Asking Questions that Point Beyond Themselves

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Yeah, it's quite touching how close to home the high seres have been here for me personally. So it's a big issue.

So one of the themes of my own Buddhist practice down through the years, that was partly kind of evoked by my first Zen teacher, was the role of questions: asking questions, asking good questions. And I'm fond of the idea that the word “quest” and “questions” are closely related. That if you're on a spiritual quest, maybe you should ask good questions. And one of the things to do in a spiritual quest is to learn to ask better and better questions. And rather than settle on the questions that you have, there are people who come to see me to talk about their life, have questions about their life, and want some support.

And sometimes, when they come to me, they're basically outsourcing the answers. They come and say something like, “I'm having a challenge. Tell me what to do.” I want to respect that, and it often represents suffering and a challenge. It represents a beautiful quest for changing a life, making things better. But ideally, the answer to the questions comes from yourself, not from someone else.

And now, so what's a good question to ask? It's a kind of one thing: it's not a question you would ask AI. So, what questions will AI not answer? I don't think it'll answer, “What's your heart's deepest wish?” Or if AI does try to answer that question, maybe you shouldn't read it.

Or, you know, you might ask AI a question like, “What is love?” And you might get a long dissertation on that topic. But if you ask the question, “What is love?” at the Thanksgiving dinner table, what is love? As I walk with my friend in the park, what is love now? As I'm dealing with my life challenge.

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I don't know if AI is set up really to answer these personal questions. These personal questions need the source of the question and the source of the answer to be quite personal. And the answer needs to have a very personal resonance with us.

In the same way that I've said this often now, if you ask a very common question in American Buddhism, you would ask someone, "What is your practice?" And that's, you know, kind of interesting to know, but it's very abstract usually. It usually comes back with something that's very general. "Oh, I practice *vipassanā*. I practice mindfulness. I'm practicing loving-kindness. Oh no, I practice Zen."

You know, or you list the kind of technique, but there's nothing personal there. But if you ask someone instead, "What are you cultivating in your spiritual practice?" now it's starting to get a little more personal. Now it's something we're doing. It's something we're doing to change, to grow in. What are you growing in your spiritual practice?

What's your deepest kind of question that you're trying to answer through your spiritual quest? So these questions, you know, not "What do you do? What do you practice?" but "What's going on more deeply in you?" reveal something much richer, much more meaningful, and much more kind of onward-leading for people than, "Oh, you know, I practice mindfulness. Thank you. End of story."

People used to ask me, when I was going to my Little League games with my son, you know, other parents will sometimes come and talk. They're kind of friendly, you know, and they talk to us here in Redwood City. But if they ever—it happened a number of times—asked me the question, "What do you do?" and if I said something like, "A Buddhist teacher," literally people pivoted and left me behind, walked away.

I was kind of surprised, in Redwood City of all places. I really kind of became an outlier, you know, or an outcast almost from these parent groups, just with that kind of identity. And sometimes asking that question, you know, "What do you do?" is maybe too impersonal or kind of gives the wrong impression of who a person is.

So maybe there's a question to ask, you know, something like, "What has brought you joy in this last year?" As soon as we're coming to the end of the year, that might be. Maybe it's too personal too. But there's other questions to ask that maybe touch something more personal. That pull out a story the person has to tell about their life, rather than something you know.

You know, "Oh, you're a Buddhist? What does Buddhism believe?" You know, I'm ready to give a dissertation on that topic. But if someone asked me instead, "How has Buddhism been important for you?" now we're talking something personal. And we're not going to debate

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what Buddhism teaches or doesn't teach, or my religion and your religion.

Say, “Oh, how have you become a better person through your Buddhist practice?” This kind of points to something different. Something comes alive.

So I'm not saying any of these questions should be your questions. What I'm saying is that becoming wise about questions, and learning how to ask good questions, explore questions, and develop questions, and have questions be one of the leading kinds of forces in your practice, rather than answers. Answers might not be as interesting as having a question. Partly because a question keeps us open, or a good question opens us. A good question helps us pay more attention to something important.

