

## *Questions in the Practice*

*Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

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Stop and ask yourself: What kinds of questions are you bringing to the practice? It's like asking yourself the shape of your ignorance, because the shape of your ignorance is going to determine what you accept as a satisfactory answer.

This is why the Buddha was very specific about which types of questions are worth asking and which kinds aren't. They really shape the way you act, the way you look at the results of your actions, and the way you decide which results are acceptable and satisfactory. He recommended that the best questions to bring to the practice revolve around questions of skill: What are you doing right now that's skillful? What are you doing right now that's not?

These questions have lots of ramifications. They mean that your actions are important. Your actions shape the world you live in. Even though we may be sitting in the same room here, each of us is living in a different world of experience. Our feelings, our thoughts, our sense perceptions make up this world, and they're very different from person to person. Your actions really do shape this world; actions from the past and actions from the present are combining right now to shape what you experience. So that's why the Buddha said it's important to focus on your actions, what you're doing right now.

Asking the question of skill adds another dimension as well. When you realize that you can develop more skillful ways of acting, more skillful ways of speaking, more skillful ways of thinking, you can work at mastering the processes of action so that they'll have a positive impact on the shape of your life, the shape of your experience.

Where does skill come from? Skill comes from being alert. Mindful. Inquisitive. These are all the qualities you want to develop in your practice.

We start with the breath as our basic focus as a way of developing very basic mindfulness, very basic alertness, and also to pull our basic mindfulness and alertness close to the mind itself. All too often we're sensitive to things happening miles away but miss what we're doing, what we ourselves are doing, right here and now. The mind has an amazing tendency to hide itself from itself, particularly around the area of intention. What are you doing right now? Why are you doing it? When you bring your attention to the breath, these things become clearer because these intentions appear right next to the breath.

So focusing on the breath is not simply a beginning exercise that you drop later for other things. It's bringing the mind to the point where it should be: right here in the present, right where the body and the mind meet.

The immediate question is: Are you skillful in staying with the breath? What's the most skillful way of focusing on the breath and maintaining that focus? Part of this has to do with the way you focus: where you put your attention, how much pressure you apply. But it also has to do with the question of how you are breathing. You really do have the freedom to breathe in many different ways, you know. Take advantage of that freedom, take advantage of that potential for adjusting your experience of the present moment. Choose to breathe in more comfortable ways. It's amazing how much a simple change in the way you breathe can put a whole new cast on things.

So we work with this. We work with this object that's right in front of us. It's our basic exercise in beginning to answer that question about skill and lack of skill. As you work with the breath, you begin to get more sensitive to the mind as well. You begin to see which qualities of the mind are helpful in breathing skillfully and which are not.

You then try to apply the same approach to the rest of your life. Try to bring to your whole life the same qualities of interest, attention, alertness, mindfulness, and inquisitiveness that you would bring to the meditation. You'll start seeing that this question — "What's the most skillful way to do this?" — is a really good question to ask in all areas of your life. In whatever situation you're in, this question reminds you of your potential to make a difference. It also helps you to see where your old habits are not really helpful to yourself or the people around you.

This question itself can really make a difference in life. There are so many questions out there that make no difference at all. There's a long list in the Canon: "Is the world eternal or is it not eternal? Is the world finite or infinite? Is the soul the same thing as the body or is it something else? What happens to the people who attain the goal after death? Do they exist or not?" These questions don't get you anywhere at all. Regardless of how you answer them, they don't really make a difference in how you conduct your life. In addition to not getting you anywhere, if you spend time pursuing them that's unskillful karma right there: wasting valuable time.

The questions that the Buddha recommends focus on the Four Noble Truths, which are simply an extension of the questions on skill and lack of skill. In other words when you start asking the question of skill, it implies cause and effect: actions have results. It also implies that some actions are preferable to others because they give better results. Once you've got these variables you've got the framework for the Four Noble Truths: cause and effect, desirable and

undesirable. Craving is an unskillful cause that gives rise to an undesirable result, which is suffering. The path of practice is a skillful cause that gives rise to a desirable effect: the end of suffering.

The questions that revolve around these areas are the ones worth asking, the ones you should bring to your practice. As for the other questions, you can put them aside. Once you deal with the problem—“Why is it the mind is causing itself suffering? Can it learn ways not to cause itself suffering?”: Once you really explore those questions and come to the answers, then you can look at all those other questions that you put aside. You’ll see that either they get answered in the course of your practice or they weren’t really important questions at all.

So try to be really clear about what the really important issues in your life are, what the important questions are. This will have a shaping influence on how the whole rest of your practice goes. If you ask the right questions, they can take you all the way to Awakening, to the end of suffering. And what could be better than that?