

## *Two Kinds of Cross-Questioning*

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When we meditate, we follow a technique. We focus on the breath, learn to be sensitive to when it's long, when it's short, and how it feels when it's long and it's short, to see which feels better. Then you can try working with deep and shallow, heavy or light, focusing the breath energy in different parts of the body. There's lots to play with here. But even though we have a technique, we're not trying to force the mind into a mold. And we're not trying to force it into believing certain things. As the Buddha said, the cure for doubt is not just force of belief, it's learning how to ask the right questions. The technique is basically guidance on how to give focus to the right questions.

For example, when the Buddha says to train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, how do you do that? You explore. You experiment. When he says to train yourself to calm bodily fabrication, which is the breath coming in and out, how do you do that so that it's comfortable and you're not just clamping down or starving yourself of breath energy?

So even in the instructions there are questions. But they're a session of guided questions on how to start exploring what's going on in your mind. We get the mind to settle down not so that it can simply be still, but also to learn.

The learning process requires two kinds of questions. One is learning the basic principles. The other is seeing what's actually going on, what you're actually doing. You can see this in the way the Buddha recommends different ways of using what he calls the principle of cross-questioning.

Sometimes a person would ask him a question and he could see from the way the question was asked that the person was not going to understand the answer without some explanation. So his way of providing explanation was to give an analogy. For example, a man came to him one time and said, "Why is it that when you teach, some people gain awakening and other people don't?" The implication being that maybe there was something wrong with the way he taught. The Buddha turned around and asked, "Have you given directions for someone to go from here to Rajagaha?" First he asked what the directions were, and the man gave the directions. Then the Buddha said, "Does everybody who hears these directions get there?" The man said, "Well, no. Some of them follow the directions but other people don't follow the directions. They end up someplace off in the west." And the Buddha said, "It's just like that when I teach. Some people actually follow the

instructions and they get to awakening. Other people don't follow the instructions, and they go off someplace else."

So by questioning the man about how he gave directions, the Buddha provided the man with a good framework for understanding his answer. There is a path and the Buddha is the person who points it out, but we're the ones who have to follow it.

This relates directly to the other aspect of cross-questioning: He wants you to cross-question yourself. Your actions really do make a difference: That's pretty much the sum total of what the Buddha is asking you to believe. Once you've got that basic principle down, then you should want to act in a skillful way. The next issue is, what are you actually doing? What kind of actions are you engaging in? What's the motivation behind the action? What are the results you are getting from the action?

This is a different kind of investigation. The first one is an investigation to get to understanding. This one is to get more alertness and sensitivity. This is where you really do cut through the doubt. Establishing the basic principles just gives you a framework, some working hypotheses. But as the mind begins to settle down, you want to understand how you got it to settle down. When the mind is not settling down, you want to ask: "What's going on here? What am I doing that's getting in the way of its settling down?"

In some cases, it's simply the fact that you're carrying a lot of thoughts and memories from where you were yesterday, where you were last night, what you were doing yesterday, what you were doing last night. In cases like that, you have to simply tell yourself: "That kind of thinking is not going to help in the meditation right now." Thoughts may come up but you don't have to engage them. You don't have to, as they say in Thai, weave them any further. Just leave them as loose ends. You don't have to make a nice little basket of each thought before you put it aside. You don't have to finish off the narrative. Just leave the ends dangling for the time being. You've got other work to do right now.

Or if you're upset because your meditation is not going as well today as it went yesterday, remember that yesterday is not the topic of the meditation. If you see that you're constantly thinking about yesterday's meditation—how good it was, how much better it was than today's—remember the story of the man who sold Chinese dumplings. Where we were in Thailand, there'd be these people who'd come driving down the road every now and then, with a little loudspeaker on top of their trucks, announcing what they were selling. There were the people who sold salt. There were the people who sold huge water jars. The ones who were

selling salt and water jars didn't engage in much advertising. They just called out, "salt, salt," or, "water jars, ma'am, water jars."

