

# 2004-11-15 The Art of Questioning

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So this evening, I'd like to talk about a topic, which is very dear to me in terms of practice. And that is the art, of questioning, of using questioning as an aspect of the spiritual life. And it's kind of cute. The word questioning is closely connected to the word quest seeking. And there's something very healthy about seeking over questioning or questing. They're also problems with seeking and questing and there's just some tension between the two of them. And that is played out in various ways in the Buddhist tradition or spiritual traditions. But questioning is a really beautiful thing to do. And I think it's very deeply For the spiritual life, to have a habit and a tendency to be questioning. There are of course useful ways of questioning and not so useful ways of questioning that interferes with our ability to engage in life. Questioning leaves us kind of kind of confused and perplexed. That leaves us indecisive, maybe isn't so useful. But there's a kind of questioning that can actually make us freer, more penetrating it can make bring more insight and understanding. questioning, it can be like a salt to the soup that really makes a soup delicious, to a question and can kind of really enrich in your experience of what's happening in our lives in ourselves. And I like to think of Buddhist practice at least as having a very essential element of questioning of using questions of questioning ourselves. Questioning reality questioning many things. There's a story that's told. And I don't know if it's a traditional Buddhist story or not, or made up in the modern West. But doesn't matter I guess. It's a story of Mara, who is the Buddhist god of ignorance and temptation, evil. And part of Mario's job description, main job. purpose is to prevent people from getting enlightened. And in Mara was out with an attendant walking around the countryside looking to create trouble. And they came across a Buddhist monk who was doing walking meditation. And at some point, the monk space just lit up. And the attendant asked Mara, what happened? And Mara said, Oh, that monk suddenly saw the truth. And the attendance said, we shouldn't you do something about that? And Mara says, Oh, no. Soon enough, he'll make it into a belief.

And one of the functions of questionings is to be questioning our beliefs, what we believe. You know, there's a world of difference between believing something and knowing something. Sometimes people don't see that difference. And sometimes we know that there's a difference I believe in so and so. And there's a world of difference. And as long as we believe something, our beliefs should be open for questioning. And one of the important questions is, upon what authority Do I have this? what feels right? Is that good enough? just feels right. Or, you know, I read it in the book or You know, some teacher said to me question, what's the source of our authority? But what basis do we give authority to our beliefs or views about life. And for many people, they go unexamined, the sources of authority, and we assume that certain things are so and we live a life that way.

To be part of the functioning of questioning is to keep us open to the mystery of life or to the richness of life or to the complexity of life. And when there's an absence of questioning, then there's often

stagnation sets in and complacency can stepped in. And part of the function of having a younger generation appear on the scene and new people in their 20s or whatever, is they seem to have this great capacity to question that seems to kind of dwindle for some people. As they get older, and it's really important to have people come along and say, You know what's going on here? Let's find out and question the authority question to beliefs. Further. I think one of the reasons why questioning is so important is that any fixed view of what a spiritual life is or what life is or reality is, always will have something which is outside the bounds of that fixed view. It's kind of like once you define what reality is, reality doesn't lend itself to a fixed definition. There's always something really, really is always changing and moving. And so there's always something beyond those fixed definitions. And so there's always something beyond so no matter what do we and how much we understand that, to understand it, there's always going to be more to understand new perspectives that have to be had. And so one of the functions of questioning is to keep keep us close. Keep us open. to new possibilities. And I think that's one of the qualities of freedom in my understanding is to be always be open to new possibilities. If they no longer have new possibilities of understanding or seeing, I think is too loose or kind of freedom in our lives. There, there's a quote that I came across some years ago, which I like, and the quote goes, trust those who seek the truth, but not those who found it. It's kind of like the Mara story, I think is really something really beautiful about the seeking of questioning and looking what is going on here, what's going on here. There can be a lot of freedom within the person or questions, there can be a lot of joy. There can be a lot of sense of stability and ease and confidence. It doesn't have to be in confidence then it doesn't have to be a source of insecurity or problems, they can actually be very it can actually come from A great sense of personal strength, to be always questioning what's going on here. I saw it when I was a graduate student at Stanford, that's in religious studies, that some of the Graduate graduate studies in religious studies at Stanford was not very kind to people who held on to their religious views. Because it kind of is kind of an exercise in critical thinking, and, and, you know, kind of academic kind of questioning religion, that kind of always questioning the authority and how you believe something and always pulling the rug from underneath all kinds of things. And those graduate students who were not secure in themselves, were very much upset by their questioning professors and kind of, kind of, they thought it was too skeptical to cynical the approach to religious studies there. But those graduate students who had a strong religious foundation in themselves have a certain kind of stability and freedom security themselves. They love to have the rug pulled from underneath their beliefs. Great You know, Wow, look at that I had a belief I didn't even know it and they pulled the rug from under me. That's great. I'm free or now. And isn't it a great? would you feel if someone comes along and tells you what you believe is not true? Do you feel, wow, that's the best? Or do you kind of get depressed and go home for two days? I guess it depends on what the belief is, but. And I was one of those people who kind of liked having the rug pulled from underneath me. And that part of that came from my Zen training. And that's what was entering did over and over again, the idea of Zen is you can't ultimately stand anywhere, you can't have stand on a position. And so you learn to be comfortable and having no position to stand no fixed views to to settle on. I think there's a tension in human life, between the desire for ins the desire for security, for certainty. And the fact that Life doesn't really offer ultimate security, ultimate stability, it's always changing and flexing and moving and dissolving, sometimes right in front of us. And so the holding on to security and stability, you know, it has inherent tension in it. And also, if there's a kind of questing mind mind and wants to go beyond the security, there's also attention you know, what else is there? You know, kind of I don't want to hold on to this.

