

Narayan Helen Liebenson  
*Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry*  
Week One: “Unlocking Answers Within”  
November 3, 2019



Hi! I'm Narayan Helen Liebenson, and I'm an Insight meditation teacher. I am a guiding teacher at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center, as well as at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts. We are filming today here at the Cambridge Insight Meditation Center. The beautiful altar behind me shows an image of Avalokitesvara, the personification of compassion on one side, and on the other side is Manjushri, the personification of wisdom. So we have good companions for this time together this morning. I am also the author of *The Magnanimous Heart*, a new book. The subtitle is *Compassion and Love, Loss and Grief, Joy and Liberation*.

Over the past forty years, I've trained with meditation teachers in the lineages of Theravada, Zen, and Tibetan, both in Asia and in the United States. I'll be leading today a Tricycle Dharma Talk called “Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry.” In this talk, we will learn how to practice a form of investigation, which is that of learning how to ask wise questions in a way that fosters greater inner freedom and allows us to loosen up and let go of conditioning. In this first week, we're going to explore why questioning is so useful as well as how to question in a skillful and fruitful way.

Why is meditative inquiry so essential? It's essential because there are two components to the practice. First, we calm our minds and then we look into the true nature of things as they are, which leads to greater understanding, and this understanding brings about inner liberation. So investigation or inquiry is a key aspect of the teachings. It's essential to the teachings. To investigate is to contemplate with a silent mind. It's to illuminate that which is cloudy or confused. It's to explore and to discover what we have not yet understood or discovered.

Deep inquiry frees the mind from the suffering and pitfalls of an unexamined life. Freeing the mind from suffering is the point of the practice and the Buddha's teachings. Looking into life as we generally live it through our habits and our patterns encourages us to examine things differently. Asking questions is a way to allow intrinsic wisdom to emerge, wisdom that is there within each one of our hearts, that has not yet had a chance to come forth and inform our lives. So questioning is a way to unlock answers within, that we never even knew were there. They are waiting to be discovered, and questioning is a way to elicit those responses from the heart.

This is distinct from efforts to convince ourselves of something that we are supposed to know, or that someone has told us we don't quite believe. Questioning is a way to understand for ourselves, and it brings about a greater sense of self-confidence and self-trust. The Buddha used this wonderful Pali word, *ehipassiko*. This word means “come and see for oneself.” Come and see for oneself how things actually are. This is why is doubt, we are encouraged to test the

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teachings out so that they become our own. Out of this emerges a greater sense of confidence and self-trust, because we know for ourselves what brings about liberation and what does not, what further mires us in misery or confusion.

I like to inspire us by reading a short poem by Joyce Sutphen called *How to Listen*.

Tilt your head slightly to one side, and lift  
your eyebrows expectantly. Ask questions.

Delve into the subject at hand or let  
things come randomly. Don't expect answers.

Forget everything you've ever done.  
Make no comparisons. Simply listen.

Listen with your eyes as if the story  
you were hearing is happening right now.

Listen, without blinking as if a move  
might frighten the truth away forever.

Don't attempt to copy anything down.  
Don't bring a camera or a recorder.

This is your chance to listen carefully.  
Your whole life might depend on what you hear.

This is an aspect of why is questioning. Learning how to listen is as important as asking the questions.

But we also want to discern between wise questions and questions that aren't all that useful to ask. I will go into this more in the second talk, but I wanted to just put it on your minds for now that there certainly are questions that bring about responses that are fruitful and helpful, and there are questions that we really want to learn how to put aside and not engage in.



I'm bringing this up right now because we are actually always asking ourselves questions. The mind is always chasing after this or that, and the thoughts that arise are sometimes in the form of questions. “Why am I here?” “What is the meaning of life?” “When can I get what I want, or get rid of what I don't want?” “Why am I so deluded?” “Why are others so deluded?” But questions such as these just make us circle around and around and do not reveal a way out.

Questioning as a meditative practice doesn't mean constantly questioning oneself. It doesn't mean obsessing. It doesn't mean running after thoughts, or spinning out in thoughts. Questioning in a meditative way doesn't demand an answer. It doesn't even require an answer, in the usual ways that we may search for answers in our lives. It's something quite different than our ordinary—I would say neurotic—ways of questioning.

Our attitude is really important. The attitude which we come to this art of inquiry, this art of wise questioning, needs to be one of open-heartedness. We need to let something deeper than our usual habitual thinking arise, and we need to trust it. We need to familiarize ourselves with silence, because wise questions and fruitful responses arise out of silence.

We practice—and this is indeed a practice—we practice relinquishing our preconceived ideas, concepts, and assumptions how we think things should be. Instead, we look at them in a fresh and open-hearted way. We look in a way that is free—or as free as possible—from assuming that things should be or have to be a certain way. In other words, we are opening to what is with humility, gentleness, honesty, and sincerity.

The most helpful attitude is one of non-grasping and non-attachment. We just want to know the truth for ourselves. The right attitude—or let's say the wisest attitude—is letting go of the known to be able to explore the unknown, what we don't already know. To do this we need the qualities of affection and curiosity. Ajahn Sumedho talks about affectionate curiosity and it's so perfect, interest and affectionate curiosity.

We encourage ourselves to rest in what is sometimes called “don't know mind,” which means open to whatever may emerge. I hope you're getting a sense or a glimpse of what I'm speaking about. I'm using words because we have to use words, but it's something other than words. It's something that comes when we are not preoccupied with our thoughts.

So the practice is to ask and then to listen. Knowing the right questions to ask is crucial. At the same time, knowing how to listen is equally important. Listening is an expression of receptivity



and relaxation. As I said before, the practice includes both methods to calm ourselves and methods of investigation. And the prelude to questioning is a calm and steady mind. This cannot be overemphasized, that we need to calm and steady our minds as a foundation out of which wise questioning can truly bear fruit. As calm deepens and as steadiness and collectedness is developed, our questions are asked within an environment of inner silence. So we're less apt to get hooked, caught, or dragged away by our usual habitual thinking.

When we encourage calmness and steadiness within our hearts, we are cultivating the right inner environment out of which both asking and listening come more easily. So both *shamatha* and *samadhi* are essential as a prelude to wise investigation. *Shamatha* is a Pali word that means calm, as many of you know, and *samadhi* is a Pali word that means collectedness or steadiness. Both are needed for the deep kind of listening to be possible.

Otherwise, we'll get distracted. Otherwise, we'll be pulled all over the place, and our questioning will turn into the usual discursive thinking that we're probably overly familiar with. Enough peacefulness is needed to be able to look into deeper levels of uneasiness. Enough happiness is needed to be able to look into deeper levels of unhappiness. There needs to be at least enough of an initial level of calm to be able to look into deeper levels of agitation. And it is necessary for there to be enough steadiness and collectiveness, to be able to move into the provocative nature of wise meditative questioning.

Meditative questioning can be provocative. It can take courage. And the foundation of *shamatha* and *samadhi* offer us enough of a foundation out of which that courage can more naturally come. So I encourage you, and I suggest that you take this seriously and encourage calmness and steadiness in your meditation practice before moving to the practice of questioning. It's not like you have to have an extraordinary deep level of *samadhi* to be able to question. But there needs to be some. So really to encourage and develop some level within oneself is essential.

So to summarize this week's talk, this week we learned about why and how to question. Next week we will explore which questions are useful to ask, and which are not. Bye for now!