

Frame Your Questions Well

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Concentration is something you do. You focus your attention on the breath, and try to breathe in a way that's comfortable. Then you try to spread that comfort so that it fills the body, so that your sense of breath fills the body, and your awareness fills the body. You want all of these three things to come together, each filling the others. That's the world of your concentration. And it's always important to remember that it's something that you're *doing*, because there are times you can get with a sense of awareness filling everything and it seems like the awareness is not affected by anything.

Those meditation methods that tell you that you get in touch with the ground of being—the awareness that embraces everything, as if that were a ground of being—are having you forget the fact that your awareness is something fabricated, something you've put together intentionally. If you don't see that it's something you've put together, you can misunderstand your concentration—because it is a state of becoming.

Becoming comes from clinging, desire, craving. But we're taking these things and we're using them for the sake of the path. This is where the Buddha's strategic approach is important to appreciate. I know some people who say we shouldn't be doing concentration because if you do concentration, you have to have a sense of self that's doing it and is going to be benefitting from it. So you should simply allow the mind to wander as it likes. But that's also creating a state of becoming, one in which there's nobody responsible. And it certainly doesn't create the path.

The path is something you have to put together. It's something you have to fabricate. It's called a *sankhara* in Pali, a fabrication. And it requires desire, which is part of right effort. You put it together with this desire so that you have the state of becoming that allows you to watch other states of becoming as they come in. You see the mind tempted to go off into a distraction of some kind and you begin to see the steps.

There's first a little curiosity. There's a potential here, and then we have the idea we can do something with that potential. As the Buddha says, we fabricate feelings for the sake of feeling-ness and perceptions for the sake of perception-hood. It's very strange Pali, turning all these things into abstract nouns, but the important part is the “for the sake of.”

There's an intentional element going on here. We take a potential and turn it into something we think we can use. And it's good to be able to see those

processes in action, because there is that temptation, once you've created something like that, to move into it, and then you forget that you created it. It's like blowing bubbles and then moving into the bubbles, forgetting that you blew them to begin with. The world is then colored by the colors of the bubble, and then it breaks. And then you blow some more bubbles. Then you move into those.

So it's good to be consciously aware that this is something that we're doing. And we're doing it all the time. But we don't understand what we're because, as the Buddha said, the craving that gives rise to becoming is the craving that causes suffering. It can be sensual craving or latent craving for becoming or even craving for non-becoming. If we knew what we were doing, we wouldn't do it.

As he said, one of the great insights he gained was seeing that even in the craving for non-becoming, there is some becoming. This can be either because you take on the identity of someone who wants to see the state of mind destroyed or because you want to take on the identity of the destroyer. In all of these cases, you're going to suffer.

So you want to see this in action. And concentration gives you a great place to see it, not only watching the processes of distraction as the mind begins to wander here, or wants to wander there, but also as you become more conscious of how the state of concentration is itself a state of becoming and how it's put together. You see both the world that you create as you create this state of concentration and your identity in that world.

Now, when the concentration is really good, really solid, and there's that sense that your awareness and the body and the feeling of pleasure permeate one another to the point of almost oneness, it seems like you and this world of concentration are one. That, too, can give rise to misunderstandings. We constantly have to keep reminding ourselves that we're watching actions and their results, because the mind tends to think in terms of beings in worlds. And as long as you think in those terms, you're going to suffer.

The way out is to start thinking in terms of actions and results. Look at the Buddha's own quest. As he said, we start out bewildered by suffering and begin to realize that true knowledge would be seeing how to put an end to suffering. And who knows how many different ways he attempted to find the end of suffering before he found the right way. But when he was talking in later years about his quest, he said he was in search of what was skillful. In other words, he was looking for what could be done skillfully to put an end to suffering.

He framed all his questions in terms of actions and the results. If he saw that he wasn't getting the results he wanted, he would look back at his actions and ask

himself, “Is there another way I can act? Is there another path to follow?” He saw that he could resolve his doubts by following questions that were rightly phrased.

So when he taught, he encouraged questions. He wasn’t the kind of teacher who said, “I’ll just tell you the way things are and you have to accept it.” He saw that in his own quest he had to learn how to ask the right questions and frame them in the right terms, so he wanted to teach other people to do that as well. That was why he was so particular about the different ways he would answer questions.