But the desire for security takes many different forms. One form it takes is in human institutions, I think human institutions like governments and schools and all kinds of things are often and often religions is partly a quest for security to hold things a certain way. And that plays itself out in religion in certain circles. And, and some people would say this fundamentalism and all religions, including Buddhism have fundamentalist wings in fundamentalists wants to hold on to views and are unwilling to question

them. I've known people who've grown up in fundamentalist circles. And as children, and as, as they were teenagers and started questioning and questioning and questioning the beliefs of their religion, they're finally told they have to leave. You can't be questioning so much. You have to kind of just accepted on faith or this is not a place to question you just have to take it as a given. So, moment, one of the definitions of fundamentalism is an unwillingness to question to keep questioning and looking deeper and deeper and deeper.

I remember when I was 14. So I say it this way. Now that I have this little two year old at home, with my two year old is trying to master his nouns. That's the name of the game, you know, nouns what things are called. And I don't know when but soon enough He's gonna start not just be settled with how things are, but he's gonna start to start asking questions about things. And why. And I remember when my older son started asking why. And I thought I would never be free of that question. I mean, I like questioning a lot, but there's a limit. And there's also a beautiful club who just have a natural tendency, I think, in children a certain point to investigate and to ask him, what is this what's going on. And then when I was 14, I remember I went to boarding school in high up in the mountains. It was a beautiful kind of blue, blue sky day and these snow capped mountains around us and it was quite, you know, spectacular situation. And I was walking down the road with a friend of mine, who was 17. And I kind of was looking up in all this wonderful sky in the mountains. And I asked him something like what's the meaning of all this? The meaning of human life of being alive. And I don't know if I was looking for an answer. But it was just kind of that was a question come bubbled out to me without even, you know, expecting an answer or wanting, I just wouldn't use it kind of came. But my friends response was, don't be silly. And when he said that something inside of me closed up. And it took me actually many years for that part of me to open up. I had this, you know, this message that there was none okay part of me to show or to act on or half. And it was a very sad to have that part closed up. Luckily, with time that opened up again, and the idea of Oh, and questioning and wondering and has become more my part more and more more part of my life. Oh, I'll talk a little bit longer. But what I would like to do near the end of the talk, is to have some of you tell us some great questions. isn't great. Some questions have been Really important. Don't tell us any answers. Please, you know, don't answers tonight. But just great questions that you've held or lived with are great, great questions that you've been asked. They really made a big difference for you in your life.

