

# The Path of Questions

*July, 2001 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu*

Let the mind settle down comfortably on the breath. Don't push it too hard and don't let it float away. Try to find just the right amount of pressure for staying with the breath. Let there be just that one question in the mind right now: how heavily to focus on the breath. Other questions you can put aside, because most of the other questions you would be focusing on now would simply foster doubt. The questions dealing with the mind and the breath in the present moment: Those are the ones that are relevant because you can answer them by looking right here, right now.

The point of our practice is to gain discernment that leads to liberation, that leads to release. But before we get to that level of discernment we have to train the discernment we have in every level of the practice.

This morning we read a passage by Ajaan Lee in which he talks about how generosity, virtue, and meditation both *depend* upon discernment and *give rise* to discernment. In other words, you have to use your discernment in each of these levels of the practice. It's not that you have to wait until the very end for discernment to land on you. You take the discernment you have; you exercise it; it gets stronger. It's just like exercising your body. If you want a strong body, what do you do? You take the weak body you've got, exercise it, and it turns into a stronger body, step by step by step because you're using it. But that also means learning how to exercise it properly. You don't exercise it too heavily to the point where you pull a tendon or tear a muscle.

So at each level of the practice there are questions you want to ask to foster discernment appropriate to that level of the practice. When you're practicing generosity you have to ask, "What, right now, is just right? How much can I afford? How much is giving too much? In what way is my gift going to be most beneficial, most effective? If I don't have much to give in terms of material things, what else can I give?" The gift of your time and energy, the gift of forgiveness, can sometimes be many times more useful than the gift of material things.

That's the development of skill, insight, and discernment on the level of generosity. Then, on the level of the precepts, you work up to a higher level. "How am I going to maintain my precepts in difficult situations?" Say, when

people ask questions that you know are going to be harmful if you answer them, how are you going to avoid the answer so that you don't lie? Or how are you going to live in your house so that you don't have to kill pests? Once you've laid down the law for yourself — "Okay, these are the principles I'm going to hold to" — you suddenly find yourself with a whole new set of questions. You'll need ingenuity and discernment to answer them. And as you come up with answers using whatever ingenuity you have, you find that your ingenuity and discernment get stronger.

The same principle holds with meditation. Each step in your meditation requires certain questions. You take the questions bit by bit by bit, step by step and you find that the meditation both requires discernment and strengthens discernment as you use it. For instance, when you're focusing on the breath, you ask a simple question: "What kind of breathing feels good right now?" And then you explore. You're free to experiment with the breath, to find out if long breathing feels good, if short breathing feels good, deep breathing, shallow...

There's an element of investigation already even in the simple practice of concentration. It's not that you make the mind really, really still and then, all of a sudden, discernment's going to go off like a flash bulb. There has to be some discernment involved in the process of getting the mind to settle down. As the Buddha said, there's no jhana without discernment, no discernment without jhana. The two have to go together, to help each other along.

Discernment here is learning which things to develop and which to let go. You start out with really simple things. You have to focus on what the breathing is like, what kind of breathing the body needs right now. If your energy level feels low, what kind of breathing will raise the energy level? If you feel too frenetic, what kind of breathing can calm you down? If there are pains in different parts of the body, are you breathing in a way that's actually augmenting or causing those pains?

These are things you can explore. What you're doing is taking your thinking process, the questioning process of the mind, and learning how to use it skillfully. Meditation is not a matter of stopping your thought processes right away. Eventually there does come a point where thinking gets more and more attenuated until you can hardly call it thinking at all. But in the mean time, before you can get there, you have to learn how to use your thinking skillfully, so you apply it to the issue of concentration, apply it to the issue of settling the mind down.

This is a basic principle in a lot of the Buddha's teachings. In order to learn how to let go of something, you've got to learn how to do it skillfully. This principle doesn't apply to sex, but it does apply to a lot of other things. For instance, some texts talk about going beyond precepts and practices in the practice, but before you can go beyond them you have to learn how to maintain your precepts with skill. Some Zen texts talk about letting go of the discriminating mind, but before you let go of the discriminating mind you have to learn how to use it properly. Before learning how to let go of desire, you have to learn how to use your desire properly. Focus it on the causes that will get you where you want to go. The unskillful use of desire means focusing so much on the results you want that you ignore the causes. You want to skip over them. That kind of desire is unskillful. You're not going to get beyond desire by just dropping unskillful desires. You have to learn how to replace unskillful desires with skillful ones, focused on the causes that will take you where you want to go. Then, when you've arrived, the issue of desire falls away.

So right now focus your desire on what will take you to concentration. This means being mindful to keep the breath in mind, and being alert, watching the breath. A good way to do that is to ask yourself questions about the breath and how you can relate to it here in the present moment. If you were to make the next breath a little bit longer, what would happen? Try it and find out. How about a little bit shorter, deeper, stronger, more refined? Just ask those questions of the mind. Don't put a lot of physical pressure on the breath. Just ask the question and you'll find that simply asking the question opens up the possibility.

This is called appropriate attention — *yoniso manasikara*, learning how to ask skillful questions — and it's essential to the whole practice. In fact the first question you're supposed to ask when you go to meet a new teacher is: "What is skillful? What is not skillful? What, if I do it, will be for my long-term happiness? What, if I do it, will be for my long-term suffering?"

You take those questions, usually starting on the level of the precepts or generosity, and work down deeper and deeper into the mind. That's how the deeper levels of concentration are attained. The discernment that gives rise to liberation comes in as well, by learning how to ask the question "What's the skillful thing to do now?"

Now, in order to ask those questions from the very refined levels of the mind, you have to start by asking them from more blatant levels in your daily life. This is why the Buddha's teaching is not about how soon we can get the experience of Awakening, how soon we can get the feeling of oneness so we

can go on with the rest of our life. That's not it at all. You have to train your whole approach to life. "What's the most skillful thing to do right now? What's the most skillful thing to say? What's the most skillful thing to think?" Learn how to keep asking these questions, looking for the answers, learning from your mistakes time and again, so that you gradually do become more skillful on the outer levels.

You find that that habit begins to take root in your mind. Then, as you're sitting here meditating, it becomes an automatic question: "What's the most skillful way to relate to the breath? What's the most skillful way to relate to the present moment?" You experiment. You test. You come up with answers. And then you test the answers.

So it's a basic process that starts from the outside and works in. Ultimately it leads to the discernment that liberates the mind totally from suffering. That's the point we all want to get to. But it's not a matter of simply sitting here and waiting until it comes. Liberating discernment comes from the process of questioning and probing and looking and getting the mind to settle down and be really still and asking, "Why is there still a disturbance in there? What acts of mind, what decisions are creating that disturbance?" Sometimes the disturbance is on a very subtle level. "What decisions are still getting in the way?" You look and you watch and you have to be very patient.

Ajaan Khamdee, one of the forest ajaans, once made a comparison. He said that meditating is like being a hunter. The hunter goes out in the forest and, on the one hand, has to be very still so he doesn't scare off the rabbits and other animals, but at the same time he has to be very alert. His ears and eyes have to be very sharp. And the hunter can't say "Well, okay, I'm just going to sit here for half an hour and I'll bag my rabbit." He has no idea how long it's going to take but he maintains that attitude of quiet alertness. The same in your meditation: The concentration is what keeps you quiet; that little question is what keeps you alert. And the combination of the two when you get them just right: That will lead to Awakening.