

Onward Leading Questions

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So welcome here.

In some areas of life, having good questions is a treasure. And in Buddhism, Buddhist practice, good questions are worth more than their weight in gold. They're very important. And now there can be questions that close things, questions that narrow the scope and shut... Sometimes it's a question that gets the other person to just shut down, close up. And then there are questions that help people to open up.

There are questions that really good questions in spirituality, at least Buddhist spirituality, are questions that kind of open us to possibilities. Right. Maybe open us beyond the edges of our thoughts, our beliefs, our ideas. Often human beings are trapped inside of their particular thought world, their particular way they think about themselves, think about the world around them, the particular orientation they have, the important issues of their life. And there can be a question that can kind of just open up the walls of that. And we see there's a world as much bigger, wider, that our scope of our attention can open up and feel kind of a wondrous immensity of potential, possibility, of openness. There's a big world here beyond our concerns. They can shift how we see ourselves.

So we find in the ancient tradition a variety of questions that's asked... In fact, the classic story of the Buddha's awakening involved him asking himself questions. He asked a series of questions that kind of opened for him and led to another question, another question, and then eventually brought him to awakening. It's fairly common for many people, I think, to have questions of why. Why is this? And there's common questions as, what? What is this? Or what do I do about it? And as a teacher, I get a lot of people that come with questions like that, especially why? Or what is this? What's happening here? And those are fair questions to ask and good.

But there are other questions that maybe are more important than... because they're not so conceptual. They're not kind of limiting themselves to maybe just their own domain. There are questions that evoke intimacy and immediacy here in the present moment. And so one of the interesting questions, and you see in the ancient, the most ancient Buddhist literature, the questions are... One of the questions is, where? Where? Where? Just where? What does that evoke? Where?

Now, if you've lost something, then where is, you know, everywhere. You're searching for where it is, and you're searching outside of yourself. But as in mindfulness practice, where is your experience? Where are you? Probably some of you have had the experience being with someone, or maybe you were that someone. Right. Where you look at them, where are you? I mean, of course, they're right there, right? But they're like in their mind, in their head, and they're piazza. They're so caught up, almost like they're possessed or something. And, you know, it's like you feel sometimes like you want to put your hand in front of their eyes. Where are you? You know, you don't seem to be even here with me.

And so where are you? Where? Where is your experience? Where are you? Are you in yourself or you're not in yourself? Where are you really? Are you still there with yesterday, whatever was happening there? I had a difficult day yesterday and this morning when I got up, I would kind of say my body was still in yesterday. The leftover feelings of challenge in the world, kind of still lingering around. And so, yeah, so, but do I go back into yesterday? Or do I stay with how I was today?

Yes. Where am I? Okay, here I am, feeling a little off. That's where I am. A body that feels off. Body that feels tired. And so, and then the question is, where is what you're experiencing? So maybe I was feeling off. Where is that? Oh, I feel it in the shoulder, something funny kind of feeling of tingling or vulnerability or tenderness from my elbow up to, back of my arm, from the elbow up to the shoulder, going down on the side of my rib cage and coming kind of with this, with kind of a tightness and agitation in my belly. Where? There. That's where it is.

And then with insight practice, it was, well, if that's where it is, where will you be? Well, one answer is you'll be with it. Here, where? In insight practice, the question is one of the key questions, not what is happening, but where is it happening so you can get close to it, so you can be with it, be present for it, hold it, feel it. And discover the what, what is it? But you discover not by thinking about it, not by analyzing it, not by having some... plan around it, but by asking the question, where is it, then you can bring your attention close to really get to know it. Find out what's there.

One of the wonderful things we discover through mindfulness practice is how little we have

to fix things if you're mindful. Some people have a very intense idea. If I'm uncomfortable, it has to be fixed. If I'm not living up to the standards, it has to be fixed. I have to do something. But, you know, we're a natural system, we're a natural ecosystem, I think, as I talked about recently, that wants to go into homeostasis, wants to go into balance, has a capacity for it. And sometimes the foreign species that we bring in and the invasive weeds we bring into the system, you know, come from the mind. It comes from the mind trying to make it different and change it and do something with it and judge it and all the stuff we do.

