An Internet Koan

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I just found a really strange website where a guy claims Zen is a scam and that he's figured out how to solve any koan. He even provides a "Free Zen Riddle and Koan Service" through which you can email him a koan and receive an answer. There are even e-books, one on how to solve Zen riddles and another two which collect them. Here's an example of how he solves one.

Q: Pick up a stone from 10000m deep in the ocean with dry hands.
A: dive in water and get it
(Explanation: How else can you pick a stone out of the water?)

The whole website is weirdly formatted and full of such delightful nonsense, as well as comics that all look like ironic memes because the guy used comic sans and paint to replace the original dialogue. The earnest, cocksure way in which he's approached the ridiculous business of everything from collecting riddles to warning people against the dangers of taking them seriously is altogether profoundly charming. It made me feel like the entire site was itself one big koan and reminded me of a middle aged 'joke collector' I met on the bus.

The joke collector said he's been collecting "why did the chicken cross the road?" jokes and "waiter, waiter!" jokes for years, and wants to have his collection published. He told me a few ("Waiter, waiter!

There's a fly in my soup!" "Don't worry, the spider in your bread will get it.") but none were much good. I told him the story of how he does the collecting might be more interesting than the jokes themselves, and asked how he does his research. He told me his trade secret: "I find them on the Internet."

Things don't grow old on the Internet in the same way they do outside of it. Change happens here so fast that old things inevitably become new by ways of some temporal exoticism that goes beyond nostalgia and is fundamentally different from the way the past becomes filled with spiritually modern people in historical present tense upon looking back. The impression we get is that the radical changes of the hundred years past were technological in nature; people lived differently, but nonetheless lived as we do. We feel that we could have lived no differently had we been born there and then. Even the political arrangements seem to have changed through innovations which were technocratic in nature, technological in application.

The impression we get from looking at such archaeological sites as this is rather different: those who built this place seem like beings from another world, who once inhabited the same world as us, right here on the Internet. They used the same tools and engaged with the same environment with laws of physics the same as ours, but lived fundamentally different lives. Yet the website is from 2010, just six years ago. Only its author is old. The reality is that it is our age which is truly characterized by life-altering technological change. The rushing blur of its futurist landscapes move so fast that time isolates those slow to adapt to change itself into separate niches from those less prone to motion sickness. It becomes clear that those from another time are also from another world; a metaphorical experience of the space-time continuum.

The generational gaps in the 21st Century are nothing like that of the 20th Century. On the Internet, generations turn over every few years, newbies raised by oldbies like lost children, bigguns passing down knowledge onto littluns. With tectonic shifts happening this fast, the uncanny valley is never far behind; one must keep up the pace or be swallowed up by the the chasm and become an alien in what was once his world, too. Behind the looking glass, the world is constantly moving beneath our feet. "Now, here, you see, it takes all the running you can do, to keep in the same place. If you want to get somewhere else, you must run at least twice as fast as that!"

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