Part of the art of questioning is sometimes questioning the question. And Buddhism puts a big emphasis on that. questioning the question some questions are not worth answering or looking at. And some questions are very useful. So to know what questions are useful and what are not this often useful is often part of the Buddhist practice, and oddly enough for the way most people operate. The Buddha said that any question that has any kind of any question that's focusing on some metaphysical idea of itself is not a useful question to ask, am I? Am I not? Is there a true self? Is there no true self? Was I in the past? Will I be in the future? Am I the same as nature? am I different than nature? Am I part of nature? Is nature part of me? It's me in the cosmos one. If my part of the cosmos cause was part of me, any kind of question about self is considered to be not a useful question, because it lends itself to endless speculation, a quagmire of use what the Buddha called it. So you don't have to believe that you can question that point of view. But the interesting idea is that some questions are useful and some are not. So that you know, the classic question that's not useful to get engaged. If someone asked you this question. You're not supposed to you're supposed to walk away. You're supposed to answer this question because you can't you can't win right? If you answer yes or no. And the question is something like, have you stopped beating up beating your spouse Yet, you know, you never beat your spouse. So but have you stopped? Yes, no, you're in trouble either way. So somebody who is spiritually have some questions like that. And the Buddha said the questions around self are that way. Another way of questioning questions is to question is to ask, Where does a question come from, within

oneself? what's motivating? What's the impulse to ask the question? And sometimes that impulse to ask a question is, is the trace it back to the impulse, sometimes can trace back to something really beautiful inside of ourselves? And some traditions they say? Yeah, the resolution of the spiritual dilemma is to realize that the seeker is what's being sought. That when you realize that what you're looking for, is the one who's doing the seeking that place of you that searching or looking or questioning is the very resolution of finding some freedom. Sometimes it's a beautiful sense of awe and mystery that is a source of it. But sometimes a source of questioning is neurosis is fear or insecurity is the desire for the excuse, or safety or identity? And so it's important to ask that question, Where does a question come from? And one of the ones that I find very useful is to do this with is when people ask what's the meaning of life? That's a great question. Right? You can go to Stanford and take a philosophy classes. And they'll exercise that question for you a little bit. But what's the meaning of life? It's important to ask, but I would suggest that one of the important movements in Buddhist practice is a turn to turn around and look at the source of that question. what's motivating you to ask that question? And sometimes people asking the question or asking that question out of fear, right insecurity or wanting security. And if you if Then if it's fear, for example, and then you look at the fear and resolve the fear, there's no more fear. What happens to the motivation to ask that question? The question might still be there. But it's not being propelled or driven by this the neurotic need of fear, for example. So the question, where's the question come from, can be liberating in a variety of ways.

It's also useful to just like he's not you, it's useful not to settle on fixed views. I find it useful not to settle on one question. But to look at any given situation from a number of different perspectives, and have the exercise of keeping keeping asking questions, asking questions. And because there's so many different perspectives in any one situation, and human minds have a tendency to kind of settle on their view that they're living Right now, but to stretch and expand the perspectives of understanding what's going on any habit of asking questions, all kinds of questions, you know, what is this? What is this? What's a different perspective? Or how would someone else look at this? Or what would you know, the Dalai Lama say in this situation, or there's many ways that many ways of questioning to kind of expand the boundaries of what our understandings are. I was at a meeting this last week at the San Cisco Zen Center, where some of the senior people Jensen, and we're asking really important questions about things about some of the important issues with Zen center. And, and then someone who is new to these meetings. Just started asking a couple of questions. And as soon as the person asked the questions, everybody said, Wow, this is tied to a much bigger issue than we realized. We have to forget About the original question we're trying to answer. Let's look at this bigger, more important issue. What are the questions? fascinating question that the person asked.

This is a little footnote to the talk was the group was talking about how Zen Center has term limits for Abbott's somewhat unusual in Buddhist world, but not unknown. They have term limits. And the question was, should we change that Zen center, change that and have longer terms abbots? And then this person asked, he said, I would like everyone to have on within three seconds, I want you to have an answer to my question. You can't think about any more than that. Just kind of spontaneous answer. And he said, who runs the Zen center? Who's in charge? And, and this was a group of like the 12, 14 most senior teachers at Zen Center at this meeting. And no one could say anything. No one had an answer who runs Zen center. Zen Center is a very unusual organization. But no one said the app. It's the habits are sitting there.

