

Narayan Helen Liebenson
Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry
Week Three: "Life Koans"
November 17, 2019



Welcome back to the third week of Good Question: The Art of Meditative Inquiry. I'm Narayan Helen Liebenson, and this week we're going to discuss the practice of asking wise questions, beginning with a discussion about life koans. This is one type of wise question that is well worth asking.

As you may know, this word koan is used in Zen teachings. It means an investigative question that doesn't have a conventional or conceptual answer. I am using this word to mean the questions we have about our lives that truly intrigue us, the questions that present themselves to us as problems or issues in our lives according to the particular conditions that we ourselves are facing and engaged with.

These kinds of questions arise within the silence of our meditative practice, but they also express themselves everywhere. They express themselves in our relationships, perhaps particularly our intimate relationships, but our relationships with anyone as well as in our work life or what we choose to do with our time. They are questions that have a grip on the heart. They are questions that are well worth asking, and we actually can't skip over if we want a life of real inner freedom, not trying to transcend somewhere but to actually engage the conditions in our lives as material for liberation.

Life koans are the fears, and the dreams, and the confusions that bubble up repeatedly over and over again during different phases of our lives. They express themes that have an ongoing grip on the heart. It's not as if they're always there. They arise according to particular conditions, and so they be there and not there and then there and not there, but they tend to reoccur.

Sometimes these themes arise in childhood and then they follow us into adulthood. Other times, different themes arise throughout our lives, and there can be different lifetimes within one lifetime. What I mean by this is that the conditions in our lives can change so drastically, and completely, and dramatically that we almost have another lifetime in which to investigate.

Another theme or another life koan, they change. We complete one, and then perhaps another one comes to be. These kinds of questions are of a different order than the unwise questions discussed in the last talk. These kinds of questions are deeply meaningful. Asking such questions, if we can ask them in wise ways, can be extraordinarily fruitful and beneficial. Rather than being questions that we turn into problems, these are problems that we learn to turn into questions. So already something different takes place when we can identify a particular life koan for ourselves.



Life koans are solved or resolved. Actually, they are dissolved at a certain point, not by the efforts to figure out an answer, but by continuing to respect the question. The response to these kinds of questions is our life lived differently than before. These kinds of questions, our life koan, are along the lines of being precious jewels. They need to be respected as such and not dismissed, and disregarded, and disrespected. Right attitude in response to these questions in relationship to these kinds of questions is that of being patient and respectful.

So relating to these themes as life koans changes the relationship that we have to them from a dilemma to an open-hearted investigation. We want to observe our reactions, our speech, the ways that we speak, the ways that we speak to one another, the ways that we speak to ourselves, our patterns of thought. We want to study ourselves under all conditions in our attempts to solve or allow these kinds of life koans to dissolve into a greater field of peacefulness and inner freedom.

We can't answer these kinds of questions via mere reasoning. They have to be lived into. This is something quite wonderful by Rilke. He says, "I would like to beg you to have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language. Don't search for the answers which could not be given you now because you would not be able to live them. And the point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer."

The true answers, the true resolution, the true satisfaction in response to our life koan are nonverbal. We might not even be able to articulate the answers to our life koans in any way that anyone else might be able to understand. And yet we know that life has changed for the better. Life has transformed itself. Fear is lessened or there is greater empathy or patience available. We are able to be more courageous or we find ourselves more patient in times when before we might have been intensely impatient. The issue is no longer relevant and no longer occupies one's mind. It really has been put to rest in a satisfying and rich way.

I often find one particular heartfelt question arising for practitioners that a practitioner tends to ask over and over again in different ways with different vocabulary. Sometimes I notice that a practitioner will ask one teacher after another the same question and they might ask with some degree of chagrin or even shame, but of course it makes sense to ask what is most important to you at this time in your life over and over again. This is how we learn.



Sometimes practitioners ask the same teacher the same thing and think the teacher may be bored at some point, but this is never so. For a true teacher, it is never boring because it's a new moment, and because the question is heartfelt, and the question is meaningful and rich, and has everything to do with suffering and its end.

So I'd like to give you some examples of what I mean by life koans. And as you listen to these examples, something might just immediately come to your mind, like I don't understand what that means, or there's an immediate thought that arises, or something like that. But these are just example, something to sense your way into. We all have different life koans, so maybe all of them are not pertinent to you and you have your own. Maybe a little bit of one might apply to your life, or you might have had this kind of koan in the past and it is now resolved, and that's a very interesting thing to see.

So one might be, what is the practice in the face of great adversity? Another one might be when life is unjust, what is equanimity? Is equanimity even ethical when people are suffering as they are? You might understand this question intellectually, but to emotionally live your way into it and out of it is something quite different.

Are others ever to blame? In a way, can't anyone else ever be to blame for my suffering? It's a poignant question, something we need to sit with and not try to figure our way out of. Allow intrinsic wisdom to answer the question for us.

Another question might be, why be here when I can be there? Why be present? It's such a popular thing to be these days, but it's not so easy because we are asking ourselves to be present when things are quite lovely as well as when things are really difficult. So why be present when I can amuse, and enchant, and fascinate, and entertain myself through my thinking, when I can be somewhere else in my thoughts? Why be present?

What is true integration? Of course, this is the question that all meditators ask and perhaps particularly after leaving a retreat, whether residential or nonresidential but a retreat in which we are practicing the ancient forms of sitting and walking over some number of days when we come out again into our everyday life. How can I integrate what I know into my life as it is? This is an ongoing life koan and an essential one.

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Another one could be, is fear in me or is there cause to be afraid? It's a very deep question to hold. Is fear in me or is there a cause to be afraid?

Another one, if I lost what is most precious to me, would I survive? Certainly. Yet another poignant question.

These are just examples. You have your own life koan or koans, and they will reveal themselves to you through attentiveness. For me, to give you a personal example, before my mother died in 2004, I wondered whether I would indeed survive her death. It was a koan for me. Of course I would. Of course I would. Of course I would because I would have to. This is the easy intellectual answer, but emotionally perhaps I would not. I didn't know. I genuinely didn't know. So I kept the question alive and treated it as a special guest whenever it arose. Instead of it being something secretive or shameful, I kept bringing it out into the light of awareness. This allowed me to not just grieve her impending loss, to not just grieve in advance of her actual loss, anticipatory grief, but as well to hold and to ask this question that certainly contained fear and anxiety with compassion and with kindness.

Because of this approach to what felt like a dire problem, by holding this question with affection and with interest in the way described earlier, I understood something far beyond just the death of my mother, as important as that was. And of course, when she did die, I was fine. A deeper sense of trust can emerge when we learn to trust and be patient with these kinds of questions. We trust that we can turn towards and face the confusions in our lives rather than avoid them or be endlessly lost in worry.

So to summarize, in this talk, we discussed one of the ways that questioning can be fruitful and rich and can transform our lives for the better. Next week, I'll be speaking about meditative questioning, how and what to ask, and what a meditative question might be. Be well in the meantime, and I hope to see you next week.