And so, but one of the real gifts of practice is to do nothing about what's happening except be intimate with it, except hold it in awareness, and allow something deeper to unfold and to move and change. So the question, where is it? It's in my belly. The experience, where is it? So it might be that you're in some kind of public event that's chaotic and difficult. And, you know, where, the obvious answer, I mean this chaos, those people out there, they're chaotic. Yeah, but where is the experience? How are you experiencing it? Where is it in you?

Well, you know that you feel discombobulated. That's a very vague answer. That kind of keeps you in the kind of like discombobulated. What is that? Yeah. But, so where is discombobulation? Where in the body, is it your little toe? Is it in the back of your knee? And slowly you see, well, not quite those places maybe. But there's a lot of restlessness in my chest. And now there's a lot of, I think, fire in my skull. A lot of kind of tightness and contraction. There's, and when I feel that, be with it, where is it? In my head, in my chest. Then, get close. Then you might discover that maybe there's annoyance, maybe there's fear, maybe there's confusion.

What to do about that? Ask where. Where is it? Get closer. Where is it? Be with it. Maybe you don't have to fix anything. Maybe the inner system that knows how to unfold, settle, open up, reveal what's going on can take care of the situation better than you. So where is it is such an important question, rather than what is it, which triggers more and more thoughts about it. You don't have to know the what, but you have to know how to be with it, how to hold it, be close to it. Intimacy and immediacy is kind of the hallmark of mindfulness practice.

And then it can get more interesting, I think, because you can ask yourself another where question. So say you feel like maybe afraid, and the fear is mostly a lot of agitation in the chest or in the belly. And then you can ask your question, where are you now? Where are you, the one who's aware of the fear? And then you realize, well, the fear is one thing, and maybe you're in the control tower, watching it, thinking about it, predicting what this means, trying to fix it, trying to hide it, trying to escape it, spinning out in the head.

And so the where are you, not in the abstract that you're in this room or in this place, but

where is that part of you that you think of this is who I am? Where is that? And maybe it's in the control tower in the head. And then get, what is it to be, well if it's there, then let's get close to it. Maybe that's more important than getting close to the fear. Let's get close to the one who's afraid. And what do you discover there if you get close to it? Maybe there's a tightness, a contraction. Maybe there's a kind of energetic agitation around the thoughts, behind the thoughts.

Most people are locked into what the thoughts are thinking. But it's possible to have an intimacy with the whole experience of being the thinker, the ecology of it. And so what does that feel like? To be thinking so much. So where are you, that question, with the inside of you? Where is that you that's being aware of the fear? And that can reveal a whole place to bring attention to and to hold and be aware of that opens up the field, allows something different to happen that can't happen if that I up there in the control tower keeps spinning and doing and making and figuring and thinking and planning and judging and reacting to what's going on.

Of course we do some of those things, but the mindfulness practice is to feel, where is that happening inside of me? And what happens if I bring and hold it in attention? Hold it in caring attention, compassionate, loving attention, gentle attention. Not to, you know, there are some people, I practice a sledgehammer approach to mindfulness, where I was just going to penetrate and just break open and get there. You know, it was kind of violent. And generally, it never worked.

But what about, you know, what about the... Recently, I spent time with my cousin who... was out in front of his house one day on the sidewalk, and there was a little parakeet that had fallen onto the ground and was kind of lost and discombobulated. And so he picked it up and he didn't know what to do with it. He was just holding it. He was very touched by his holding the little parakeet in his hand and seemed to be happy to be there and shivering. And then some stranger walked by and said, what do I do with it? And their friend just said, I guess it's yours now.

So he took it to a pet shop where they knew about birds and got some instructions and support for it. And now it lives with him. And the parrot's favorite place is just on his neck here, inside his shirt. Pecking at his neck. Come sits on the shoulder and... And so, you know, to hold it's, you know, how do you hold that? In the same way, how do you hold yourself? How do you hold what's difficult in you? And you can only hold it this way carefully like that if you know where it is. Where is it? Where is it really?