You know, there's so many committees, there's boards and elders meeting, there's so many different things. But so it's a very, it was very interesting to realize that, wow, we have a very unusual organization in San Francisco. So asking a question, just kind of like suddenly kind of opened people up and change the whole context of what we were talking about. Questioning changes to the inner

ecology changes the changes the environment, the context of where we live. And, and if you're stuck and fixed in a situation, start asking questions, whether it's interpersonally or personally. Start asking questions and see where it goes. The Part of the way which changes the ecology of the situation is that the questioning our capacity to question is coming from a place within us, which is not stuck in the old view or stuck in the old ways. It's an expression of freedom to ask questions. And so even though situation might seem impossible, and we're stuck in it, we begin exercising freedom, we start asking questions, and looking more carefully probing and finding out. There's a lot of different ways of asking questions. I love the questioning of in silence. So going on long walks and just being quiet and then that quiet or just long walks in the woods by myself, starting to ask questions about my life, what I'm doing, or some issues that are important or some spiritual questions. Sometimes in meditation, people would like to ask questions. One of the ways to ask questions in meditation is to get as still as you can. And in that stillness stay the course. Question, maybe pre determined questions. So the question, and then don't think about it, but see what bubbles up from deep into psyche? When you've asked that question. And I've had some of the most important decisions in my life arise that way, where I've asked a question or grappled with some issue in the depths of silence, and then something arose from my body that I never could have thought of myself.

Sometimes a way to be questioning is to go find a good friend and say, you know, I having this issue in my life, and we you simply ask me questions. Don't give me any advice. But I think you're good. Maybe questions just just ask me a lot of question, no leading questions. But just ask questions. And maybe we can kind of explore I can see the situation and knew that way. Sometimes it's interesting to ask questions in the context of really dramatic things happen in our lives, like, Yeah. Or some huge unexpected thing has happened is what happens to certain questions in our lives. When we have a terminal illness or someone we know is is going to die or someone just died? Where's it where's our priorities and values? What's really important to ask? In the context of these big questions, you might get a very different answer to questions in the context of, you know, these huge issues of life.

So I want to give you an example a few questions, and then I'm going to open it up and have you start questioning your offer your questions.

For Vipassana practice, sometimes an interesting question is what needs to be accepted right now? What needs to be accepted right now? You're struggling, frustrated and things are really difficult in your practice, you're sitting meditating, it's really hard. And then you ask this question what needs to be accepted right now? And that can change the context. Nice. Oh, I didn't realize maybe have to accept my frustration. Another interesting question is, in various contexts is what needs to be expressed right now? Where's it needs to be expressed, kind of vary from inside of me? What is it needs to be said what needs to be felt but needs to come out of me with the point? What needs to be expressed? And sometimes again, sitting in stillness and silence and asking that question, you might be surprised with bubbles up. A nice question to ask that's an antidote to the ways many people's minds work. The question what's right with me? When's the last time you asked that about yourself? and other questions to questions like, Where's the energy? Where's the energy right now? And what's up? We know what's of interest. Where's the interest?

Another interesting questions that I've carried with me for a long time for a long period of several years at a time, every day to kind of ask this question to explore for myself. And that is, if I knew I was going to die tonight, how would I live this day? And it was very interesting because a digital for a long period of time. It was interesting to watch how it shifted in changed, how things stay the same over time and how things changed. And I felt it really helped me a lot to understand myself my life to ask that question, how would I spend the rest of the day? What's most important for me? Given, you know, 24



hours laughter 12 hours left? I did that one says, as an exercise for some people were workshop I taught where I had closed their eyes and sit still for a while. And then I said, in your in this in this in the stillness, reflect on these questions. I say, if you know that you have only 24 hours left. How do you live those hours? So they thought about him silence. And they said, Okay, take a deep breath. Now, what if you only have 12 hours left? What if you only had four hours left? So we can progressively make shorter and shorter time, four hours, one hour, 10 minutes, one minute. What if death is now and One woman after doing this exercise, she quit her job.

I mean, not, you know, not that minute, but you know that next week and his big high powered executive job and, and I kind of golf when I heard that, oh, what have I done? And that was about 10 years ago and she said it was the best decision you ever made. She's so happy. And that exercise made that but there was another person who said Oh, when there were 24 hours and 12 hours and four hours left, I calculated it was still time for me to drive home to where I lived, and clean up my house and apartment get things in order. So it looked good, right. And but it was only one hour left. Then I realized that I couldn't get home fast I needed to do it. And then I just woke up. Here I am, you know this is it and she kind of woke up So, this so what are some good questions you've encountered in your life you'd like to offer to our group here.

Let's use the mic. And, and there's an art to using the mic. One is never to turn the, the switch off underneath, just leave it on. And the other is if the whole group can be conscious of the mic and be ready to pass it back and forth, it could pass really quickly. Everybody's paying attention. And the reason we use the mic is so everyone can hear. In this room. Some people have hearing system devices. And so it helps them to hear people are out there in outer Hall. And if they're talking inside here, they can't hear out there. And also there are some people who listen to us on the web, and they can't hear the questions are a virtual community can't hear the question unless we talk into the mic. So if Please offer your question into the mic. We appreciate it.