A good question kind of leads to something beyond the question, and that doesn't necessarily require the answer. So I'll read one of the stories from this little book of mine called *The Monastery Within*, and the title of the little story is *“The Right Question.”*

> A young man once appeared at the gates of the monastery with zeal and determination to be a monk. Asking permission to enter the monastery, he was granted an interview with the abbess. The abbess asked, “Why do you want to become a monk? Why do you wish to leave the world behind to engage in Buddhist practice?”
>
> “I want to know who I am,” was the man's earnest reply.
>
> “‘Who am I?’ is the wrong question,” said the abbess.
>
> “But I have read books that explain that this is the great question. If one penetrates this question, one attains realization.”
>
> Ferociously, the abbess shot back, “Books! What do they know? Go away and come back with a real question. Come back with your question.”
>
> With that, the man was quickly ushered out of the monastery.

Teachers can be—you know—I can be much more stern and strict as a teacher in writing than in real life. So don't worry.

> So the man was quickly ushered out of the monastery. Thinking about this, the young man returned the next day and told the abbess he had a better question.
>
> “Let's hear it,” said the abbess.
>
> “I want to discover the truth.”

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> “That is not the right question. Out!” barked the abbess.
>
> The man hung his head down, left, and spent a few days thinking about what might be the right question. Returning to the monastery, he said to the abbess, “What is liberation?”
>
> “Out.”
>
> Discouraged because his deep yearning for liberation had not been good enough, the young man began wandering around the country, constantly searching. Sometimes he searched out the wisest people he could find and asked them the right question: what the right question might be.
>
> Periodically, he returned to the monastery with a new question.
>
> “How can I end my suffering?”
>
> “Out.”
>
> “What is wrong with me?”
>
> “Out.”
>
> “What can I do?”
>
> “What can I do for you?”
>
> “Out.”
>
> In frustration, “What is the question?”
>
> “That's for you to discover. Out.”
>
> “Why are you asking me for a question?”
>
> “Out.”
>
> Though the abbess continued to send the young man out of the monastery, it was not without feeling. Sometimes the man asked with such deep humility that, when the abbess barked “Out,” a teardrop would run down her cheek.
>
> This is what happened when the man asked, “How can I discover love and compassion?”
>
> “Out,” she said, crying.
>
> “How can I be of service to others?”
>
> “Out.”

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> As the weeks, months, and years passed by, more and more time elapsed between the young man's visits to the monastery. Searching for the right question became his quest. Only occasionally did he come across one he thought he could try with the abbess.
>
> Then, after asking the following question, he no longer returned to the monastery.
>
> "What is happening now?"
>
> "Out."
>
> Some ten years after the man initially knocked on the monastery gate, the abbess had the occasion to travel to some distant place. There she ran into the man, now not so young, who appeared unusually at peace. The abbess asked him why he had stopped coming with a question.
>
> "Oh," he said. "After some time, I simply forgot to return. Everywhere I go and in everything I do, I keep asking, 'What is the question?' This quest has become more and more powerful for me. It fills my days and nights. It keeps me very present and interested."
>
> "For a long time now, I haven't thought about the monastery, or about much else from my past. I now care less about answers than with discovering the question each situation calls forth."
>
> The abbess smiled and said, "Now you may enter the monastery."
>
> The man replied, "Thank you, but now I have no need to do so."
>
> The abbess bowed deeply and left.

I don't know if this inspired the story, but I did go to a Zen master in Japan, met to meet with him, and I guess we were having tea or something. And I asked a question, and he pointed to the door and said, "Go." But he also said, "Come back twenty years before." So I had to leave with that ringing in my ears: "Twenty years before."

So, asking questions. I came to my Zen master here in America once with a question, and instead of answering me, he picked up this tennis-ball-maybe-size black stone, very smooth. And it was kind of early in the morning. It was dark outside, you know, like maybe 5:30 in the morning when we had our meeting. So it was kind of a special time, and his room was kind of a little bit dark, kind of intimate, in this kind of special Zen mode.

And we're sitting cross-legged next across from each other, like I'm sitting here now. And I asked this question. I don't remember what the question was, but what I do remember, he picked up that stone. And he handed it to me.