It's so easy to be, like, afraid. And it's just, where's that cloud of fear? Fear is everywhere. Fear

is the whole experience. Fear penetrates everything. It's... because we're not really living in the immediacy and intimacy of the moment. We're kind of living in the vague kind of image, idea, sense that the thinking mind kind of radiates out. It's everywhere the fear. No. There's a place that's the heart of it. Can you find it? Where is it? And hold it. Be with it.

And so you can ask, where's the fear? You can ask, and... Where are you in relationship to it? Where's the one, the you that's doing the practice, that's reacting to it, that's approaching it, doing the... Where's that? And hold that. Sometimes that's more important. And don't get involved in Buddhist ideas of self and no-self. You don't even see no Buddhism. There's no self. And you know, and so you're telling us, where are you? That's not the question. That's not right. You're really leading people astray. You have to say there's no self.

That's more that thinning conceptual world. It actually keeps people away from the intimacy, immediacy of now. What's important is your experience, not really what it is, and know where that experience is, and respect that enough to hold it, to be with it. So where's the fear? Where's the you? Where are you? And then, if you're really there with that process, then there's a third question. Where's the awareness of all of that? Where's the awareness that knows the experience of I? Where's the awareness that knows and holds the fear? Where's awareness? Where's attention?

And for some people, that kind of question, kind of that sort of question, then it opens up the field. Because awareness is something that doesn't lend itself usually to a very exact, careful kind of attention place. If it does, which it can, that's invaluable to see, because that gives you a place to bring your awareness. Awareness of awareness. If it's a small place, be aware of that. But at some point, you start becoming fascinating that if you're aware of being aware, where is that, where is both of those forms of awareness? Are they two different kinds of awareness? Is one of them larger that holds the other? Where is this awareness? Does it have a place?

And maybe awareness doesn't have a place, maybe that doesn't have a place. Or maybe that doesn't have a bounded place. Maybe it centers someplace. But maybe it points to some wider potential, wider possibility beyond ourselves. Their usual sense of self, their usual sense of the world we live in, the usual sense of preoccupation. And what if... a kind of a boundaryless awareness, a kind of undefined presence is where freedom is found.

So the other question that the earliest texts depict the Buddha is using, he did use, he asked the question where, and that was very meaningful for this path of freedom. Another question was when? When this is here, what arises then? What appears then? When this is here, what appears? So you can ask the question, when you're aware, what arises then? When you're

being reactive, what arises then? What follows?

If you're angry, really pissed off, and someone cuts you off in traffic, what arises then? When you're peaceful... and someone cuts you off in traffic. What arises then? So when something is there, how does that condition the situation? What changes then? So when you're aware of your fear, what happens? How does that unfold? What arises then? What occurs then?

So that's a question, why that's kind of an opening question, is it's a question of not what is it, but how do things change? How are things evolving and changing, growing, shifting? And so the interest is in the process rather than locking into this is what is there. Now you know exactly what's supposed to happen. They are open to, what is this? I can't, maybe you don't know. When this is here, what happens? Well, let's see. Let's be available with this immediacy and intimacy. When I hold the fear non-reactively, what occurs? So that leaves you open to discover.

When you judge your fear or judge yourself for being afraid, if you don't ask any other questions, then you may be locked into those judgments. This is how it is. But if you ask ourselves, well, when there's judgments, what happens then? So it's always looking beyond itself. It's always looking at the process, the movement. And often we don't give ourselves a chance for a process. We don't give a chance to movement and to unfold because we're locked into our judgment, locked into our concern, and we kind of get stuck in it.

So where? So we can be present for our experience. Where is your experience? Where is the experience very personally and intimately? Where is it? How is it? And then when you meet that with kindness, what happens? When you meet it with annoyance, what happens? So you have to kind of, when, here, how am I here? What's happening when I'm here? Who am I when I'm here? And when I'm this kind of I, what arises? And... And so this movement towards seeing, that's what the Buddha pointed to. When this happens, what arises?

