

## *Asking the Right Questions*

*August 8, 2015*

One of the drawbacks of having a regular Q&A session every afternoon is that people think they're expected to have questions. And so they just start thinking of random questions for the sake of having a question—or for the sake of drawing out the Q&A session so you don't have to work.

That's not what it was like when I was with Ajaan Fuang. If I had a genuine question, he was happy to answer it. But if I came up with a question just for the sake of having a question, he would be pretty curt and cut it off. I began to realize that he was encouraging me to ask and answer my own questions. If I didn't put any effort into trying to find an answer myself, he felt he was teaching me to be lazy. So it was only when I had tried to think through an answer and I really couldn't come to one—that's when I would ask.

The reason we have the Q&A session is because, for a lot of you, you're here for just a very short time, so we open the opportunity. It was the same when I was in France. We had lots and lots of questions. I'm going through the transcript of the retreat right now. And it's overwhelming—the number of questions. But I felt I was going to be there only for a few days. And who knows when I'm going to be back in France? So here was the chance.

But the ideal attitude towards questions in your practice is, one, if there's anything you genuinely don't understand after trying to figure it out, you ask questions. That's in terms of what the teachings are saying. And then, secondly, when you come up with the issue in your own mind, how would you bring it to stillness and how you develop dispassion? Those are the two big questions in the meditation.

The first one has to do, of course, with getting the mind concentrated. How do you center it? How do you get it to indulge in its concentration?—in other words, learning how to enjoy it at the same time that you're not getting carried away by the pleasure. You have to learn how to focus on the breath but not get waylaid by the fact that there's a nice pleasant sensation coming up and either getting excited about it or just wanting to wallow in the pleasure. You've got to learn how to ask the right question: what to *do* with that pleasure. See it as a tool or as a resource that you can use for the purpose of further concentration.

Ajaan Lee gives a lot of good examples for breathing in a way that gives rise to pleasure and then seeing how that sense of pleasure can spread through the different parts of the body. That way, as you expand your range of awareness, the pleasure expands as well. You have a genuine sense of fullness as you're sitting right here. That's something you want to develop, something you want to maintain.

That's the next question. Once you've got it, how do you maintain it?—because it's the maintaining that actually makes it concentration.

We can detect, as we go through the day, different states of mind that are formless. In other words, you're not clearly aware of the form of your body inside here because you've got a more spacious sense of awareness. These moments don't last very long, though. To get them to last long, you have to go through the steps. Otherwise, it's like trying to jump up to the fourth or fifth story of a building without going up the staircase. You can jump up to that level, if you're really good high-jumper, but you can't stay there. You come back down again.

So the question is—how do you take what concentration you've got and develop it so that you can stay with it and maintain it, in spite of the sound of the crickets in the background, or maintain it in spite of the pain in the body—the pains that come up in the course of sitting here still.

These are some of the questions you should be asking yourself about getting the mind into concentration.

As for trying to get some discernment, the questions are not totally unrelated. The discernment questions have more to do with seeing things as fabrications—in other words, seeing the intentional element that goes into what you're creating here. And that's right here with the breath. The breath itself is a type of fabrication. Your directed thought and evaluation are verbal fabrication. The feelings of pleasure and the perceptions you hold in mind about the breath: Those are mental fabrications.

The questions about discernment concern how to view fabrications in a way that gives rise to dispassion. Of course, this doesn't mean just trying to drop them immediately as soon as you close your eyes. First you've got to get the mind into concentration. In other words, you first *use* the fabrications, to get a sense of the mind as still as possible.

And then, when it's still, you try to maintain it. That's when you look for any ups and downs in that level of stillness, the level of ease, the level of fullness, or whatever it is that's pleasant about the meditation. Try to become aware: What are you doing when the stress goes up? What are you doing when the stress goes down? That's actually applying the four noble truths. In other words, there's a rise in the stress: What are you doing? What's the cause? When the stress happens to go away, what did you do? What's the cause there?

You don't have to get into a lot of the technical details or technical terms, but those are among the main questions you ask yourself: When the stress goes up, what did you do? When it goes down, what did you do? Can you catch these movements of the mind?

And how are you going to catch them if the mind isn't really still? It's in this way that concentration and discernment have to go together.

The Buddha's teaching prime topic of concentration, his prime topic of meditation, was the breath. When you're doing the breath according to his steps, you're on the one hand trying to calm things, which is what tranquility or calm is all about. On the other hand, you're trying

to see things as fabrication so that ultimately you can develop dispassion for them. That's insight.

But those steps leading to dispassion don't come right at the beginning. First you learn how to sensitize yourself to the different types of fabrication going on. Then you try to get a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, because the mind is not going to calm down without that sense of fullness, that sense of satisfaction. It's going to be hungry. If it can't get any nourishment from the concentration, it's going to think about all kinds of other things.

So the question is, as you're settling down with the breath: What would be a gratifying way of breathing? What would be a gratifying way of thinking about the breath? In other words, remind yourself that you're not here just pumping away: in, out; in, out; in, out. You're nourishing the organs of the body. Ask yourself which parts of the body seem to be tired? Which parts are deprived of breath energy? Can you breathe in a way that allows them to gain some energy, to feel soothed by the breathing process? This becomes a gratifying way of thinking about the breath. And that allows it to calm down.

Once it's calmed down, then you start asking those questions about the process of fabrication that you just engaged in. Where is it still lacking? Where is it still not as fully skillful as possible? The question here is: Can I see even more subtle levels of stress? That requires that you get even more still. It's like trying to listen to some music far away. If you're not still, if you're moving around and fidgeting, you're not going to hear the far-away music. But if you get very, very still, you can hear it.

So in order to see what's going on in the mind, first you have to be very still and learn how to be continuously still. Then you have to learn how to ask the right questions—how to get it even more still and how to see things in terms of fabrication, i.e., your intentions and the role they play in your breathing and in your thinking, your perceiving, and your feeling. How can you master these processes so that they're skillful? How can you develop an even more refined taste, or more refined standards for what really is skillful?—what you're going to accept as the kind of pleasure you feel is really what you're after. Because for a lot of us, it's just, "Well, I'd like a little bit of rest. I'd like a little bit of stress reduction."

But the Buddha was really demanding. He wanted something that was better than that—a deathless pleasure. You're not going to find it anywhere else. You have to look right here. So look here continually and get the mind still. And see if you can ask the right questions—because it's that combination of careful looking and knowing how to ask the right questions that counts as appropriate attention.

That's how the Buddha defines appropriate attention: learning how to focus on the right questions and put irrelevant questions aside. That's when you see things you didn't see before. Everything you need to see is right here. But your mind is fidgeting too much and it's not asking the right questions. That's why it doesn't see. So try to narrow the issues down to these

two big ones—gaining more stillness and understanding the processes of fabrication. That's when things that are here will open up and show themselves for what they are.