Dharmette: What? To Step out of Habits

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So, hello and welcome to the second talk on asking questions. It's one of the really great capacities, I believe, of humanity. Maybe other creatures do this in their own way. But to be able to ask questions allows for new possibilities, new understandings, and new ways of being. It also allows us to step out of habit.

Habits tend not to be so helpful because, one way or the other, a habit ends up being on automatic pilot, and we miss the fullness of our life, of our experience. We miss seeing new possibilities, new ways of being. And if the habits are unhealthy, it's even worse. Unhealthy, unwholesome habits can debilitate us. And one of those is how we think.

Thinking is one of the most common activities of humans. Sometimes it goes rapid-fire. Sometimes, for some people, it seems like we're on multiple tracks at once. And if the train of thinking is a bad habit, a painful habit, a fixed way of seeing things that are not necessarily inspiring, even dispiriting, then we're reinforcing and building up a life that's problematic, a way of seeing that's problematic.

In fact, unhealthy ways of thinking, if they're a habit, become their own problem. They become self-generating, in that we start feeling—let me see here. It's a little bit cold here today without the heater, so I'm trying to have a space heater, but that's blowing cold air now.

So unhealthy ways of thinking are kind of self-fulfilling, self-generating. If, for example, we have fear, which is easy to do in the world, but we think through the filter of fear, our thinking carries the fear in it. Then the fear reinforces the feeling of fear. It reinforces the ability to see in the world what is dangerous.

We're reminding ourselves that we have this belief that things are going to be bad for us or dangerous. But the very way of thinking makes things feel worse for us. Sometimes the great

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danger is in the habitual way of thinking anxious thoughts. That's the danger. So it's a self-fulfilling danger.

Even though the thoughts are about something else than the thinking, that's where the big danger comes. If there's aversive thinking, and that's a habit, then the aversive thinking is not comfortable. It's irritating, or it's annoying, or it's just uncomfortable. And so, right there, there's proof that something is uncomfortable.

Something is off in this world, and we don't necessarily tie it to the thinking. But the thinking then reinforces the idea that something is, you know, provides the justification or the proof that something is wrong in the world and there's a problem out there that's causing the problem. But some of what we're feeling is the byproduct of the thinking itself, thinking adversely. And so there's kind of an idea that we're not going to find the solution by thinking in the problematic way. The problem itself is not going to be the solution.

So if we perpetuate problematic thinking, we're not going to find the solution there. Partly because of the mood, the secondary mood, or the secondary impact that the mood or the feeling tone of that thinking has on us. It changes our outlook. It changes the way we see the world.

So sometimes we don't want to try to solve the problem with the problem in the problem. We want to break the habit. Some of the problems might still exist, but the habit of thinking that way, habit of particular ways of thinking, is debilitating and can perpetuate things for decades. And so, how do we break these habits?

That's one of the functions of mindfulness. Any mindfulness we're doing, mindfulness practice, is meant to support us to break the habitual ways of thinking, which, because they're habitual, involve meaning. We're stuck in something, and mindfulness is here to unstick us. So simply staying with the breath and being committed to being with every breath interrupts the cycles of perpetuating thinking that we're caught in.

We might get caught for a moment, but we come back to the breath. We come back to the breath. And slowly, there starts to be a loosening, a softening, a weakening of the habitual way of thinking. If we keep coming back to the present moment, whether it's to the breathing, to the body, to sounds, whatever it is, for that moment we're breaking free from the habit of always having the same attitude, the same way of thinking.

Provided that mindfulness is not thinkfulness. Some people confuse the two. So when they're mindful of breathing, it's synonymous. It's completely joined with the habitual way of looking at something: “I'm breathing. I'm a problem. I'm breathing the wrong way. That

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was the different wrong kind of in-breath. If I had a better one, I have to look for the perfect one, and I'll never get the perfect one. The *Buddha* probably had this wonderfully sweet, you know, angelic way of breathing, and my breathing is not that way, and so I'm doing it wrong."

So we're with the breath, but we don't really see these deep habits, these deep grooves of thinking that come along with being mindful. So what I'm offering this week is the idea that questions can break us out of those habits. There are simple questions we can ask that are meant to kind of open the field for a new way of being, a new way of seeing. And one of those questions is, "What is this?"

Just a question: "What?" Sometimes I ask myself, "What?" Sometimes maybe the attitude is, "What in the world is going on here?" And that kind of drops me out of my reactive mind, my habitual thinking about it. It gives me kind of a fresh start. Ah, it's like this.

So in meditation, whatever's going on, if you recognize there's some physical pain in the body, rather than the old habits of relating to it, it's like, "What is this?" And the movement, kind of the internal movement, is not physical in any way, but is the movement of what I do with my hands now, where I open my hands from holding near my chest and then open them wide, kind of like to receive and lean forward. "What is this?" I'm here to receive, to hold, to be available.

So internally, that's the kind of feeling. What is this inhale? What is this pain? What is this experience of thinking? And not to go along with the thoughts, the ideas, but what's the experience like?

And so, in mindfulness, it's always going back to what's the experience like? How does it sense? What does it feel like? What is it as an event here and now, where we're not necessarily so concerned with the content of thoughts, especially if we're trying to break the old habits of thinking, which, after ten, twenty, fifty years, it starts to dawn on us: "I'm doing a lot of this, and it doesn't really serve me. I wonder if there's a new way."

And so, what is this? What is this? It is a way of setting ourselves free. It's also something we can do with our friends and strangers, rather than coming with our old associations of persons, beliefs, attitudes, hurts, desires, expectations. Internally, we don't have to say it out loud. But who? What is this? What's happening here?

And I like the question "What?" in this way, if we don't try to answer it. I like it because, for me at least, it just opens the playing field. If I ask the question, "Who is this person?" then, at least for me, I tend to go into my head more and start thinking. But the what? What's here?

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What is this person that's here? What's happening now with this person with us? What's here?

And it kind of opens up new possibilities. I'm more likely to see in new ways. And if what I see is the old ways, like if I have, you know, maybe a little bit of fear around being with a person, I might say the question, "What is this?" and kind of be counterphobic, kind of step toward the person. Maybe not literally, but just like, what's really here?

Can I feel and sense and see without the fear? Without the fear thoughts spinning? Or sometimes, if it seems appropriate, I do it to my fear: "What is this fear?" And I'm present for it. What is this?

Rather than letting the fear dictate what I think, fear thoughts, predictive thoughts of what terrible thing is going to happen, and that reinforces the attitude, the mood of fear. The mood of fear reinforces more thinking, fearful thoughts, and so the cycle just continues. And some of these cycles of the mood that comes with our thinking, reinforcing the thinking, can go on for years and years.

So it isn't just breaking the habit of what we're thinking. It's breaking the cycle of the way the mood that we have reinforces the very way we're thinking, and the way we're thinking reinforces the mood. So this—it's a dramatic thing. It's a powerful thing to do, this.

So, what is this? What's happening here? Just the question, "What?" can be enough. So try it today. Try some appropriate way. Try in some way that you feel quite comfortable and safe to do this.

Live with a simple question: "What?" And don't try to answer. Don't think the answer. Don't use your thinking to find the answer. Let this question, as a mindfulness exercise, put you more fully into the direct experience of the moment.

And may this help you to step out of unhealthy habits you have, just in time for the holidays here in the United States. Thank you.

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