Then he also said, when this happens, where does it come from? And not, and again, not figuring it out, but when there's fear, where does the fear come from? What's underneath the fear? What's the foundation for fear? What has to be there to be afraid? And there's a lot of different answers for that. Sometimes it's vulnerability. Sometimes it's hurt. People feel deeply hurt, betrayed in this life. And so that hurt makes it very, very tender and easy to be afraid because we're going to be hurt again.

So when there's X, where is it arising from? And that question is pointing to even greater intimacy, really getting close, just keep feeling, feeling, feeling. So I've been in situations like this where I felt something was happening with me, having some emotion, and I asked the

question, when this is here, now that it's here, where is it coming from? Where is it arising from? And I didn't have an answer, and that was great. But without the answer, it kind of opened my attention to just feel the whole situation more carefully, maybe more curious, more attentive, more quiet, more peaceful, quiet.

Okay, I don't know what this is, but it's certainly arising from something. If I become quieter, stiller, less thinking, and just kind of allow everything to be there, have that intimacy with what's happening, what shows itself? Does anything arise? Anything occur? So to have these questions that are supportive for change, supportive for growth, and as maybe many of you know, that, because I'm saying it a lot lately, in American Buddhism, in English Buddhism, we use the word practice a lot. And one of the common questions people might ask in our kind of English-speaking Buddhism is, what's your practice? And it's fine to practice. Right.

But the Pali word, the ancient Buddhist word that's being translated as practice, is *bhāvanā*. And *bhāvanā* literally means to grow, to cultivate. And so you ask people, what's your practice? And people might respond with a technique. I practice mindfulness of breathing. I'm doing loving-kindness practice. I'm doing concentration practice. I'm doing insight practice, which is all fine, but it's a little bit abstract.

If instead you were asked, what are you growing? What are you growing in your inner life? Many people, if you ask that question, I think they stop and have to think about it. Oh, no one's ever asked me that. What are you growing? Are you growing confidence? Are you growing kindness? Are you growing compassion? Are you growing peace? Are you growing in wisdom? Are you growing in patience? Are you growing in your capacity to let go? Are you growing in ease?

I love the word ease. And so I love the idea of ease. And I love that as kind of the heart of Buddhism because it's so... I think it's unpretentious, it's not so grand. Just find your ease. Growing your sense of ease in this world. Someone might answer the question, what are you growing? I'm growing a greater sense of feeling at home, in myself, in my heart, in this world. So there's many answers. And we might have different answers, different days, different months, different years. What are you growing? What are you cultivating? What are you cultivating?

But what I like about that question, as opposed to what's your practice, is that what you're growing, is a question that points back to some kind of immediacy and intimacy here in oneself. There's a feeling, a sense, a reference point for what we're talking about when we're growing something spiritually, emotionally, that is not there when we say, what is the practice? And, in fact, sometimes people have not used the word practice. They literally use

the word technique. What is your technique? What's your meditation technique? And that makes it even more like something abstract than an engineering project.

So what are you growing? So if you like what questions, what are you growing? And then where are you growing it? And who's the one growing it? Yeah. Or where is it going, growing? Or when you're growing, where does that come from? Where does that occur? So these are all kind of mindfulness questions. To ask yourself these kinds of questions when you meditate, not incessantly, not like, again, not as a big project, but with the principle to ask questions then that allow you to kind of rest or relax into the open possibility, the openness of something revealing itself to you rather than you figuring it out.

So I like to think, I often like to think of this practice of mindfulness as a process of making ourselves available for revelation. It's a big religious word, revelation. We're here to allow something to be revealed. Right? Nothing's, you know, too grand. Don't get too excited. But the basis of your peace, basis of your goodness and your compassion, your love. Can you really let your experience be revealed to you rather than coming back to always being the doer, going to do the thing, to be the one who's going to understand?

So all these questions then, whatever you're doing, whatever is happening, whatever way you find yourself... Where is the experience of this now? Where is the I that's engaged in this whole process? Where is it? What's arising in it? What's occurring there? What's the process that's out going on? And then when you kind of begin getting a sense of that intimacy and immediacy with here, then to ask the question, where's the awareness? Where's attention? Where's awareness?

