

Practicing Questioning

Deep inquiry can be a core aspect of meditation practice. Here's how to ask skilful questions of ourselves.

By Narayan Helen Liebenson



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Over the past forty years, I've trained with meditation teachers in the lineages of Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan, both in Asia and in the United States. I've found that, in all of these lineages, learning how to ask wise questions is a huge part of cultivating a skilful practice. Meditative inquiry fosters greater inner freedom and allows us to loosen up and let go of conditioning. But how do we do this?

In meditation practice we calm our minds, and then we look into the true nature of things as they are, which leads to greater understanding. This understanding brings about inner liberation. Investigation or inquiry is another key aspect of practice. To investigate is to contemplate with a silent mind. It's to illuminate that which is cloudy or confused—to explore and to discover what we have not yet noticed or understood.

This kind of deep inquiry provides us with the tools to free the mind from suffering and the pitfalls of an unexamined life. Of course, freeing the mind from suffering is the point of the practice and at the core of the Buddha's teachings. Looking into life as we generally live it—carefully examining our habits and our patterns—encourages us to examine the whole world differently. Asking questions is a way to allow intrinsic wisdom to emerge, wisdom that is there within each one of our hearts, that has not yet had a chance to come forth and inform our lives.

I also think questioning is part of the Buddha's injunction to practice *ehipassiko*, a Pali word that means “comes and see for oneself.” Meditative questioning is one way to understand for ourselves and to build a greater sense

of self-confidence and self-trust. We learn to know for ourselves what brings about liberation and what does not, what further mires us in misery or confusion.

In this practice, doubt is totally OK—we're encouraged to test the teachings out so that they become our own. But questions like, "Why am I here?", "What is the meaning of life?", "When can I get what I want, or get rid of what I don't want?", "Why am I so deluded?", or "Why are others so deluded?" tend to take us nowhere. I've found that they cause us to circle around and around and do not reveal a way out. The deep inquiry I'm talking about doesn't mean constantly questioning oneself, obsessing, or running after thoughts.

Questioning in a meditative way doesn't demand an answer. We come to this art of inquiry with an attitude of open-heartedness. We familiarise ourselves with silence, because wise questions and fruitful responses arise out of silence. We practice relinquishing our preconceptions about how things should be. Instead, we look at things in a fresh and open-hearted way that is free—or as free as possible—from these assumptions and let something deeper than our usual habitual thinking arise. In other words, we open to what is with humility, gentleness, honesty, and sincerity. We cultivate an attitude of non-grasping and non-attachment

Meditative questioning is a tool we use in order to explore the unknown—the parts of our lives we've not yet noticed. To do this we need the qualities of what Ajahn Sumedho calls "affectionate curiosity." We encourage ourselves to rest in what is sometimes called "don't know mind," which means open to whatever may emerge.

First we ask and then we listen. Here are some meditative questions you can try for yourself—both on and off the cushion.

- When upset, to ask who is it that is upset right now? Or who is upset? *Doesn't have to have a conceptual answer.*
- What is the mind aware of right now? *A basic question that orients us to what is happening in the present moment.*
- Is there any moment better than this one?
- What do I want to contribute?
- Given the conditions in my life right now, what is wise effort? *Only you know the answer to this.*
- How am I reacting to this experience? Is it possible to approach it with wisdom and with compassion? Where is kindness? Is there love for this too? *Whatever the "this" might be.*
- What is the quality of my heart right now?
- What does love, free of attachment, actually look like?

During your practice or throughout your day, every so often drop the question in and then listen as deeply as you can. Resist the attempt to try to find an answer, but rather let the question itself guide you into greater love and acceptance. In taking this up as a practice, there will be a growing sense of which questions bring peace and lead to even greater peace and a release of suffering, and which to confusion and only more confusion. Asking meditative questions is a way to guide your life and your practice. We develop a natural inclination towards

investigation. When this happens, use whatever naturally arises.

The brain doesn't hold the answer to our lives. Let the right question arise for you. Let the right question, the wise question, the meditative question, bring you to a depth of silence, allowing for an authentic responsiveness of heart.



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