But the man who sold dumplings was a little bit special. You'd hear him coming over the rise, and he would always say: "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." And the next day, or two or three days later when he came back: "Today's dumplings are better than yesterday's." It got you thinking: When was he going to reach the Platonic ideal of Chinese dumplings? But as someone pointed out to me one day, exactly where are yesterday's dumplings right now? If they haven't already gone into the cesspool, they're on their way. So, whatever the guy was going to sell today was sure to be better than yesterday's dumplings.

The same principle applies to yesterday's meditation. No matter how good it was, it's not nearly as good as today's meditation, because this is what you're doing right now. Yesterday's meditation is now just a memory. We're not here to pay attention to memories. We're here to pay attention to what we're doing right now. How are you focusing on the breath? How it's working? If it's not working, what can you do to make it work better?

The same principle of looking at your actions applies all throughout the practice. In fact, the Buddha has you start out with your thoughts, your words, and your deeds on a very everyday level. These were the instructions he gave to his son Rahula when Rahula was seven years old. Before you do something, ask yourself: "What's the motivation? What do I expect to come about as the result of this action?" If you expect harm, don't do it. If you don't expect harm, go ahead and give it a try. While you're doing it, look at the results that you're actually getting. If you see that you're not getting good results—you are harming yourself, or harming other people—stop. If there's no harm being done, continue with what you're doing.

If, after you've done with the action, you reflect on the results of that action and realize that it actually did cause harm even though you didn't expect it, and you didn't see any harm while you were doing it, then you resolve not to repeat the action.

This is a different kind of cross-questioning. You're not trying to establish a general principle. You're trying to figure out: "What am I doing right now?" so that you can judge it against the principle of whether it's skillful or not. The judging here is important. It's not the final judgment of a judge trying to decide whether to send you to jail. It's the on-going judgment of a craftsman, like a carpenter working on something on his carpenter table. He's sitting on his bench, working, say, on a chair, and he realizes that he has just shaved the wood a little bit too far. What is he going to do? How does he compensate for the mistake he

made? That kind of judgment is necessary, because you've got a work in progress and you're trying to make it as useful and as good as you can, so that your next action will be a skillful action even when you've made mistakes.

Or like a pianist sitting on her bench. She's playing along, she realizes she's just done a little something unexpected with the volume, or unexpected with the tempo, or phrased a phrase in a way that she hadn't expected to. Now the question is: Is that something with potential that she wants to weave into the remainder of the performance, or is it something she's got to compensate for?

You're judging a work in progress so that the next time around you can do the most skillful thing. In this way, your actions are judged not just by the intention or not just by the outcome, but by both—because you're working on a skill. You're trying to see what you're doing that's not skillful so that you can make adjustments to bring your actions—and your actions include your thoughts—up to the standard, up to the general principle you've already established.

So, there are two kinds of cross-questioning going on here. One is the kind that establishes a principle so that you can understand a teaching, how it fits into a larger picture. Then there's the cross-questioning of yourself: What are you doing right now and what are the results? The Buddha has you carry this into meditation when you look at your thoughts: What kind of thoughts lead the mind to distraction? What kind of thoughts lead it into stillness? If the mind's getting distracted, how do you deal with it to get away from that distraction? He gives lots of recommendations. There are some general principles in his recommendations, but then again it's a matter of applying the principles to your own practice to see what works for you.

So, we're not here just trying to clone a particular mind state or set of beliefs. We use the general principles as working hypotheses so that we can get into this issue of why the mind is creating suffering and how it can stop. As we're working with the breath here, we're developing qualities of mind that make it easier and easier to see what's actually going on. The mindfulness part—the part that keeps things in mind—keeps reminding you that you want to do this skillfully. You want to stay with the breath; you want to keep the mind here. There's the alertness to watch what's actually happening. There's the quality of ardency, which is the desire to do it well. And part of doing it well means learning how to judge your actions in a way that's actually helpful.