And at least for me, that question has been a wonderful question because it dissolves the walls of the mind. Awareness is everywhere. You can't point to the edge of awareness. So questions, open-ended questions that you can ask yourself for this practice. So, those are my thoughts. We have some questions if a time, if you have some questions for me or questions for yourself. Some examples.

So, Gil, you mentioned the question, what are you growing? Yeah. And it occurs to me there are a couple different angles to that question. One is kind of an intentional, like I planted broccoli, and so I'm growing broccoli. And the other is kind of more of an observational, like, you know, I got this vegetable box here, and I'm not sure what's coming up right now. And I was wondering if you had anything to say about those two different angles.

Well, the first thing to just celebrate that you would point those two different sides of it out. I appreciate it a lot. And I think that there's a point in practice where it's more observational.

And then it is intentional. It's wonderful to be intentional around this, to have some clear idea that what you want to grow, how you want to change. But it's also at some point to really begin to understand this really this natural wonder, this amazing capacity we have to kind of get out of our own way and bring into the mix of here something very healthy very wholesome, which is awareness itself, just being really, be attentive, be really present for stuff, and then find out what wants to grow and have it be revealed. So you observe it rather than do it.

And sooner or later we have, in this practice here, you have to get out of the way of this practice and not be the doer or the intender. It's best even not to have any idea of what's supposed to happen. In fact, it's not possible to do this *Vipassanā* practice to its full potential if you are always knowing what's supposed to happen. If you do that, if you know what's supposed to happen, you're going to trip yourself up. So I love what you brought up, the observational side of that.

I had the good fortune of studying philosophy or religion with Jacob Needleman at San Francisco And he used to start, I had several classes with him. And the first beginning of every class, he would say, we don't do answers in this class. We only do questions. We try to do better questions. And so I thought... idea works in the academic setting as well, and maybe in the spiritual setting. And then relative to what you just said, Tignat Han at one point suggests that you write down on a piece of paper, are you sure, and put it somewhere? So I have that on my computer monitor.

Yeah, it's a little bit similar to Suzuki Roshi, who reduced all of Buddhism into three words. Not a question, but it's maybe a little similar. Not always so. So if it's not always so, then the good way to be is curious. Many years ago, I went and was doing a retreat with an English *Vipassanā* teacher named Christopher Tuttmus. And it was a group discussion and someone started to talk about their practice and started off with early on in their statement, something like they were waiting, waiting for something to happen in their practice. I'm waiting for something. And Christopher Thitmus in a very kind way said, if you're waiting, you miss the bus. So what's the bus here? Whatever is happening in the moment.

So, last night I was talking with a friend and she said, oh, have you heard what happened with Iran? And I said, no. And she was like, are you kidding? How did you not know what happened in Iran in the last two days? And I said, well, and then I read about it in the New York Times before I went to bed, which probably was a mistake. In the middle of the night, I woke up. And it was hard to get back to sleep. But then in the morning when I woke up, I was really a lot of sensation in my belly, which I believe was fear. So with this example and

what you've been telling us or talking about, you know, the when, no, where and when, right? Could you help me? Could you address this a little bit, this example?

Yeah. Because I was aware that I was, this is fear, I think, blah, blah, blah. And so I, but could you talk a little bit about that example? Yeah, so the fear was in your belly. And what's the experience like there of fear? It was very tight. And it was, I don't usually, thankfully, I don't usually feel that. But I was, so it was a kind of a dramatic thing. And I realize, okay, I associate this with what's going on in Iran. So that, yeah, that's kind of abstract. But who's the I? Where's the I? So where am I with that?

Yeah, the you that's reacting to that, thinking about it, concerned about it, where does that reside in you? Well, my first response to that is that I was... I was aware that, you know, this is really, something's really going on here, and I want to be with it, sort of. So twice now you use the word I very strongly. Where's that I? Where does that I live in you? If you go, is it in your little toe?

Yes. Well, it was in my head, I think. Your head? Yeah. So if you bring your attention to the head to feel what that eye feels like there, that's the eyeing, the mying, the meeing, the what does it feel like there? What does it feel like in my head with this? Oh, okay. Well, I was aware, well, it was, these are... Tough questions for me. I don't think I'm the only one. But so where was I? So now that you're perplexed about this, where does that perplexion live in you? Where are you experiencing that right now?

