Dharmette: Questions (4 of 5) The Right Question

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So, my friends, hello from Insight Meditation Center. Here in the United States, today is Thanksgiving, and so I offer thanks to all of you for being part of this wonderful YouTube teaching and *saṅgha* that we've had now for five years or so. I feel very grateful to be able to come down here in the morning and sit with you all and offer the kind of teachings that I can offer here. So I'm grateful for all of you.

So this week, the theme has been questioning. As we get along through the week, this topic of questioning becomes more profound, and its potential can maybe be seen as greater. To make it dramatic for you, I can say that whatever our problems are, whatever is challenging for us, what's most needed is the right question. Rather than looking for a solution first and foremost, or looking for someone else to fix it, or looking to get away, or staying judgmental or critical of others or yourself, if you're suffering, if you're challenged, if you have a problem with yourself, with others, with the world, what's lacking, what's missing, is you coming up with the right question.

The question that frees you, the question that engages you, the question that allows you to step forward in a beneficial way, the question that brings benefit to you and others, rather than the question that just keeps you mired in the challenges. And so, one of the great questions in the midst of challenges is, “Yes, this is challenging, and what sustains you through it?” And just that changes the focus. Just that reorients us to something different than just the problem and how it's causing problems for us. And so, to find a way to reframe what's going on—not to deny something, but to show something new.

There's a story in my little book called *The Monastery Within*. It goes something like this: Deep in the mountains, far from any roads, is a very wise person, considered to be the wisest person in the land. The person doesn't say much, but the person listens really, really well, taking in

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and learning what people are about when they come for a visit. The person then always has just the right question, the question that helps the person.

And it takes three days, because there's no roads to walk, hike, or backpack in on mountain trails. It's slow going, but people are really motivated to go. They'll take that three-day hike. And that means there's going to be three days to leave. They show up, and they explain themselves, their story, what's going on for them.

And sure enough, this wise person listens well, deeply. Maybe they ask good questions to learn more about you. And finally, the person says, “Well, I have a question for you, but you mustn't tell anybody else this question. Do you agree? Of course, do you agree?” So the person whispers the question.

And you're kind of amazed by the question, and maybe it seems underwhelming at first. Like, well, how could this be so important? But there's three days to hike out to live with that question, and by the time people come out, the question has transformed them. It turns out this wise person only has one question that they offer to others. But that's why no one should be told, because everyone needs to think that it's the question for them. But it's always the same question, and the question is, “What are you not paying attention to? What are you not paying attention to?”

So sometimes there's questions that highlight what we're ignoring, highlight our suffering, highlight something that's difficult that we're not paying attention to. And sometimes a good question highlights maybe what's really going well and going good that we're not paying attention to. So today, for some people, it's a social day, Thanksgiving. Sometimes it's just really nice to be with people, family and friends, and sometimes there's challenges. There's families that maybe have challenging people in them.

But when there's challenges, consider: what is the right question? I don't know the right question here. This person's going on and on about their medical condition. They've done it before, and they give you endless details about the challenges they have with the medical establishment, with medicine, getting appointments, and it seems like they're caught up in this world of their challenges. And it seems like the person doesn't stop, and you feel like you have to listen and listen, and it's trying.

But rather, what is the question you can ask that changes it all? And that question, maybe, like I said earlier, is, “That sounds really hard, that you had this all year. What sustained you through it? That's remarkable that you've been able to stay present for it and keep trying to make it work. What gives you this strength?”

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And then, if they have a positive answer, say something like, “And where did you learn that? Is that innate in you, or was that inspired by other people?” What you're looking for is to change it. So you get a personal story. You get something personal that they start talking about, something that you want to hear that helps them open up to themselves in a deeper way. It changes the nature of details of doctors to details of the person's inner life in a nice way.

And sometimes I ask these kinds of questions about others to do it in a broad way. So it's not probing for something. It's not asking for something specific, but just a very open-ended question. You know, so it could be, “Hi, it's great to see you. It's been a year since we saw each other. What has gone well for you this year?”

As opposed to saying, “Hey, it's great to see you, and I know you're Republican. What was it like for you?” Or, “Who did you vote for?” You know, to ask questions that are limiting and maybe guaranteed to raise conflict. But rather, to ask, “What has gone well for you, and what has inspired you this last year?” is maybe an innocent question that allows people to answer very broadly and openly.

Someone offers a wonderful Thanksgiving dinner, and maybe a nice question that would open the conversation up wide would be, “Wow, this food is really delicious, and clearly some people here are good cooks. I'd love to hear: where did you learn to cook well? What inspired you to cook well?” And that's not so personal, and people have a lot of leeway in how they respond. But it can begin changing the conversation. It gives something personal to talk about, something maybe that has more depth, inner value, and purpose to it.

So the question I'll offer you is: What questions can you ask so a problem becomes an inspiration? What questions can you ask so you get to know others more personally, more deeply? What questions can you ask where you get stories from people that are very deeply personal, that are interesting to hear, nice to listen to?

If you ask someone a question like, “What good is meditation?” and then you feel you pull out all the clinical studies you've read and go through all the clinical results, that is boring. That's not interesting. That doesn't make a personal connection. But if you ask a person a question, “How have you benefited from meditation? How have you benefited from your church life? I see you go to church every Sunday, and have you benefited from that?”

As opposed to asking, “Well, I see that you belong to a religion different than mine. What do you believe in your religion?” That might be interesting, but that maybe, again, doesn't become personal. And so, asking questions that are deeply personal, or carefully personal.

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And as we learn to do this, we also learn to do this for ourselves in meditation.

The challenges we have in meditation are maybe due to not knowing how to ask the right questions. And rather than being stuck in the same problems over and over again, maybe for months and years, the same difficult mind, the same mindset, the same repeated thoughts and orientation, and trying to think that you have to tough your way through it or get a technique that's going to get you past this, maybe what's needed is for you to discover the right question that opens the field, opens you, that allows you to see in a new way, that allows you to listen to yourself in a deeper way, that allows you to understand what's happening more deeply.

And one of the questions in meditation that can be useful like this is to ask, “Where is the inner source for this behavior that's difficult?” What's in the lived moment, in your lived being right now? Not the past, not some event that happened, the cause of it in the past. But what's the source right now of your anxiety? Where is the depth? Where is it arising from? And what holds it there?

When you understand the depth of yourself, what is there? What is there that supports you, that guides you, that sustains you? So there's many questions, and those questions, of course, might not be the perfect one for you. But maybe this gives you an example.

And one more time I'll say, because I want to challenge you a little bit today, if I'm allowed, is if you have a sustained problem that goes on and on, something challenging, consider that the real issue is not the problem. The real issue is that you haven't figured out the right question. And if this is interesting and evocative for you, maybe that's an interesting question for a social gathering: “This crazy Buddhist teacher said that the issue is not asking the right question. What have you guys understood? What have you learned about asking good questions? And when has a good question made a difference for you?”

So may this day be a day of thanksgiving, and may you be grateful for our wonderful capacity to question, inquire, and discover more and more liberating frameworks for understanding this life. Thank you.

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