I have a couple actually. One is a not very useful question, I think but it's an amusing metaphysical riddle. And it's where does eternity and or if you're an optimist, you can say, Where does eternity begin? And there's no use telling you the answer because if you don't arrive to it on your own, it's kind of pointless and I'm sure some people right away. But the second one is just something that occurred to me. It's just amusing and I don't take it seriously. there's a there's a famous one. Why do bad things happen to good people? And that's not a mystery to me. But I try to reword it. It is why do good things happen to bad people?

That's it. Thank you.

A question I ask is, how to balance being

inner focused and outer focused? Thank you.

Good question.

Up here in front.

When I was in college, I had a, I was a professor one time who

used to be a teacher in a middle school,

and they said that they used to have a student and that the student asked him a great question. One time Which was

wire circles always suspicious? vicious? Why are there any happy circles? Why are they always vicious circles?

I just found that amusing.

Thank you.

So Oh, in back Helen. Mistake stage.

I had a very important decision to make a good few years ago and

somebody had told me

about or I'd heard about a series of four questions.

It was, what would happen if I do make that change? But no, it was what will happen if I do what will happen if I don't

fly Won't happen if I do and

what will or won't happen if I don't? Thanks.

think there's more suffering or less suffering on this planet? In the last 50 years?

I've been thinking about this lately.

How can I be the person that my

dog thinks I am?

That's a key metaphysical question. And the other one that somebody asked me once that

bugged me till I figured out the answer is wire manhole coverts around

someone else

over here.

Sometimes when I walk the labyrinth, I go in with a question. What matters.

The outer rim there Scott

What do I need?

What am I grateful for? That's it

this way I think someone over here. Yeah. I think we're gonna buy a second mic.

There's a book gun instructions to the cook. And at one point he talks about the role of the Zen cook is to make a tasty, nutritious meal with whatever ingredients he's gotten on hand. And so sometimes I'll ask myself and I have to, you know, if there's something going on in my life that I'm doing or if I make a decision, I'll ask so this is tasty is nutritious.

Here in the front, apparently. The one

I think about a lot is how are we organized in ways that we don't realize and how like, you have yourself choices, but then how can you also be a part of that then you don't quite understand and And be functional. Thank you.

question that

was helpful for me was whose attention is it that I want?

mines mines in question that it's more like wanting to understand what is suffering about the back

encoding a dilemma sometimes can't seem to get a decision, I will always ask myself, just how important is this

as part of the ongoing paramiko group, we're just studying virtue right now. And I'm finding it very,

very

hard to stay

soft with the five precepts and non harming in subtle ways. But what one question seems to really help is really asking what I'm going to say or do or what I'm thinking, is it to the benefit of others or me? And that really seems to cut through a lot of questioning or doubt.

My question is,

how do I stay focused when I'm

meditating alone.

A question that I'm working with right now is what is safety?

What is safety?

My husband reminds me of a question that hit the spot with me with some Sylvia Borstein and she asked the question we should ask ourselves is what I am about to say

is valuable a silence



I've been asking myself

what is right livelihood?

What is right livelihood?

This is not fair. But following up on Gil's question. Does anybody have one of these so we didn't have to use the AMC money to buy one

Over here, so

that's it obey through

a couple of more stop. The question

I ask is, why am I here?

Why am I here?

Five years from now what will I miss most about my life right now? Thank you. Many years ago in in Palo Alto we used to meet back there. I think it was a Monday night. I decided not to give a Dharma talk, but rather to answer questions. And, and what I thought I would do was just rather answering the questions one at a time, was to take maybe four or five questions, and then and then kind of answer them all together. So now it's a technique of answering questions, you take a whole bunch of questions and then synthesize an answer based on this, this diverse kind of question. And so I was taking, you know, four or five questions or whatever. And then, kind of like Matt by magic. The room just started asking more questions. And, and it seemed after a while, that answering the question was not the point. And, and we spent the 45 minutes as asking questions, and I think everyone left left the meeting so satisfied, like that was the most profound thing that could have happened that evening was just to hear all those questions.

So

I encourage you all to take explore the world of questioning and see if it doesn't make a huge difference in your lives and lives of all beings. So thank you very much