Some questions, as he said, deserved a categorical answer: in other words, yes, no, across the board. Those questions had to do with two things. One was the fact that unskillful behavior should be abandoned and skillful behavior should be developed. And the second was the four noble truths and their duties: the duty to comprehend suffering, the duty to abandon its cause, the duty to realize its cessation, and the duty to develop the path to its cessation. These were the terms that framed, as he said, the ideal questions, because in both cases, we’re talking about actions and results. These are truths that have duties. They tell you what to do. They’re not like, say the three characteristics, which, if they’re taken on their own, don’t have any duties.

The Buddha wasn’t the first to point out that things are inconstant, stressful and not-self. There are a lot of hedonists who say, “Hah, that’s the way things are,” and they drew a very different conclusion from that. But the Buddha didn’t simply take the three characteristics on their own. He taught them as three perceptions to be used in the context of the four noble truths, to help you comprehend suffering, to help you abandon its cause. So what the Buddha was looking for was truths with duties, truths that give you a sense of what to do. He as a teacher said that that was one of his duties: to give his students a sense of how to figure out what should be done, what should not be done, what’s skillful, what’s not. So those are the main terms for what he called the categorical questions.

Then there were the questions that he said deserved an analytical answer. In other words, they weren’t phrased quite right or they were based on a misunderstanding, usually of karma—like the question of whether the Buddha would say anything displeasing. It was a trick question. If he said yes, then they would say, what’s the difference between you and every other person in the world? If he said no, well they had him on record for having said some displeasing things to Devadatta. They thought they had him. So when they asked him the question, he replied, “That doesn’t deserve a categorical answer. It deserves an analytical answer.” He stepped out of the false dichotomy. As he said, there are times when it’s for the good of the other person that you say something displeasing. He gave

the example of a baby who's gotten something sharp in its mouth. You do what you can to get the object out, even if it means drawing blood, because if the child kept the sharp object in its mouth, it might swallow it and do even more damage. So, in the same way, there are times when it's for the other person's good that you have to say something displeasing. So that's an example of an analytical answer.

Then there are the questions that deserve to be cross-questioned. In other words, you ask questions back of the person. These are usually the cases where the Buddha senses that the person asking the question will not understand the answer unless he's given an analogy from his own experience. Then he can compare that with what the Buddha's about to say. Here again, the Buddha is teaching patterns, because that's what analogies are. They have you look at the formal pattern, such as the ways in which teaching people to gain awakening and taking sharp objects out of mouths can be similar.

Finally, there were the questions the Buddha said to put aside. These were the ones framed in terms of selves and worlds, in other words, the terms of becoming. If we're going to get out of becoming, we have to learn how to look at it not as selves in worlds, but to see the world as an activity, your sense of self as an activity. Your sense of the world is going to change depending on your desires. Your sense of yourself is going to change depending on your desires. So this is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha was asked, "Is there a self or is there no self?" he refused to answer, because if you go with the idea that there is a self, there are certain defilements that are going to be developed, depending on how you define yourself, what you think you have to do to maintain yourself, to maintain the well-being of the self. And that can lead to some very unskillful behavior. If you say there is no self, that can lead to unskillful behavior, too. Both sides can create their own defilements. So the Buddha said to avoid answering those questions.

If you're going to think of self, think of your sense of self as an action. See your sense of the world as an action. When you feel yourself trapped in the body, a "you" in the world of the body, ask yourself: What is the action going on here? On the one hand, there's the perception that's creating the trouble. And there are all the various defilements that arise based on the perceptions. So always look for the actions.

We get the mind into a state of concentration so that we can see its own actions a lot more clearly and understand where they're causing us trouble, where they're causing us suffering and pain—and also to develop our ingenuity to see if there's some other way we can do things so that we don't have to cause ourselves suffering. We don't have to cause ourselves pain. When you run into a problem, learn how to express it as an articulate question. Then ask yourself, "If the Buddha

were asked that question, what kind of answer would he give? How would he have you phrase the question?” Would he regard it as categorical, or would it require an analytical answer? Do you have to do some more cross-questioning of yourself to figure out what’s going on, or would the Buddha recommend that you just put the question aside?

All too often, our problem is that we’re not very clear about what our questions are, or even if we are clear, we don’t know what category they belong to, what kind of response they deserve. But remember, the Buddha found that asking the right questions at the right time is the way to awakening. So take your questions seriously. Take the way you create questions seriously, because it can make all the difference. We’ve got the Buddha’s example, in terms of his own quest. We’ve got his examples in terms of how he taught. So see if you can inform your own quest and your own questions in line with the example he set.