

Nimble with Your Questions

May 30, 2014

We keep coming back to the same place—the breath coming in, the breath going out, how you feel the breath energy in the body—because we want to get familiar with this territory. We want to know it all the way in, all the way out, and to see the different things the breath can do until we get familiar with all its potentials, and then skilled in using those potentials in different situations.

Even though this is the same place, the state of the body is going the change. The state of your mind is going to change. There are days when it's easy to settle in with the breath; it seems the most natural thing to do. Other days, it's hard to find one comfortable breath anywhere in the body at all. And part of the skill we're trying to develop is learning how to deal with whatever situation comes up. It's like an athlete trying to figure out all the different ways the opposing team can come at him, and have a move ready for whatever the opposition has to offer.

The other reason we come back here, though, is related to Ajaan Chah's image: We lost something. We lost it right here. So wherever you lost it, you have to look right there. You probably know the old joke about the man who dropped something off the side of a ship in the middle of the sea. He waited until he got into port to look for it over the side of the ship, because the light at the port was better. Of course, that wasn't where he dropped it; he dropped it in the middle of the sea.

What you've lost here is the ability to observe your mind in the present moment and to see what it's doing. So you've got to keep coming back to the present. The frustrating thing is that there are many layers going on here in the present. You may be able to solve one problem. You come back and, well, it seems to have come back from a different angle, which means that you haven't solved it from all its various angles. One of the skills in the meditation is learning how to keep coming back to the same place, and yet bring new eyes each time you come so that you can see things from a slightly different angle.

This is why there's no one meditation technique that's going to do the work for you. That's a common misunderstanding: that all that's needed is to do as you're told, and the meditation will do the work. All you have to do is put in the effort. But discernment doesn't arise that way. Discernment comes from being a genius—from learning how to phrase new questions, questions that didn't occur to you before. You see this in the Buddha; you see this in the teachings of all the great masters. The Buddha came to his meditation with a question that was different from other people's questions. Other people were asking, "Where is my true self?" And they came up with all kinds of answers to that question, but they didn't solve the problem.

The Buddha, though, didn't ask that question. He asked a different question: "Where is the suffering? What's causing it? And what can I do to put an end to it?"

This is why he was so particular about the questions he would advise you to ask. You start with his questions, but gradually you find that you have to figure out your own questions that branch out from the original questions. Even though there are certain patterns that everyone has in common in terms of their greed, aversion, and delusion, still there are other aspects that are not quite the same. And you have to have to figure out what your problem is and come up with questions that are just right for you.

We know the teachings of Dogen, the Zen master. So much is said about "just sitting, just sitting." It sounds like he's telling you just to sit, and things are going to settle down and grow clear on their own without doing anything else. But that's not what he was saying. He would bring a lot of different questions to the simple act of sitting. Is the mind sitting in the body? Is the body sitting in the mind? These are some of the questions he would bring. The purpose was to dig up a lot of unspoken assumptions and at least see how they were skewing his perception of things. And those were just a few example questions that he would offer. He encouraged people to ask their own questions about this simple act of sitting. Or the simple act of being with the breath—the simple act of focusing on the breath in the body: What's going on?

We know the stories of Ajaan Maha Boowa's battle with pain, and it's very impressive, the amount of pain that he was able to sit through. But the really important part of the teaching was not so much the endurance, but the questions he would ask. As he said, he'd come to an understanding of pain one night, and then realize that the questions he asked the night before wouldn't work the next time he sat. He'd have to come up with new questions.

So it's the ingenuity of your discernment that's going to make all the difference. There are some basic outlines. But within those outlines, you've got to figure out your own questions. The questions that Ajaan Maha Boowa asked got a lot of other ajaans thinking. I know quite a few ajaans who found that reading Ajaan Maha Boowa was a spark for their own insights. Again, it was not so much agreeing with his solutions; it was agreeing with his technique of coming up with new questions, trying to figure out: How do you relate to the pain? How do you relate to your desires? And you have to ask unusual questions, unexpected questions. That's how you learn. That's how your discernment develops.

If you find that attachment to food is a problem, maybe part of the problem is your attachment to aversion. So look at your relationship to aversion. If you find that sitting long periods is a problem, ask yourself: What is it in you that doesn't want to sit long periods of time? And there will be a part of the mind that says, "Well, of course, I don't like it because x, x and x." And so you say, "Well, why?" Don't stop with the "of course." Pursue the issue a little bit further until you see that somewhere in there is a silly assumption. When you see that it's silly, that it doesn't stand up to your questions, you can get past it.

You have to watch out for these things. Learn how to question your assumptions. We keep coming back to the breath because it gives us a good grounding point, so that we can compare tonight's issues with last night's issues and see if there are slight differences. The meditation requires patience—your ability to sit with things—so you can get really, really, really familiar with this territory. At the same time, you're learning how to bring new eyes, learning how to ask new questions, the questions that may seem off the wall. But you don't know if they're going to be useful or if they should have just stayed on the wall until you try them to see how they're going to work. After all, there are many layers of delusion in the mind.

Ajaan Lee talks of five layers of aggregates—layers of subtlety. Sometimes you deal with one layer, and you think you've taken care of everything. Well, there's another layer and another layer. Kee Nanayon talks of many layers of film in the mind, and each layer of film is going to require a different question to get past it.

This is why the Buddha mentioned that one of his skills as a teacher was skill in questions: knowing how to deal with different questions, knowing which questions are not worth asking and which ones are. And it's important that we bring that understanding to the practice as well. If you expect that a particular technique is going to do the work for you, the defilements are going to eat you up because they can see you coming from a mile away.

You have to be quick on your feet, able to turn the tables on them—turn the tables on your assumptions. When you get them off balance, then you can knock them out. But that's only if you learn how to be nimble with your questions.