." Is she correct? She notes it is difficult. Do you suppose it is difficult because something else needed? If so, what? If not, then why is nothing else needed? And why is it so difficult?
- p. 47–8 Blackmore talks about "now" as well as a "present moment" that glides along marking "a boundary between the future and the past." Is the "present moment" the same as now? If not, how do they differ?

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p. 48 She notes that “there’s stuff,” but questions if it is “happening now.” She notes that everything that “happens” seems to be “spread out over time” and concludes that she “cannot find its now.” Why can’t she find “now”?

p. 48 What about the “present moment,” can we find that?

p. 48 (after break) Blackmore writes about creating “a now,” but then notes how her “now” eludes her. What do you suppose her problem is?

p. 49 Is it true that we cannot say when any particular thing happens? Does this mean that there is no now, as Blackmore would have it?

p. 49 (after the break) Any comments on Blackmore’s concluding observations and questions? Is saying “no” the same as “looking into the darkness”?

### 2. What was I conscious of a moment ago?

p. 50 Have you ever experienced what Susan Blackmore describes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶?

p. 50 How would you answer SB’s questions in the 3<sup>rd</sup> ¶?

p. 51 (top) SB asks, “So—was I conscious of [the cat’s purring] a moment ago or not? Surely there must be an answer, mustn’t there?” Is there? What would you say?

p. 54 (top) SB asks why she doesn’t know if she’s been watching her breath. Have you ever experienced this? Are you watching or not?

p. 54 In the 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ SB says, “Stop. Think.” Do you think this will help?

p. 54 SB ends the page asking, “What’s going on?” What would you say?

p. 55 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ SB asks, “Who then was conscious of them?” Is this a necessary question?

p. 55 SB ends the section saying, “Perhaps it will help to take one and analyze it carefully.” Do you think it will? Is there a danger? If so, what?

p. 56 Near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> ¶ SB writes, “So this was a memory—not the real thing.” What would be the “real thing”?

p. 56 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ Why is SB less able to tell the difference the harder she looks? Is it possible to be conscious of things *now*?

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- p. 56–7 After paying attention to her conscious experience of the bird’s song, SB asks, “When did the consciousness itself happen?” What would you say? Do you also find it difficult to answer? If so, why do you suppose that is?
- p. 57 1<sup>st</sup> ¶ after break: Why can’t they find “a special place where consciousness happens?” Why can’t they find “a special process uniquely correlated with conscious, as opposed to unconscious, events?” What justification is there for believing that there are any “unconscious events”?
- p. 58 before the break: SB writes, “This whole line of scientific research must be entirely misguided.” Would you agree? Why? If not, why?
- p. 58 1<sup>st</sup> ¶ after break: Any suggestions to help SB out of her dilemma? Do her musings in the following ¶ help? Can you see what her problem is?
- p. 59 SB says that she hasn’t a clue as to what she was conscious of a moment ago. Why do you suppose that is? Is there anything to know here? She goes on to ask, “If I don’t know who does?” Is a knower necessary? If so, why? If not, how might this affect her musings in the final ¶?

### 3. Who is asking the Question?

- p. 60 middle of 1<sup>st</sup> ¶ after the break: Susan Blackmore asks, “Now who is seeing all this? There is no escaping the flagstone. There it is. And there is no escaping the fact that I am looking from over here. There is perspective: a viewpoint.” Are there any unwarranted assumptions here?
- p. 61 SB notes at the top of the page that there “must be something here,” but that it eludes her every way. She asks, “Who is asking?” “Surely it must be possible to find out what is looking.” At the bottom of the page she asks, “After all, there are a lot of experiences right here and now, so there must be someone experiencing them, mustn’t there?” What is her problem?
- p. 62 1<sup>st</sup> ¶ SB notes that “if they are out there, and I am in here, then there must be a boundary, or edge, or divide, between them and me.” Is there such an edge? Does it help to reconsider what consciousness is? What is her problem?
- p. 63 before break: SB says, “I was looking for the me that was looking and I found only the world.” “I am, it seems, the world I see.” Have you ever noticed this? If so, is the “I” necessary in this take on experience? What does “I” refer to?
- p. 65 [top] SB repeatedly says, “I am that.” She finds this difficult when she considers other people. She then notes that, “It’s the same with everything I experience; there is not a separate me as well as the experience. It is hard to

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accept that I am all those people....” Is there a way to see everything from her newfound perspective without it being hard? If so, how?