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That was his answer. What? How can that be an answer? But that was quite something, and so that may be part of the reason. What is this? How is this an answer?

What? What does a stone represent, or what is it? What is it to be with it? What is it to have my questions be stopped, my mind stopped, and just now be with this little piece of nature? So, questions that point beyond themselves.

I'm fond of that. I learned from reading the ancient texts of the Buddha. The Buddha asked the most important questions that he seemed to ask. The very questions that led to his awakening were where questions, questions that ask where something personal is at, where you find it in yourself.

So, where is the suffering? Where does the suffering arise? Oh, the suffering arises from clinging. Where is the clinging? Where is the clinging arising in me?

It's not asking what it is, or what to do about it, or why it's there. But what the where questions do is point the attention inward to what's really the place of practice, the place that we bring our attention. Because attention is something that brings to life more questions. It brings to life an inner process of healing, of opening, or freeing, which is not going to come from answering questions intellectually, not going to come from AI.

And so, to place attention here. So these days, for many years now, when I sit down to meditate, I'm so different every time I sit down. Different day, different situation. I love to meditate, but I sit down not for answers, not to assert myself, not to be on a task. “I'm going to try to get concentrated,” or something.

I sit down with the question: “What wants to happen now? What is happening now? What's moving through me now? Where does my attention want to go? What inside of me is calling my attention? What is my heart? What is my inner life? How does it want to meet the situation I'm in?”

So I'm not in the control tower. I'm not the one who's in charge, the one who's going to assert myself, the one who's going to have purpose to do something. That whole part of me is at rest because I know there's something deeper here that does this work much better. It's more me than what I find in the control tower. And having these questions helps that come forth.

What wants to happen here? What is this right now, to be alive? Where does my attention want to go? Where does my attention want to rest? What is calling for my attention?

What's calling for close attention, to really close and feel it, you know, very, very precisely? What's calling for an open attention where awareness is really broad and spacious, making

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lots of room for something? What is it in me that's asking to relax? What's asking to relax?

I was awake last night for more than I wish I was awake, middle of the night. And that question was the one that seemed like the best one: “What wants to relax here now?” And so I just kind of did that question over and over again, and eventually I fell asleep. I don't know if it was because of the question, but the question made it feel very nice to be in bed because it wasn't going to build up any tension or any stress for just being awake at night.

So, questions. And then, what are the questions that connect people versus the questions that disconnect them? You know, if you go to someone's house, they invite you over for dinner, and you ask them, “Well, how much did the dinner cost?” I hope the laughing is a sign that you understood. That's a disconnected question. That's not a question that's going to connect people.

But if you ask a question like, “Wow, this is good food. Where did you learn to cook?” or, you know, “How did you learn to make this meal?” or “What inspired you to do this for our meal today?” something that gives a little, evokes a little story, helps you understand the other person better, and opens the field for some interesting conversation to come, rather than a question that closes it, that shuts it out.

So, like I said earlier, the question, you know, “What is your practice?” maybe it's an opening question. It could be an interesting beginning of a... But it's not that personal, so it might not really reveal something interesting. But, “What are you cultivating when you practice? What are you nurturing? What are you fostering through your Buddhist practice?”

A very different answer will come forth, and the person will get to know you better. You know something about what's important for you.

So I want to go back to these where questions. There's the three where questions that I find very interesting. So the first one is, like I said, where am I activated now? With my anger, where am I activated? With my sadness, where am I activated? With my intense intellectual curiosity, where? What's activated? What's alive?

Where are the sensations? Where is my body? What's activated in my body as I'm being pulled into deeper and deeper concentration? Where's the home for that in the body?

So where is it in ourselves, which is very personal? It's also a question that puts us in the present moment. Why might put us in the past. What is it? Might put us in our intellect. Some people will answer the question “what” with a disconnecting answer.

So, where? The second is a where question: where are you in this situation? And you would

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think that maybe Buddhists shouldn't ask the question, “Where am I?” because we're not supposed to have an I, kind of. Not really, but that's what people believe.

