

Ask Yourself the Buddha's Question

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Take a couple of good, long, deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing inside. And try to keep your attention there with those feelings of the in-breath and the out-breath. If it helps, you can use a meditation word to go along with it. *Buddho* is a common one. It means “awake.” You think *bud-* with the in-breath and *dho* with the out. Or you can count the breaths one through 10, then one through nine, one through eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, zero. And if at the end of the counting, you're with the breath and things are solid, okay, you can drop the counting. If not, start at 10 again.

And ask yourself questions about the breath. That way, you can drop the meditation word and drop the counting more quickly. How does the breath feel? Is this the kind of breath you could stay with? If not, try changing it. Make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, more narrow, more broad. Experiment for a while and see what feels best—or at least what feels good enough to stick with.

This process of questioning yourself about the breath is very important. It's what helps you to settle down and gets you interested in the breath. You begin to realize that the way you breathe has an impact on how you feel the whole body. Where there's a sense of ease in the breath, you can think of it spreading around throughout the body so that it becomes even more pleasant to stay here. At the same time, you're exercising a really important function in the mind, this ability to pose questions and then look for yourself to get the answers.

This part of concentration is called directed thought and evaluation. The Pali terms are *vitakka* and *vicāra*, and they basically constitute your mind's conversation with itself. You want to train them so that they engage in an interesting conversation—a useful conversation. Of course, a lot of every conversation lies in the questions you ask. They're actually what directs the conversation.

This is one of the examples that the Buddha set in his own quest for awakening. When you read his accounts, you see that he often says, “I'm doing this and I'm not getting the results I want. Why don't I do something else?” So he tries something else, and he sticks with it, in some cases for a very long time—at least long enough to get a sense of what the results are. And then he asks himself, “Okay, are these the results I want? If not, let's change what I'm doing.” And it was through trial and error like this, through experimenting, through questions

and then acting, then examining the results of the actions: That's how he gained awakening.

That's how we can gain awakening, too. In the very beginning, this is how we gain concentration. It's not just a matter of forcing the mind down, sticking its head under water. You're going to stay here with a sense of ease and well-being so that the mind is happy to stay here. If it's not comfortable with the breath, not interested, it's like a child being forced to stay in the house. You lock the windows, you lock the doors, and still it's going to find some way to get out. But if you give the child something to play with, something interesting, give it a sense of warmth and well-being in the house, then you can open the doors, open the windows, and the child's not going to run away. It's happy to be there.

And it's the same with the mind. Learn how to develop an interest in the breath. After all, it is *your* breath. It's the force of life that keeps you with the body, keeps the mind and the body together. And if the breath is good, it's nourishing. If the breath energies flowing through the nervous system and circulatory system are good, that's going to have a good impact on the health of the body. When the body feels healthy and strong, the mind is going to find it easier to stay here. So take an interest in this and develop the ability to ask questions not only about your meditation, but also about the rest of your life.

When the Buddha was teaching his son, Rahula, the very beginning of the practice, he said basically, when you do something, what do you expect to get as a result? And then when you're doing it, ask yourself, one, "Are they the results I expected?" And two, "Are they the results I want?" If not, you go talk it over with someone else who's more experienced on the path. Then go back and try something else. When the Buddha's giving instructions on meditation, he asks you to find a perception—in other words, a mental label—that allows you to settle down and then you stick with it for a while until you can settle in. Then you ask yourself, "Is this good enough? Is there still some disturbance here? What am I doing that's disturbing the stillness? How can I stop that and let the mind settle down even more deeply?"

All of this is a process of questioning, asking yourself, "What are my actions? What am I doing right now? What are the results? Are they the results I want and if not, what can I do to get the results I want?" When you break the problems of real life down in this way, it's the most effective way of taking some pretty large problems and reducing them to little pieces that you can actually deal with. If your question is "What's wrong with me?" well, who is this "me" that you're talking about? Remember, the Buddha said that thinking in terms of what you *are* is not all that helpful. But if you think in terms of "What am I doing?" then you

can focus on the actual causes of your problems. Your sense of “you” is too large and vague to tackle. But an action, a thought, a word, a deed: Those are things you can look at. You can break them down—and you can change them.

So follow the Buddha’s example. And working with the breath is a really good example to start with. The breath is close to your awareness, and it’s what the Buddha calls a bodily fabrication. In other words, it’s something that you can intentionally make changes in that have an effect on the body. There are also verbal fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions—in other words, the labels you apply to things. That’s another area where you can question yourself: “This label I have of the breath here, my mental image of the breath: Is it helpful?” You read Ajaan Lee and he talks about the breath energy going down through the nerves. What does that mean? Well, watch the sensations of your body. Open your mind to the possibility the breath could be moving through all the parts of the body. This is why we have Dhamma instructions: to open your mind to possibilities you might not have thought of before.

That’s what’s really special about the Buddha, not only that he was trying very carefully to make his actions more skillful, but that he was also very demanding in what he was going to accept as a desirable result, a result that he could be content with. Sometimes we hear about meditation as being all about accepting, accepting, accepting. Well, the things you want to accept are the facts that you are acting, and your actions are having an impact on your experience. But as the Buddha said, you don’t content yourself with your actions unless you’ve found the ultimate happiness.

This is what’s special about him. His imagination was large enough to encompass the idea that there’s an ultimate happiness that’s not conditioned, that doesn’t have to depend on your actions. Your actions can get you there, in the same way that the road to the Grand Canyon doesn’t cause the Grand Canyon to be, but following the road does get you there. And then when you get there, it’s larger than you could have anticipated.

So don’t let any limits on your imagination limit the possibilities of what you can do. Allow yourself to open your mind a little bit wider. Think like the Buddha. Then ultimate happiness is possible, and it’s something you can do. You can follow the path of action by looking at your actions. Ask yourself, “Okay, what are the results I’m getting here? Are they satisfactory?” If not, go back and change what you’re doing. Remember Einstein’s definition of insanity: doing the same thing over and over again, expecting different results. We want to be sane, so we have to figure out where to change our actions so that we can get the results we want.

If you don't like the results of your actions, that's perfectly fine. That's a kind of discontent that the Buddha actually encouraged. But don't stop there and give up. And don't make the mistake of asking, "What's wrong with me?" Instead, ask yourself, "Where am I acting in a way that's not skillful? And how can I change that?" Those are the questions that can take you far.