- p. 65 It’s interesting she notes that “this way of looking makes it easier to be kind.” If so, why do you suppose that is?
- p. 65 [bottom] SB writes, “It is one step to see that the perceiving self is none other than the perceived world, but it is much harder to stare straight into this impossible, self-referential, daft question: Who is asking the question?” Is it? Hasn’t she already *seen* through the question? What is she hung up on?
- p. 67 [last ¶]: SB writes, “There are arms all right.” Are there? Reconsider the last 2 questions I just put to you. All three of these questions can be resolved at once.
- p. 68 [just before break]: SB ends ¶ with “Keep asking.” Isn’t there a point where there’s no point in asking anymore? If so, where is that point?

### 4. Where is this?

- p. 69 Susan Blackmore starts her inquiry by considering “what is right in front of me, here and now.” Is “what is right in front of me” the same as “here and now”? What about the location of “this yellow winter jasmine”? Is it same as “what is right in front of me”? Is it the same as “here and now”?
- p. 69 [before break]: SB notes that there are two “obvious” answers: “the flowers are out there in front of me where they seem to be, or they are inside my head.” Are these the only possibilities?
- pp. 69–70 SB asks if experiences are “in the brain that creates them.” Are there any assumptions here?
- p. 70 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶: SB writes, “I realize I have made some kind of object out of the flowers, as though it is independent of my experience.” Are there any assumptions here?
- p. 70 SB goes on to write: “But the question was ‘Where is this?’ and ‘this’ is my experience of the flowers.” Is it?
- p. 70 end of 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶: SB writes: “...the abstraction would not be ‘this.’ ‘This’ is my experience of the flowers right now. And the question is ‘Where is this?’” But is there any difference between what SB calls “the abstraction” and what she refers to as “this”? Is “this” really her experience of the flowers?

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- p. 71 SB notes there are problems with the idea that color is “out there” since it depends on what kind of eye is looking—“it” would not appear yellow to a bee, or a colorblind person, or a dog. So yellow is “in the head”? In other words, is it in the neural activity?
- p. 72 SB writes: “But is this neural activity the color itself? How can it be? One neuron firing is much like another.” “Where is the yellow in the yellow-firing cells?” At the bottom of the page SB then notes and asks: “It is not surprising that we have no satisfactory science of consciousness. The experience of yellow seems to be left out of our rapidly improving descriptions of how the brain works. Something is horribly wrong. But what?” Any ideas?
- p. 73 Paul Churchland argues “the redness of red simply *is* the patterns of firing within our brain” is equivalent to “light *is* electromagnetic waves.” Is this a valid argument? How about Daniel Dennett’s rejection of qualia? Can we dismiss the redness of red entirely and just treat it as the firing of neurons in the brain and nothing more? Are there any assumptions in these dismissals? Isn’t something turned around here?
- p. 73 bottom: After asking, “What is this greenness of green?” SB goes on as if this is a question in need of an answer: “It’s like. Um.” Can you see what her problem is? If so, can you see what Churchland and Dennett are ignoring?
- p. 74 top: SB writes, “...separating out those lovely yellow flowers from everything around. I lost ‘this’ altogether. ‘This’ is the whole thing; the whole experience; this.” What do you suppose she’s getting at?
- p. 76 last ¶: SB writes, “Where is this? This? I realize I have no idea what I am talking about. For I omitted to ask the simplest question at the beginning. Which ‘this’ am I supposed to be asking about? There’s ‘this,’ and now there’s ‘this.’” Does her additional question change anything? Does it eliminate the original question?

### 5. How does thought arise?

- p. 80 “Is there an essential difference between abiding in tranquility and moving in thought?” How would you answer?

### 6. There is no time. What is memory?

- p. 94 Just before the break Susan Blackmore writes, “You can’t have movement without time. The movement of the clouds only makes sense in time. The koan is wrong. There is time.” Is she right? What justification might there be for saying there is no time?

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- p. 94 After the break SB writes, “How can I tell the clouds have moved...? Because from one moment to the next I can *remember* what came before.” If this is the case, is there an essential difference between time and memory? If so, what is that difference? In what manner does time appear? How about memory?
- p. 101 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ after break: SB writes, “The world we think we see or hear—is always a memory.” Do you agree?
- pp. 101–2 SB writes, “I can’t see what anything is like, even though it’s right in front of me. So I feel as though I can’t see at all.” What is her problem?
- p. 103 top: SB asks, “What is this? ...I have no idea anymore. I want him to tell me.... He would not, or could not.” Why doesn’t he tell her? Could it be because he doesn’t know either?
- p. 104 SB writes, “Past and future can be held in mind as equivalent. What then comes between them?” She notes that ‘now’ is supposed to come between them, but it can’t be found. What would you say?
- p. 104 before break: SB notes that “The question ‘What is memory?’ turns out to be the same question as ‘What is this?’” Do you agree?
- p. 105 SB asks, “So what is mindfulness?” I know it’s different from not being mindful. But how?” How would you answer?