But where is the sense of self? Where is the sense of agency? Where is the sense of the one who is processing this? Where is the one who is making decisions, who's going to answer a question or make a choice? Where is the choice maker? Where is the sense of being the one who's observing?

And in deep meditation, the sense of self might drop away. But in ordinary life, there is this organizing principle that might be called a self. It's interesting to kind of see where this is. You know, where am I?

Some people are in the control tower. That's some people who they are is always above the neck, always above the neck. But is that who you really want to be? Maybe there's a deeper sense of self that comes from the heart.

And some people feel the deepest sense of self comes from the belly. And, oh, that's the home. That's the place that some wisdom can come. That's what speaks most personally for me, in a way that my thinking mind does not speak so personally for me. It's actually disconnected from something deep.

So where are you in this? The third one, which steps out of the I, me, and mine world, is: where's awareness right now? Where's the center of awareness? What's the source of your center of awareness? Is there a particular place?

Sometimes it can feel, again, like in the control tower. Sometimes in the heart. Sometimes it can feel like it's throughout the body. Awareness is throughout the body. Sometimes it can feel like it has no boundaries. Awareness, it just is.

When I was at some point in my years of practice, a number of years, I asked myself, I thought about how I would have answered this question early in my practice, before I started. “Where are you?” I would have pointed to my head. And then, at some point in my practice, “Where are you?” I'd be pointing to my heart.

And then, at some point further in my practice, the “Where are you?” and I would just open my arms wide, and that's the answer. It's kind of like an unsatisfying answer for other people, but there's no—there's nothing here. It's everything here. It just—everything holds this I, or is the I, or the I disappears in all this.

So the same thing with awareness. Where are you aware? There was a time I would have pointed to my head, because that's where I processed everything in my thoughts. And then,

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at some point, it shifted very much to my heart center. At some point, it shifted to my belly center.

That's where awareness seemed to reside and radiate from. And then, at some point, again, that became something that was boundless. There was all-encompassing. There were no limits, no boundaries, no edges to awareness. It just goes out forever.

So these kinds of questions: where? Where are these things? Where are you? And if people are frustrated with you, they might ask that question: “Where are you?” If they're really worried about you, they put their hands in front of your eyes: “Where are you?”

Because we're lost, we're caught up in our thoughts or something. So, “Where are you?” It's a wake-up call if someone ever says that to you. Where are you?

So, questions. Asking good questions, asking right questions, asking deep questions. Many years ago in Palo Alto, when we were back in those days—I think it was there. I don't think—maybe it was here at IMC. We've been here now for 25 years.

I had a custom sometimes of having people ask questions, and then I would answer. And sometimes I'd do it a little bit more in the Zen style, where the answers are really short. And after a while, people learned to ask short questions. But, you know, back and forth, it's kind of interesting.

So one day, I don't know exactly what I was thinking of, but rather than giving a talk—I, oh, this is what I did too. Occasionally, back in the old days, I would ask for a series of questions, like five questions, and then I would weave a talk out of those five questions. So that was kind of fun. Now I can't imagine doing that. I'm not as reckless.

But so, anyway, I was here and I asked for questions, and the questions were so profound that I didn't stop hearing the questions, asking for questions. And so everyone kind of understood what was going on. So the whole Monday evening, for, you know, 45 minutes or so, was people just asking their question. And after a while no one expected an answer.

That answer wasn't the point. It was a deeply moving evening for all of us to hear these questions. So I didn't mean to put pressure on you to say it that way, but maybe we can take a few minutes, maybe five minutes or so. I'd love to hear from some of you. What's an important question for you that maybe expresses something of what I've been trying to say this morning?

Anybody willing to take their chance? And I promise not to bark.

Hi.

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It makes no sense, but what keeps coming up is, “Where is it, and what is it?” And it doesn't make any sense.

But that's a powerful question for you. Fantastic. Thank you.

Gil, after I heard the story you shared with us, and the master, after a long time, still asked the student, “Why are you not coming to the monastery?” I thought, well, if I were the student, if I were the student, I would have had no desire to go back to that particular teacher. It's like, why do you even ask why I'm not coming back? You haven't treated me well.

