Dharmette: Question (5 of 5)Contemplative Quesions

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So, hello and welcome to this last of five talks on questions. And being able to ask good questions is one of the great skills of Buddhist practice. To know what questions to ask that can guide us, that can guide our reflections, that can guide our decision making, and can guide our practice, our attention, our focus, our meditation itself. And finding good questions is very different than finding good answers. And part of the art of asking good questions is to have questions that aren't necessarily answered. But to guide our attention, guide us to explore, help us to open up to something that maybe is beyond questions, beyond thinking.

Helps us to connect to something that is profoundly meaningful. That is not exactly a verbal answer, but rather may be a feeling or a sense. Sometimes I'll ask contemplative questions of people, and what I mean by contemplative questions is at a time when we're most calm and settled, maybe after a really good meditation or having sat for, you know, maybe a couple of sessions in a row during one day, and things are really settled and calm. And then to drop this question deep into our being, and not look for a verbal answer, but see what responds within. See what kind of, not even nonverbally, what emotion arises, what sensations arise, what knowing arises.

And maybe there are words. What words arise? But those words are not coming from the ordinary surface thinking, the reactive thinking, the chain of associations where we're associating with our fears, our desires, our conceit, our sense of self, trying to prove ourselves or get approved or something. But it's deeper than that. All that surface stuff is quieted, and the words might arise. But it's almost as if the words are not us speaking, but something deeper than us that's within us.

And so, a contemplative question that I've used sometimes is something as simple as, “Where does peace live in you?” And then, what response to that? Or it could be something that's a

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little bit more complex. And, you know, what is your deepest—what is it you most care for? And so again, not going up to the thinking mind to figure that out, but is there something that spontaneously emerges from that question? What is freedom, and what emerges from that?

It might be many different questions, depending what the need is, what the situation is. If we're trying to figure something out in our life, what is the right contemplative question to drop deep inside, so that something that's not our ordinary thinking mind has a chance to receive it and process it and respond to it? And some of the deepest decisions I've made, deepest understandings I've had, have not only responded in this kind of deep way from inside, but when I've been most settled, some of the questions that have arisen for me have arisen from this deep place that I can't exactly claim to be my own. In terms of, I didn't will it, I didn't figure it out, I didn't intend it; it just seemed to arise. The *Dharma* questions that were very important for me came out of nowhere.

I was fairly settled and calm and peaceful, but not as much as I could be. But I was surprised to hear in my mind or in my heart the question, "What happens if I let go of my body?" And somehow something deep inside responded, and there was a phenomenal letting go of the body that just felt so right and good. And then I was surprised to discover that there was a follow-up question: "What is it like to let go of the mind?" And to my surprise, something responded to that, and there was a phenomenal letting go of the mind. And it was very, very significant for me to have this deep sense of peace or freedom that came when these things were let go of in some meaningful, surprising, intuitive way that felt just right.

And so, there's this place. Questions have a role, and contemplative questions have a role in the art of contemplative thinking. Contemplative questions are a phenomenal, wonderful contemplative, you know, orientation to have, and so they belong to a category of questions. There are questions that point beyond the framework of the question, point beyond the logic of the question. So, questions that point beyond themselves, maybe beyond thinking, because we do have in meditation the usage of our intelligence, uses of thinking, uses of asking questions that point beyond themselves rather than keep us stuck in the cragmire of thinking and figuring out and reflecting.

And I like to highlight that we don't have to check our intelligence at the door when we come to meditate. And I did get a sense in my early years of Buddhist practice that teachers were implying, or I don't know if they said it explicitly, but kind of implying that we're supposed to not really engage intelligently with our practice; just be really simple, really, really simple. Trust simple awareness and don't think of anything. And I think a wiser way is to understand

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how to think. That supports meditation, because if we don't understand that, thinking will still occur for many of us, and it'll take us away from the meditation.

But how do we think intelligently? The support is, how do—and the question can be—how do I quiet my thinking mind? And we use thinking to reflect and intelligently try to understand what it takes to quiet the mind. So we're using thinking to quiet thinking. Oh, it means maybe I should relax. It seems like a lot of my thoughts are connected to my fear.

That's housed in a tight belly. Maybe if I relax my belly, that'll help something calm and relax. Maybe I need reassurance. I feel so uncertain about my future that maybe for now, these minutes of meditation, some reassurance would be nice. And maybe then it's to chant the refuges to oneself. Maybe it's to do *mettā* for oneself, or maybe it's to recall the deeper purpose—that's why you're meditating.

Or the kind of deeper lessons of what you've had in meditation that gives you confidence, and you bring that to bear, and that begins settling something in the thinking mind. And then there's asking, and then this movement toward settling using our attention is to know from time to time when we can ask ourselves a *Dharma* question, a practice question that points us to that which is beyond thinking, even beyond the question. So, a question like, "What is your inner peace when you don't have words to explain it?" "Who are you when you don't use thoughts to answer the question?" So both of those are kind of questions that point beyond themselves.

And what inner sensibility, whatever inner sensitivity, what inner kind of opening or attending meets that question or responds to that question or tries to answer that question not through words, but by a fuller presence into that freedom? Into maybe how you can't answer the question, "Who am I?" Even with words, you can't. It's never really accurate. But if you know you're not using words, what's left to be who you are? Maybe something that has no boundaries, has no definition, something that has nothing to attach to.

Maybe there's a glorious spaciousness that responds to that question. That you're, in some ways, more the vast space that we're centered in than we are any of our thoughts, ideas, feelings, hurts, desires. And even though ordinarily we wouldn't think that space qualifies as being who you are, and doesn't seem very satisfying. But in deep meditation, it's almost like that is where freedom is. That's where the richest, happiest way of being is found, and no answer needed to the question, "Who am I?"

Or peace. This can be the same way, and so sometimes there are *Dharma* questions like this that people sometimes will ask contemplative questions at the beginning of a meditation.

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And this usually works when the mind is fairly concentrated and steady, so that it's the quiet, steady, open mind that allows something to be processed and respond to this. And so there's an art in meditation of asking a question like, “What's the deepest in this sitting?” “What is the deepest understanding of change?” “What's the deepest understanding of freedom?” “What's the deepest understanding of non-clinging?”

Sometimes you word it a little differently, where you say, “In this sitting, in this meditation, may I learn something new about non-clinging? May I learn something new about freedom?” And then we put it aside. We don't think about that at all. Again, the thinking mind gets in the way. But somehow, as a beginning of a sitting, making this resolve, this question, and letting it kind of work in the background, something begins working. That again is not our thinking mind.

And it's cheap to do this question. So if nothing happens, it's fine. It's not a problem. And we shouldn't be searching and waiting and looking for where the answer is going to come from. But just trust, as the meditation gets quieter and deeper, maybe something responds. And what is it that responds to that?

So, questions. I hope this week on questions from the beginning to the end has given you a rich, richer, and more inspiring relationship to what's possible with wise, intelligent questioning. That questioning has an important role in a wise life, and that becoming skilled at answering, asking good questions is invaluable for being on the *Dharma* path. It's invaluable in living a wise life. And it's invaluable in living a rich, connected social—a rich social connection to other people, where our questions help us to have the deeper understanding and sharing of life with others.

May it be that questions open your life wide open, so you can care for yourself and the world in better ways. So, thank you very much.

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