### 7. When Are You?

- p. 108 top: Susan Blackmore writes: “I see myself at home in the kitchen. When was that?” She then analyzes what the question must be referring to, musing that “they come, they take their time and they go” and notes that the times in which events occur can’t be pinned down. She then concludes: “‘When’ is very confusing. I must just keep at it.” Is there a disconnect between her observation that the various times cannot be pinned down and her insistence to “just keep at it”? If so, what does that imply regarding her question, “When?”
- p. 111 middle: SB writes: “There’s nothing it’s ever like to be anything,” noting that the science of consciousness is all about ‘What it’s like to be’ something. Does ‘What it’s like to be’ make any sense? If not, what about her original question: “When are you?” (Remember she’s focused on the word **are** at this point.)

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- p. 115 SB notes that the question can apply to anything, not just to her. In the 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ after the break she notes that the loud shriek of the bird “was suddenly there; it lasted for a while,” or so she later remembered it, “and then it was gone.... ...but when was it?” Have you ever noticed this? That you can’t capture it while it’s happening, nor after it has happened?
- p. 116 Read SB’s musings on this page. See if you can note that there is no time, no “when.” Note that confusion only comes whenever there is an assumption of substance. At the bottom of the page SB notes that, “There is just this stuff springing up out of no-place and no-time, with no continuous someone to whom it appears. So what is this stuff and where is it coming from?” On the next page she says, “I can’t imagine what it is,” “I have no idea where it comes from.” In view of all she said on the previous page, can you give her a hint?
- p. 117 bottom: SB writes that, “The whole idea [of jumping, I presume] was misguided.” If so, what’s misguided about it?
8. Are you here now?
- p. 122 top: Susan Blackmore writes that for Dennett “neither the show nor the audience can be found in the brain and the brain is the only real place there is to look for them.” Is the brain the only place to look? Considering that the brain is directly experienced as a mental object, might it not be possible to consider that the brain is part of the “show” and not the other way around?
- p. 123 top line: SB asks, “...where are they all coming from and going to?” Does this question make sense if “they” are mental objects?
- p. 123 3<sup>rd</sup> ¶: SB asks, “What is pressed up against all this? Emptiness of course. It is this space in which there is no existence, this whatever-it-is out of which everything comes which seems also to be me.” Is it possible for Emptiness to be pressed up against anything? Can there be space without existence? Is it possible for anything to come out of anything? And can any of this be “me”?
- p. 124 top: SB asks, “Is this empty, black, alive and limitless self who is pressed up against the world a pristine knowing?” What would you say?
- p. 126 top: SB says that she “can apply the same strategy with thoughts as I did...with perceptions.” Do you agree? If so, what does this imply?
- p. 126 Just before the break SB notes that, “The first step...is to see that I am the thoughts.” Is this right? (Consider the claim by William James on the next page that “thought is itself the thinker.” What is James getting at?)



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- p. 126 After the break SB recalls the instruction to remain in non-elaboration. Why do you suppose this instruction was given?
- p. 127 In the middle of the page SB notes that she has always treated thoughts as a problem or something to be dealt with. Have you ever experienced this in your meditation? But now, she says, “instead of either fighting or watching them, I am simply to *be* them.” Does this make sense?
- p. 127 2<sup>nd</sup> to last ¶: Is “I am both thought and thinker,” and “remaining in the experience of non-elaboration” the same thing, as SB seems to imply?
- p. 129 Does accepting “that this new experience is me” [just before break] deal with the “troublesome ideas” mentioned in the ¶ above? [I’m referring to the idea of “the self who is conscious” and the idea “that things can be either in or out of consciousness.”]
- p. 130 mid page: SB notes that “now” is a construction, conflating it with “present moment,” and then goes on to note that “there was another you listening to the birds.” Is this consistent with her other observations immediately preceding this point?
- p. 131 SB asks: “What then of the ‘awareness of awareness’? I can make no sense of this.” Can you?
- p. 131 She then asks, “Where do they all come from?” Does this make sense?
- p. 132 before break: SB: “There is no ‘right now’ unless I make one up.” Is she right?
- p. 133 top: SB writes, “I know that I think a lot and that this is frowned upon in traditional Zen.” Why do you suppose that is? Is there another kind of Zen where it is not frowned upon?
- p. 133 SB goes on to write: “The real test is whether the view at the end of the process is clearer than the view at the start.” Is she right? She goes on to note “it cannot matter whether it was an intellectual scaffolding or some other kind.” Is she right?
- p. 133 after the break: Have you ever experienced what SB describes while driving her car? If so, wouldn’t the question she brings up in the last ¶ on page 134 be a flat-earth question? In other words, wouldn’t “no” be as beside the point as “yes”?
9. What am I doing?