Ah. So why would I come back to someone who says, “Out”? Ah. Out.

Yeah, I think in some culture—well, great. I should—I'm not supposed to answer. So thank you. I almost got caught.

Is there a question over here, Sylvie?

I found myself asking me that kind of question yesterday. I was taking a walk, and I felt really happy, like unusually happy. And the first question that comes to my mind is, “That's interesting. Why am I happy?” And I'm starting to think about all the reasons I would have to be happy.

And then suddenly, my practice came back. And it was like, “Oh, what does happiness feel like right now?” And it was just, oh, my chest was feeling so expansive and, you know, almost dancing inside. And it was like I've spent my entire life asking why.

So I guess, you know, your whole week of 7:00 a.m. on that topic has produced some results.

Right. Thank you.

Okay, I think I have it now. So a question that I continue to ask myself in practice is, “Where is fear present?” And I've found that a very fruitful question to reflect on.

Yes, where is fear? So maybe I can ask a counter-question. Is that okay? Do I have to answer?

No.

What happens when you ask that question?

That perhaps, yeah. When I ask myself that question, it reveals where attachment is present.

Great. Thank you. So right behind you, and there was someone over here next to—okay, let's go ahead.

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Um, I would ask Gil, um, “Where is my thusness?”

Where is your bestness?

Where is my thusness?

Ah, thusness. Your thusness. Thank you.

Morgan.

I was challenged earlier this week by your sittings, and I struggle with how to be aware without thinking.

So is that your question? How to be aware without thinking?

Okay. To be aware without thinking. So that might not be the—it's a very important question for you, but there might be a better question that addresses the same thing. So that's an example where maybe a teacher would encourage you: stay close to that. This is good, but see if there's an even better question.

I think Barry's been trying since the beginning. So let's.

As I'm aging and getting closer to the end of my life, what do I need to be complete?

Great. Very nice question.

It's coming out to the back.

The question I'm asking myself a lot these days is, “What mind am I carrying?”

What mind am I carrying? And what does that question do for you?

It brings pause.

Great. Thank you. Thank you.

So I, in the midst of my grief, I often ask myself, “Where does surrender come from?”

Where does surrender—

Don't have an answer yet.

That's a great question.

I'm very early in my practice and not in the habit of asking good Buddhist questions yet, but I have a question that torments me 24 hours a day. I have difficult family relationships and situations, and I'm constantly asking myself, “What is wise speech and behavior in this situation? And what is my part to play here, if any?” I never have an answer.

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Yeah, those are really good and touching questions because of the challenge. Another one that you might want to add to the mix is, “What do these people really need? What are they really saying?” In such a way that you listen deeper to them.

Hello. My question is, “From where does the positive valence of holding a good question come from?”

Ah, so maybe you say that for my sake. Could you say it in a different way?

Yeah. So there's a sense in which a question is a seed, but whether it's a seed that gives rise to something beyond itself, something that is generative, is a judgment that needs to be made using your current standing and the ability to make a judgment about what happens next based off of what you already have. It's a feeling. So where is that coming from?

Great. So, great. So I would say it then that, um, what's the wholesome—that's a Buddhist idea of goodness—what's the wholesome source from which that question is being asked? Is that close? Is that a close rewording of what you said?

I'm not sure.

Not sure. Great. I love what you're trying to, what you're asking. Thank you.

So let's. It is a potluck, and we have a few minutes left before we're supposed to officially end. So maybe it's a nice morning for you to turn to, you know, one or two people next to you, and say hello, and maybe say some brief words of what this whole discussion about questions was like for you. Whatever you'd like, you feel comfortable to say.

And just so people, especially people who are new, get welcomed and included here. And then everyone's welcome to stay for the potluck, whether you brought something or not. And you don't have to stay for this to greet someone next to you. But I'll ring the bell in a few minutes, and then we'll go to the potluck.

So you can say hello to one or two people next to you, and just look, make sure that no one is left sitting there alone because everyone turns the other direction.

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