Dharmette: Questions (3 of 5) Freeing Questions

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Hello, everyone. This is the third talk on questions.

Down through the ages, all the way to the time of the Buddha, wise people ask questions. They ask questions of their teachers, but also ask questions of themselves. The Buddha asked himself questions, and it made all the difference. We're here today because he asked questions that led to his awakening.

In the Zen tradition I practiced in, there are a lot of questions. Sometimes there are questions that quiet the mind, even stop the mind. Sometimes there are questions that lead to a very deep participation and engagement with the world. When I was a monk in the Zen tradition, I came upon a number of questions that were the guiding questions for my seeking, my practice.

One of the earliest ones was this: I had spent some time alone, and it was so meaningful. I wasn't planning to live alone or be a hermit, but I asked myself, “How can I be alone with others?” How can I have this inner sense of freedom, this inner sense of well-being, of peace, that I discovered when I was alone, when I'm with others? Maybe it's an unfortunate expression to say it this way, but it's what I said: “How can I be alone with others?” That was what I set out to discover for a number of years practicing Zen.

Another question I had was, “How can I participate with what I'm doing?” Very simple. I carried that with me through all the doings in Zen: working in the kitchen, doing carpentry when I first got there, doing compost, cleaning bathrooms. Whatever it was I was doing, how can I participate with it?

The idea was to overcome how I held myself back, how I did things halfheartedly. I didn't include all of myself. I was in check or resisting, or sometimes worse. I wanted to discover the joy of participating with each thing I'm doing as fully as I can.

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Part of this questioning, this use of questions, is to find our freedom—to claim, maybe, our freedom. Many of us will claim our freedom in the external living of life. We make decisions for ourselves about all kinds of things, and we don't want anyone else to tell us what to do. We want to have the freedom to choose for ourselves, and we feel resentful, push back, or get angry with people who are trying to tell us what to do because we want our freedom.

Adolescents, at some point, need to and want to have their freedom. They can't wait to live their freedom, leaving home from their parents. They need to discover what it's like to make decisions on their own and establish a life of their own. This is part of adulthood.

But what's strange is that we are willing to live under the hegemony of our thoughts. We're willing to go along with what we're thinking, as if we have to go along with all kinds of thinking that is unhealthy to think, not helpful for ourselves, not helpful to others. Maybe because there's a strong identification with thinking, we are our thoughts. So, to not think these difficult thoughts is to lose our freedom, or we want to just be. It's not that we think this way, but we kind of want to not be. We don't feel like we can stop it because this is, you know, what our freedom is demanding of us.

But it's the opposite. Sometimes it's kind of like the pirates have taken over the boat with the way that our thinking goes. We lose our freedom. For those of us who have repetitive thoughts that repeat themselves over and over, or repetitive habitual habits of thinking—always thinking in negative ways, always thinking aversively, always thinking in desirous ways, and thinking about what we want and how to be comfortable—in and of itself, one or two of these kinds of thoughts are not a problem. But if there's a habit, if it's on automatic pilot, we have lost our freedom. The pirates have taken over.

Part of growing up in the *Dharma*, growing up as adults, is to find our freedom in relationship to our thinking. It is to find a freedom that brings us peace, a freedom that brings us a sense of agency and choice about what we think, and the ability to switch and change what we think. Not in Pollyannaish ways, not in ways that cover over what's going on, but ways of thinking that really represent the depth of who we are. It answers the key question that the Buddha posed for many people: “What leads to your long-term happiness and welfare?”

“What leads to your long-term happiness and welfare?” Maybe in the short term, winning a big lottery would seem like it was good. Studies of lottery winners who win big prizes seem to show that, just a year later, most lottery winners are less happy than they were before winning the lottery. So that might not really lead to long-term happiness.

And so we ask ourselves this question: When we look at our thinking mind, is this going to

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lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? If I think this way, if I continue living in my resentment of someone, and it's been going on now for three months, if I keep doing this, is this really good for me? Is this really good for my long-term well-being? Is this really helping me find my autonomy, my freedom?

And why do I feel? Why do we feel we have to have these thoughts of resentment, that they're so important? Why are we giving up our freedom because of the authority of these kinds of thoughts?

Now, we don't want to dismiss anything in this practice. We don't want to deny anything. Everything is a message, but we don't want to lose our freedom in order to read the message and relate to the message. What we're looking for here in this kind of practice is the freedom to step away from the habits of mind. It is the freedom to gaze upon it freely and relate to it wisely, to see it more deeply, to change the orientation of the thinking.

So, if we're thinking thoughts of resentment and anger, step back and say, “Wow, there is a lot of anger here.” What's the need? What's the deeper need? What needs attention here, rather than continuing to ruminate and go in these loops of anger? What is it more deeply in me that needs care and attention for my long-term happiness?

What is it that's in my heart right now that needs me to care for it, or listen to it, or understand something more deeply? To begin asking those questions is a way of claiming our freedom, rather than just going along, staying on the thought train of resentment or whatever it might be. So, the question, “Does this lead to my long-term happiness?” is what the Buddha recommended.

Another version of that is, “Is this really what I want to spend my time doing? Is this really what's going to bring me freedom? Is this really what's going to bring me happiness?” To keep having these thoughts, some people keep doing it because they don't know an alternative, or an alternative is scary. But that's okay. We can work through that.

This practice is going to help you, support you, guide you through that fear, through this not knowing something else. You can't find something. So, the idea is somehow to turn—not to deny anything, but to turn it around in a beneficial way.

This can happen in conversations with others as well. There are deepening questions we can ask people. Someone may be talking about something that seems silly or repetitive, or they've talked about it before, or it doesn't interest you. Maybe there's a way of turning it around and asking something about what they're interested in, and trying to ask a deepening question.

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Like, if someone keeps talking about sports scores over and over again—that's all they want to talk about—or they want to talk about politics, then you can ask something like, “Oh, this really seems to be a strong interest of yours. What brings you that interest? What is it that you really love about politics or about sports? Have you always had this interest? What is it that's driving this interest of yours?”

Do that kindly, supportively, or ask for a story. “Wow, you're really interested in sports. Was there any particular event that you were part of that was really fun for you in your sports times?” And so you can turn it around.

You don't have to go along with what people say the way they say it, but you can also respect it and do something that's beneficial for you. Maybe establish a deeper connection, understand them more deeply about what they're talking about and why. This idea, to be able to ask deepening questions, connecting questions, is one of the great arts of social life.

It's also a great art for our own life. How do we ask deepening questions for ourselves? How do we ask the kind of opening questions that help us not just go along with giving up our freedom to the incessant, ongoing rumination of the mind?

Sometimes the mind is that way because we don't give it enough attention. We ignore it and just let it do whatever it wants to do. Maybe it's having a lot of difficult thoughts because it's waiting for you to show up. It's like sometimes children or teenagers act out not because they like acting out, but they're hoping to get attention. They're hoping someone will listen to them and pay attention to them. And so, the same thing for our own mind.

So, what will lead to my long-term happiness and welfare? And when we're with others, how do I participate in this conversation so it leads to our mutual happiness and welfare? What would be a question around this conversation that would make me happy, and maybe feel more connected to the person I'm with, rather than resisting it or walking away?

So I hope that this gives you something to think about, and maybe even, in the best possible way, gives you a challenge around your relationship to your thoughts. Even there, you can begin working on finding your freedom. Not a freedom from turning away, and not a freedom from denying or covering over, but a freedom that gives you a better vantage point to care well and deeply for this life.

Thank you very much.

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