

Questioning Everything

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One of the important benefits of concentration practice is that it allows you to question everything that comes in your mind. As you're focusing on the breath, the only thoughts that are really relevant are the ones that help you stay focused on the breath, the thoughts that ask questions about:

How is this breath?

What's going on with that breath?

How's the mind right now?

Is it staying with the breath?

What do I need to do in order to help it stay more solidly?

If you find a train of thought that helps you stay with the breath, okay, fine.

Everything else you can question.

And that's a real luxury. We go through our lives with a lot of thoughts that we never really question. They're part of our culture. They seem to be the air that we breathe.

And some we're actually afraid to question: things we've been taught by our parents, by our teachers, by the media, by our friends: "If you want to be a good person you have to believe this. If you want to get along with us you've got to believe that."

And a lot of these ideas get accepted without question.

So it's good to be able to get away. As you sit here, no one's asking you to believe anything aside from the fact that it's going to be good to stay right here, right now.

A thought comes in saying, "I've got to do this, I've got to plan for that." Well, no you don't. And something in the mind says, "Well, it's irresponsible not to do that." Well, okay, I'm irresponsible. What's wrong with that?

It's a thought that we're often afraid to think but it's good to be irresponsible for a while so that the mind can have a chance to be on its own, to look at what's actually right here, right now, and to come to its own conclusions as to what's really good and what's not, what's worthwhile and what's not.

I remember when I first went to meditate in Thailand. At three a.m. in the morning I'd hear the bombers going overhead on their way to Cambodia. I began to wonder, "What I am doing here sitting on this mountaintop meditating? Nobody else is benefitting from this. I should be out there doing something to help those people who are being harmed."

I mentioned this to Ajaan Fuang and he said, “Well, watch out. How much goodness is your mind capable of before it breaks? And those ideas of going out and helping other people: What are they hiding?”

Because this is the good part of questioning these things: When you question a particular attitude and it falls away, you see what’s hiding behind it: the part that resists the questioning. Sometimes it may be a genuinely good intention but sometimes it may be hiding something else. You never know unless you get to question it.

So for the time being as you’re meditating here, everything that comes in the mind, say, “I don’t know.” Put a question mark after it, “I don’t know.” Put a question mark after it. Let it go, let it go.

And see what you’ve got left. Only then can the mind be solid enough to make its own decisions. And it’s free from carrying around the attitudes you picked up, as I said, because you were afraid *not* to pick them up at some point in your life, and they just became part of the permanent mental furniture.

So here’s the freedom that comes from letting yourself question everything that comes in, “I like this.” Do you really? “I’m afraid of that.” Are you really? You don’t have to decide right now. Just let it go, let it go.

Just hold onto the breath, because the breath is totally neutral. It’s the energy that keeps you alive. And it stands to good reason that if the energy’s in good shape, your body and mind will be in good shape as well. When the mind is in good shape, then it can start deciding for itself what it wants to act on and what it doesn’t. And it’s coming from a different place. A wiser and more solid place.

In primitive cultures they have young people go off at some point into the wilderness as a rite of passage. The customs around that rite of passage vary from culture to culture, but it’s an important point in each person’s life: to get out from the family and be alone for a while to see what comes up in your own mind of its own accord.

And meditation is a really good way of doing that. We lack those rites of passage in our own society, it’d be good if we had more of them. But the meditation is an especially good one to adopt, because it doesn’t have you trust everything that comes up immediately in your mind. In some societies you gain your totem animal by whatever first comes up in your mind. But meditation takes a longer view. Things come up and you question them. They seem to be good—you still question them. You don’t trust every insight that pops into your mind.

Think about Ajaan Mun who basically had to rediscover a lot of the skills of meditation because so much of the living tradition of how to go through the steps of meditation, how to ensure that you didn’t fall for visions or for false insights: A

lot of the living tradition had died away and he had to rediscover it.

And the way he did it was that whatever came up—and he tended to have a lot of visions in his meditation and it's very easy when you have a vision, especially if it involves a deva or some special being, to want to believe it—he realized that he couldn't believe everything that popped into his head.