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- p. 135 after break: Susan Blackmore writes, “This body has been sitting here a long time. But does that really count as me doing it?” What do you think?

Just before break on page 137, SB asks, “Did I [clap] of my own free will?” On page 140, mid-page, she asks, “So where do I come into this? It’s all bound up with me. For me to have free will means that I do something of my own accord.” Could this be her problem? What do you think?

On page, 141, top, SB muses that, “Maybe it makes sense to say that my body is [sitting up straight]; but am ‘I’ doing it?” She then analyzes giving birth to her first child noting that (at bottom of p. 141), “I was doing the hardest physical work I had ever done in my life, and yet I was not willing it. The labor was willing itself. Doing, and yet not doing.” And on page 143, just after the break, she asks, “Do I have free will?” Can you see how accounting for a self in this picture would make it impossible to see what’s going on?

- p. 144, SB gives a vivid description of her thoughts and reactions in having to deal with a man and his intruding radio while on the beach. Notice how it all changes when, on page 145, she observes “this perfectly sensible response was not coming from a little thing inside called ‘me’....” Unfortunately, she goes on to assume “it came from somewhere.” This is not necessary, but she also notices “with a certain horror that by relinquishing myself to the world...I have given up all personal responsibility.” Is there a way out of her dilemma?
- p. 146, bottom: SB asks Reb Anderson, “What do I do about responsibility?” Reb said, “You *take* responsibility.” What do you think about that? Note that on the next page SB has trouble with this. She asks, “Who takes responsibility? Isn’t ‘taking responsibility’ doing something? Isn’t [it] an act of will?” SB goes on to settle much of this for her self on pp. 147–8, but consider how she arrived at her “decision” to go to the “prestigious conference,” described on page 148. Any comments?
- p. 148, last ¶, SB describes what she means by “taking responsibility.” Would you say that she has resolved her problem?
- p. 149, in the footnote, Reb said he would probably now say “accept responsibility.” Does this change anything?

### 10. What happens next?

- p. 152, end of 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶, Susan Blackmore writes, “Someone was listening to all that too.” What would you say to that? Who is that “someone”?

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- p. 153 mid page, SB writes, “I realize that when I look I’m thinking in terms of a continuous me...” but then later adds: “But this is wrong.” Is it, given the context?
- p. 153, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> ¶ SB repeats the phrase, “someone, not me,” and then begins the final ¶ with “Yet something is still wrong.” What’s her problem? SB gives an answer, “I’m still imagining a central me who is doing this,” but then she adds (next page), “Perhaps I could do without her. But if so, where would I look from?” So, again, what’s her problem?
- p. 154, 2<sup>nd</sup> ¶ after break: SB writes, “By trying so hard I am invoking that very sense of a self that I am trying to do without. But if I don’t try I’ll never find out.” Is she correct? Why, or why not?
- p. 155 Consider for discussion the contrast between the last 2 ¶s.
- p. 156, mid page, SB notes “what seems to be me just arises along with whatever is being experienced....” So she throws away the idea of continuity of self, calling it “scary.” Is it scary? If so, why do you suppose that is?
- p. 157, 3<sup>rd</sup> ¶ after break: SB asks, “What is continuing?” She speculates, but is any of it convincing? Is any of it necessary? At the turn of the page she observes that “stuff will keep coming out of nothing, or not. Indeed, perhaps those two are one and the same.” Is she correct? What comes out of what? Can anything come out of nothing, or not come out of nothing?
- p. 158, after break, SB notes that there never was a continuous I, but then she goes on to say that “Experiences and their experiencers will arise wherever and whenever there is a body capable of sensing things and a brain capable of analyzing them....” Can you defend her claim? Isn’t something else needed to validate such a claim?

### Being conscious

- p. 160, top, SB writes that “Consciousness is an illusion.” Is it?