Probably in my head. Probably in my head. In the back of the head or tip of your nose? Well, I'm feeling tightness in my jaw. So what happens if you just allow your jaw to be tight, but stay close to it? Now I'm feeling sadness. Things change quickly. And then where is the sadness in you? It's in my eyes, it's in my stomach, it's in my chest.

Yeah, it's probably been waiting for you, the sadness. In those three places, where is the sadness the strongest? Yes. I would say, in my face, in my jaw. Yeah. So then go into your face just to allow it to be there. Just be present for it. And you just offer very simple presence for it. It's not a mistake. It's nothing to fix. Nothing. Just be... Then when you do that, what happens? What occurs? What happens?

I feel more sadness. Perfect. There's only three things that could happen. It can get weaker, it can get stronger, or stay the same. So you're on track. Right. So now we're in a different world than the world of fear. And so this, so the question is, what's the foundation? What's the source from which the fear arises? I don't know you're well enough, but it could be that fear has power over you and strong because it's arising out of some kind of underlying, maybe

semi-conscious sadness. But if you really stop and feel this whole phenomena, you start feeling the deeper sadness. And it's healthy to do that.

Remember, this ecosystem of who we are, it knows how to, it knows how to heal. It knows how to find its way forward. Right? So even sadness, we don't need to be afraid of it. It should be deeply respected if we can give it that nice room. So the question, where, where is that sadness? And when you bring attention to it, what happens next? That's that simple. So there's an example. Does that give me a little more concrete?

Yes, yes, yes. Thank you. Great. Thank you. So it seems like... All of this process is a wear in the physical, you know, the headache or the eyes or whatever that you're going. Is that what you're trying to say? Because I'm thinking sometimes it seems like a thought will be or an emotion will be some in here somewhere. Right. But it isn't a specific physical manifestation. Are you assuming that all emotions are going to have a physical manifestation? Is that your assumption?

Yes, yes. Every emotion has a physical corollary. It's without the body to have to... You kind of wouldn't know really what emotions you have. And so it could be subtle, it could be in a small little place, it could be broad and strong. And maybe we can't feel, some people sometimes we can't, some people can't feel their emotions very well. They might have general sense, they know what it is, because they haven't developed, grown the capacity to feel their body. They've done the opposite. We live in a society that grows the capacity to be shut down and shut off from our body. Yeah.

And so with mindfulness practice, mindfulness of the body, that over time we're developing greater and greater sensitivity to feel what's happening in the body, feel the emotions. And the wonderful thing about that is that the more we can feel in the body, the more room there is for this natural system to work well. So just focusing on the sensations in the body, not working, worrying about the why or the history or the future. Just put that aside. There might be a time to ask about the why questions and think about things, maybe journal, go for a walk with friends. But what most people don't give themselves over to enough is something much simpler than that. And actually, too many questions why we lose ourselves in the process.

And so the idea is, where is it? And can I open to it? Can I feel it? Can I just be with it? What happens if I don't try to fix it, if I don't ask why? But instead, just hold a gentle, hold a gently in awareness like my cousin holding that parakeet. That was a wonderful image. Yeah. And so this is what, so mindfulness has a lot to do with this process of not asking why, but really discovering what's there and And some of the deeper things, more challenging things, we might not be ready to resolve or something until we've developed a greater capacity to be

present. We've learned how to really bring presence. Okay, thank you.

So maybe the last one, yes? Could this be related to the idea of chakras? Mm-hmm. We usually, in our, there's a wonderfully rich tradition in India about chakras. In early Buddhism, our school, we don't really talk about chakras, partly because, as I understand it, partly because it tends to narrow the focus a little bit. It's like it already comes with it, a whole bunch of ideas of what chakras are and how they work and chakra systems. And so we prefer in our system not to, not to, overlay that kind of idea on top of our experience. Just let the experience be what it is on its own without that kind of label or that kind of system. And other systems will use it, and that's fine.

Okay, so, well, thank you. So where are you? Thank you.