The word “judgment” has a lot of bad press these days. That's because we tend to pass unskillful judgments. You have to learn how to look at your judgments to see where they're skillful and where they're not. Don't get yourself tied up when you see yourself doing something unskillful. We're here to learn a craft, and of

course there are going to be mistakes along the way. If you pretend that they're not there, or that they're not mistakes, that's not going to undo them. And it certainly is not going to help you further down the line. You've got to say, "Yes, there was a mistake, but now I'm going to learn from it." That's the attitude the Buddha asks you to develop, because that's the attitude that gets results.

These two kinds of questioning parallel what they do in a cross-examination in the Vinaya. Say that monk A suspects monk B of having committed an offense to the point where he was ready to accuse him in the Sangha. The first step is to turn to monk C, who is an expert in the monk's rules and start asking him questions publicly in the Sangha about the rules related to that particular action. That's the kind of questioning that helps to establish principles, so that everybody in the Sangha has a chance to refresh his memory about what the relevant rules are. This is how far they go: This kind of action is considered an offense; this kind of action is not considered an offense.

Once A and C have established the principles and everybody is informed, then A asks leave of B to question him about his behavior. When he gives leave, A starts asking him. This is where they go to the particulars. "What did you do?" Here they're trying to ferret out the specific actions so that they can finally pass judgment on whether those actions constitute an offense or not.

So there are two kinds of cross-examination. One consists of the questions that establish the principle so that everybody understands. The next set of questions tries to get down to the particulars of the actions, to see whether they constitute an offense.

The same principle applies with your mind. We're trying to establish the basic principles: which kind of intentions are skillful, which kind of intentions are not; which qualities of mind lead to skillful intentions, which qualities lead to unskillful ones? This is like the cross-examination of the expert.

Then you look at yourself: How do your actions actually fit in with the general principles? What things do you do that are skillful, what things do you do that are not? This is like the cross-examination of the accused. The difference here, of course, is that you're not accusing somebody. You're looking at yourself with the purpose of trying to develop more alertness, more sensitivity, so that you can really master this principle of skillful action in the way you actually act, speak, think, to see how far that principle of skillfulness can go. Can it really put an end to suffering? The Buddha says it does. You can take his statement as a working hypothesis but you can't really prove it to yourself until you at least gain the first level of awakening. And you can get there only by cross-examining your actions, measuring them against his principles.

As the Buddha said in the simile of the elephant hunter: You go into the forest. You're looking for a big bull elephant because you've got the kind of work that needs to be done by a bull elephant. You see big footprints on the ground, but you don't immediately jump to the conclusion that those must be footprints of a bull elephant, because you know that there are dwarf females with big feet. They might be theirs. But they look promising. So you go down the path. You find scratch marks high up in the trees. Again, you don't come to the conclusion that they were made by a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. The marks might be theirs. It's only when you get to the clearing where the big bull elephant is standing, that's when you know: oh, here is a big bull elephant.

In the same way, when you practice, the Buddha talks to you about practicing the precepts, developing stages of concentration. You start seeing good results that come from the precepts. But those don't even count as footprints. The footprints start when you get to good concentration. Here is a sign that this might work. But again he doesn't want you to jump to the conclusion that, yes, you've confirmed it, because you haven't. The scratch marks are the powers that can be developed from concentration, but even they're not proof. The real proof comes when you've had your first taste of awakening. You've seen that there is a deathless, that you really can find a dimension at that, as the Buddha says, you touch with your body—which means you touch it with your whole awareness—and there really is an end to suffering. That's the point, he said, when your conviction is confirmed.

But how do you see that? By examining your own actions and getting more and more skillful in how you think and how you act and how you speak. You do that through this double process of, one, learning how to question your way to an understanding of the teachings, and then, two, questioning yourself as to what you're doing and the results of what you are doing, to see exactly how skillful they are. It's through this questioning that you come to certainty. You apply the principle of what the Buddha calls appropriate attention to the question of what's skillful and what's not. That's how you develop the factor of awakening called analysis of qualities. That's how you develop your discernment, the kind of discernment that actually does lead to release. And it's the release that counts.

So keep this in mind. You're not just trying to force your mind into a mold. You're learning the skills you need in order to test things for yourself. That's how your doubts can come to an end.