

Narayan Helen Liebenson

*Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry*

Week Two: “Discerning Between Wise and Unwise Questions”

November 10, 2019



Welcome back to this second week of “Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry.” I'm Narayan Helen Liebenson, and this week, we're going to explore the topic of wise and unwise questions.

As I mentioned in last week's talk, what we choose to ask is really important. There are different kinds of questions: some are wise and are worth asking, and bring about the fruits that our hearts long for. Others are actually unwise, meaning not useful, and mire us into a greater degree of conditioning.

What I mean by wise are those questions that bear the fruit of inner freedom, that loosen our conditioning, encourage greater wisdom, and cultivate more compassion in our lives, for ourselves and for others. Unwise or unuseful questions mean questions that emerge out of our conditioning. Answering them doesn't bring us anything new or fresh. It's the same old thing. It's just going around and around in samsara.

When we try or attempt to answer these unwise questions, we don't understand anything differently than we did before. Actually, we just get more and more caught in the thickets of neurotic thinking. Please don't let me insult anyone by using this word neurotic, it's meant completely impersonally.

Questions such as these elicit answers that are actually not true or accurate. They are colored by the very same conditioning that brought one to ask such a thing originally. Discerning between these different kinds of questions is essential, because asking one kind will bring freedom and asking the other will bring even greater confusion and doubt. Unwise questions perpetuate conditioning instead of ending it. They reinforce conditioning instead of freeing ourselves from it.

There are two kinds of unwise questions, or questions that are not useful to ask or answer. Asking these questions happens naturally. We can't stop them from arising, but we can recognize them as unwise and then learn how to let them go, instead of engaging them. There's a huge difference between the arising which happens on its own, organically, which we don't have any control over, and the justification of thinking that we can answer them and that answering them will be to one's benefit.

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The first kind of unwise questions is any question that has the theme of self-doubt. The second is questions that have no reasonable answer other than a simple one-word answer. I will give you examples of these later in the talk.

I'll address the first kind that of doubt first, self-doubting questions. These kinds of questions are quite different than the wise doubt that I spoke about in my first talk. Wise doubt is a matter of testing the teachings and not just blindly believing them. Unwise doubt is asking questions that cannot be answered by oneself.

Rather than struggling to answer these questions, not getting bogged down in questions like this is a matter of learning how to not engage in the struggle of trying to answer ourselves. The futile effort to answer oneself is the effort to allow conditioning to try to let go of conditioning. It just doesn't work. It's chasing one's tail. It just doesn't bring about what we want.

This kind of questioning is more than familiar to most meditators. These are questions that appear to be necessary. They appear to be extraordinarily important. They take over, they take center stage, and we find ourselves caught in kind of a tunnel vision without a whole lot of spaciousness around or within the experience in the moment. These are questions that masquerade as wise to ask, but are actually simply the mental state of doubt. The question is whether we can see doubt as doubt when it occurs, instead of engaging in that doubt.

Of course, we can practice doubting our doubt. That is really quite helpful. But to expect there to be a reasonable answer that comes in accordance with the doubts that we experience is not wise. We want to be able to identify the mental state of doubt that arises in the form of endless questioning. All this brings is the mental state of spinning out and jumping from thought to thought, instead of being less reactive to the thoughts that are arising.

There are different objects to our doubts and it's helpful to identify them. Self-doubt is a lack of confidence in one's capacity to practice. It's the doubt that I can practice, or, the doubt that I am practicing correctly. This kind of doubt can haunt a meditator. Instead of trying to answer that question, can we simply see it as the mental state of doubt and then experience it as it is, feel it in the body, and let it dissolve on its own without feeding it through thinking.

We can also doubt the teachings, the methods, and the techniques. Is this the best method of practice?

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In our culture today, there seems to be this idea that there is always something better we can chase instead of sustaining our attention long enough to reap the benefits that are possible within the method that we are actually engaged in.

Of course, it's helpful to pause from time to time and to assess. The Buddha offered a really wonderful way to assess whether the methods, teachers, or lineage that one is in is beneficial and has integrity. He said, "If a system of practice leads to clinging and unwholesome mental states, it's not a good system of practice." If what we are practicing leads, over time, to relinquishment and to the wholesome, he encouraged us to continue.

We can also doubt that we are in the right place wherever the body is. The mind, of course, can be elsewhere, and so we can wonder over and over again in any given day, “Am I where I want to be?”

The question of “Why?” is one example of a question that naturally arises we might not want to respond to. “Why is this happening?” It's very strong in our culture to ask this question, “Why?” We think if we ask why, it will actually help. We can get an intellectual answer, but it actually doesn't satisfy. I would suggest that it doesn't answer what we are really looking for. Oftentimes, the subtext of asking this question, “Why am I experiencing this (because I should not be experiencing this)? Because I am experiencing this, I am doing something wrong.” We also might really be asking “Why is this experience happening to me?”

In not attempting to answer this question, but instead letting this question be present, we don't want to tamp down on or repress anything that arises. We just want to meet what arises more wisely. We can see into this question more deeply and we can recognize that unpleasant experiences happen to everyone. Unpleasant experiences are impersonal. We might also want to investigate whether we ask “Why?” when we have a pleasant experience. Please look into whether this is so for you or not.

As well in this question of “Why?”, if we don't relate to an inner experience as problem—which means something that should not be happening—the question of why it is happening will not arise. When “Why?” arises and one is tempted to answer it, instead try asking, “What is my relationship to this? How am I relating to this right here and right now?” Then it clicks into meditation.

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Meditation is seeing the causes of suffering in the here and now, not so much because of things that may have happened in the past. From the perspective of *now*, this experience is happening because of conditions coming together. We can see some of those conditions, and but we can't see many others.

Our meditative task is to meet phenomenon with wisdom and with compassion. For example, let's consider the question “Why am I suffering?” In the here and now, this question has one of three answers. *Identification* with the experience as being me or mine or my own, that which I can possess and claim. Or *clinging*, trying to hold onto the experience when it cannot be held onto. Or *resistance*, resistance to that which is only going to tighten the struggle even more.

There are many questions, as I said before, that have a one-word answer. We try to answer these questions with intellectual gymnastics, but really the answers are quite short. I'd like to end this talk by giving you some examples.

“What is wrong with me?” One word answer: “Nothing.”

“How can I get this to last?” A two word answer: “You can't.”

“Why am I such a jerk?” A three word answer: “You are not.”

“Why do people do what they do?” A one word answer: “Ignorance.”

I'll leave this talk to be for now. To review, I spoke about the need to discern between wise and unwise questions with the encouragement to let go of the unwise.

Next week, we will enter into the terrain of wise questions, and we'll focus on life koans. See you then. Meanwhile, be well and happy. Bye!