Dharmette: Questions (1 of 5) Where That Includes

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So, hello and welcome to the beginning of a week of *Dharma* talks. I'm happy to be back here. Maybe because I've been on a teaching retreat the last week, what's on my mind is that, when we do mindfulness practice, especially meditation, in that context, it's really great to have questions to guide the practice rather than answers.

There's a very strong desire that people have for answers, and people will often come to me with very sincere and, sometimes, very great intent around questions they want answered. They're usually good questions. I appreciate them, and I certainly hope to try to respond well. But there's something very invaluable about having the question and not the answer, if the questions can be ones that make us pay more attention, be more present, and be more awake to what's happening.

So part of the art of *Dharma* practice is knowing how to ask questions. Not just ask the questions that are on the top of your mind, or intellectually interesting, or, you know, the obvious thing that's going to solve your problems. Rather, ask questions that promote and support you to find your own answers, to find a different way of being that supports a certain kind of way of being awake and being present. The Buddha asked himself questions for his *Dharma* practice. All of us who follow in the footsteps of the Buddha are partly following in the footsteps of his asking good questions that supported him, that guided him to his awakening.

One of the fascinating aspects of his questioning was that he asked a lot of where questions when he was looking at himself, looking at his existential life, his life of suffering. He didn't ask why he suffers. He didn't ask what about the suffering. He asked the question, "Where is this suffering arising? Where is it appearing?" There are two things about that question. One is that where it's appearing, where it's arising, is now. It isn't, "Where did it appear from? Where did it come from?" Rather, where is it appearing now?

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And the where is the place. Is there a place within that the suffering, my distress, my fear, my worry, my anger—where is it arising? Where is it manifesting within? That puts attention in a very different place than if we ask, "Why are these things happening to me?" That puts us up into our discursive mind, our figuring-out mind, our questioning mind. It might put us very quickly into doubt and discouragement because it's so difficult to figure out. But the question where is simpler.

It doesn't require a lot of intellect. It doesn't require a lot of complicated answers about things. It's a location, and it might not be easy to find because some people are not used to paying careful attention to their body. But part of *Dharma* practice is learning how to become more and more embodied. A lot of practice has to do with learning to live whole, holistically, with the body at the center. Because the body is a home for everything about us, and when we live from the neck up in our thoughts or in our eyes, out looking at a screen all day, we're really truncating the full animate intelligence of this human system that we are.

The animate intelligence that is deeply connected to the body—this ancient AI that we are—requires all the systems to be operating together. That involves all the deep sensitivity, processing, and opening that happens in the body. So to ask the question, "Where is my suffering in my body? Where is the home of it? Where does it most manifest?" is a way of beginning to trust the body, beginning to include the body as part of the process of practice and *Dharma*. It also doesn't require a lot of explanations. It's not a question about, "Why am I suffering? Why am I discouraged, distressed, angry?" The why questions are secondary in meditation itself, but where?

The reason why where is so good is that what we want to do in mindfulness practice is to gather our attention around that place of where awareness is. Awareness is a phenomenal ability. When we bring awareness to something inside ourselves, like where the anger is within us, where it is in the body—in the chest, or the face, or the belly—and we hold it in awareness, it's kind of like awareness is a soft bath where certain things can dissolve. Awareness is like a wonderful nest where something profound has a chance to maybe develop and grow and break free of its shell, the egg. Or awareness is a little bit like sunlight that allows a plant to grow, or allows the ice to melt.

Awareness is very little—I mean, it's not a complicated thing—but it's very significant. It's kind of like allowing there to be space around whatever's going on, so the fullness of how it can be processed, the fullness of how all the different parts of our inner intelligence, the animate intelligence we are, can become coordinated, can become oriented, can come in harmony with that thing. If we only focus on something as if it's a problem and it has to be

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fixed, and we have to find the answer to do it, figure it out, we're actually dramatically limiting the ability to bring together this huge animate intelligence we have to hold it all and allow something deeper to happen and unfold. That is more than we could do if we are the ones who are going to fix it or control it or make something happen. And so, awareness makes all kinds of things possible within the field of awareness that are not necessarily you doing it. It's the bigger intelligence than you that's here in your psychophysical body.

And so, where? It's such an important question. Where is it arising? Where is it appearing? Sometimes, if we do that, we see that it's arising from something else. Rather than asking the question, "Why is this happening?" people say, like, if we're angry, it might be because we were hurt. So if you sit and, you know, just ask, "Where is the anger?" and hold it, then, as we hold it, you might see, "Where is it arising? Where is the anger arising from?" Oh, it's arising from the hurt.

That keeps it really simple. But if you ask, you know, "What's the cause of my anger?" we might override the hurt. We might get to the person who disrespected us and want to give them a piece of our mind. But this question, where, kind of connects us here. Part of this deepening of attention that can happen when we hold something in awareness is that we then have a chance to see more deeply what's going on. What's the ecosystem? What are the different factors that are coming into play? More gets revealed.

And then the Buddha, in his case, kept asking the question, "Where is this? Where is this? Where is this arising? Where is this appearing?" He didn't fall back on the questions why or what is it. Just where. How I understand this process the Buddha went through is that he was just looking at the obvious. He wasn't trying to figure anything out. He was just here: "Where is this? This is what I see. What I'm seeing, I know what it is. Where is it?"

At other times in our life, the question why is really useful, when it is, in fact, part of the complicated kind of mental life that we're living. One of the great places for the question why is in questioning what we're saying, what we're about to say. Why do I want to say what I'm about to say? What's the motivation? What's the reason? What am I trying to accomplish? Why do I want to say it?

And never settle for one answer, because many times the different layers of the mind, corners of the mind, can have multiple reasons why we're trying to do something. Someone asks us, a stranger asks us on the street, for directions someplace. Why do you want to give them an answer? You want to be helpful, and then you don't think about that anymore. But there might be other things happening as well. It might be that you want to be praised for being a good direction giver. It could be that you're actually afraid of them partly, and you want to

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be able to give them instructions right away so they can move on and get out of your way. All of the above.

And so sometimes it's useful to ask why questions. Where I find it most useful is in our speech. Speech is often motivated, and to ask why, we discover the motivation. If we really get into the why in the speech, and why we're going to say what we're going to say, at some point, when we get into feeling the emotions and the inner life around it, then it might be useful to ask, "Where is this? Where is this inner life?" And to marshal together, bring together, this wonderful capacity we have for awareness that grows and works really well when we're embodied in the where place, where our inner life lives, where emotions live, even thinking, bodily sensations.

So I'm hoping you get the sense that these simple questions, where, and sometimes why, maybe open up the field more widely, so it's more inclusive without having to figure things out. And so, this week is a week about questions, and I look forward to it. Thank you.

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