So he'd put things to the test. If something seemed reasonable, seemed right, he'd try it out. He'd act on it, taking it as a working assumption to see what would happen. If it didn't work out, he had to be clear about the fact that it didn't. What may have seemed like a great insight was just a passing fabrication. He had to let it go.

But in order to be able to pass judgment on things, he had to develop really strong powers of concentration and a very unflinching attitude: the ability to stay away from distractions, to stay away from all the hooks that tend to catch the mind. Because we're hooked by so many ideas. You have to learn how to be skeptical about your beliefs.

One of the qualities that surprised me about Ajaan Fuang was how skeptical he was—about a lot of things, about a lot of customs in Thai society, beliefs in Thai society. It was because he'd been out in the forest and he'd had the opportunity to question these things. But the important points wasn't so much that he was questioning things outside, he also learned how to question things inside. If you can't be skeptical of things outside, how are you going to be skeptical of your own things inside?

You can't believe everything that comes into your head. No matter how good it seems, no matter how righteous or noble or insightful or whatever it seems, you've got to put it to the test. And before you can put it to the test you've got to get the mind into a really solid, neutral position.

Which is what the concentration is all about. You're with the breath, which is neutral territory, and you're able to watch things. This is mindfulness combined with alertness. You watch things all the way from doing something to the results of what you've done.

We often think of mindfulness simply as being fully aware of the present moment but it actually means the ability to keep something in mind. As the Buddha defined it, it's the ability to remember things that were said or done long ago—and in particular, things that *you* said and did long ago. This is so that when the results come, you can recognize, "Oh, this is connected to that. This happened because of this action I took. I said that, now my mind is a mess. I said that a couple of hours ago but my mind is a mess now." Or, "I did that a while back and now my mind's in good shape."

If you can't see these connections, you don't really have true insight. The insight lies in seeing cause and effect. After all, when the Buddha summarized the insight of his awakening, he boiled it down to a causal principle, the ability to see the connections: When one thing arises it causes something else to arise, either right now or down the line. When it passes away it causes the other thing to pass away, either right now or down the line, sometimes both.

That was it, a causal principle. When he wanted to convey in the briefest terms what was most useful to know about his awakening, that was what he would talk about: causal relationships. Because it's in seeing the causal connections that you begin to realize, "Okay, my craving, my clinging right now are causing this suffering. If I stop the craving and clinging, the suffering stops."

That was the lesson he wanted each of us to learn and to observe for ourselves. That's the real gift of the Dhamma: not so much teaching the Dhamma but getting people to look inside themselves so that they can see that the actual Dhamma arising and passing away. And particularly seeing the connections, the Dhamma-ness of the causality that goes on in the mind. And then using that knowledge to put an end to suffering.

We suffer because we lack skill. And our lack of skill is something nobody else can undo for us. They can help point things out, they can help make recommendations, they can give examples, but the actual acquisition of a skill is something each of us has to do for him or herself alone.

Which is why no one person can awaken another person. They can say something that might spark an insight, but then it's up to the listener to decide what to do with the insight. And here again, you can use insights skillfully or you can use them unskillfully if you don't see the connection between your actions and the results.

So that's where the real discovery lies, in being able to drop your presuppositions about what's going on so that you can really look. That means questioning, questioning, questioning everything. When you find some likely answers, you try them out. And only when you see for yourself, "Okay, this answer really does lead to that result, and it's a good result": Then you've learned some good, pragmatic truths.

Then try to refine them over time, testing them again and again from this position of real solidity. If you simply questioned everything without having a good solid foundation, you'd get tied up in knots to the point where you couldn't do anything. But if you've got the solid foundation where you can trust your observations then you replace your ignorance with knowledge because you're in a good position to observe things and you're mindful enough to see the connection

between cause and effect.

That's why we work on developing powers of mindfulness and alertness and concentration as a basis for the discernment that really puts an end to suffering.

You even question the process of questioning because you begin to realize that some questions are worth asking and some are not. Again, you're learning to see everything in terms of cause and effect. And you're learning to see every insight in terms of what it does, what caused it, and what results it leads to.

When you see things in those terms, that's when you overcome the ignorance that leads to suffering. And you've developed the knowledge that leads to suffering's end.