

Narayan Helen Liebenson
Good Question! The Art of Meditative Inquiry
Week Four: "Asking Meditative Questions"
November 24, 2019



Hi, I'm Narayan Helen Liebenson, and I'm happy to see you again. Last week I offered a talk about life [inaudible 00:00:15], and this week, which is the fourth and final talk of this series, I would like to speak about meditative questioning. Meditative questions as well as meditative questioning.

Meditative questioning is one of the best ways to investigate and inquire. It always has to do with the here and now. A meditative question always has to do with that which is happening here and now. Not with the moment that has passed, not with a moment that has not yet come, but it is in direct relationship to life as it is here and now.

Another feature of meditative questioning is that it may include conditions, of course, and it points beyond conditions as well. A meditative question is almost a bridge from the condition to that which is not conditioned. A meditative question offers a greater sense of perspective. It offers a sense of the greater picture, instead of only being focused, or even over-focused, on content. It opens things up.

A meditative question is always in the service of wisdom and compassion. It's always in the service of inwardly seeing something differently than we have. The fresh breeze of inner freedom. It is always in the service of inner freedom. And a meditative question is one that encourages one to look under the surface of things, and into the depths.

I want to encourage you to ask a question, or questions, that you really care about, that really matter to you, that you are genuinely interested in. In asking a meditative question, the point is to ask the same question regardless of what the conditions may be in that moment.

So, ask in all conditions, not just some. Ask while you're sitting in formal meditation practice, ask when you're walking, ask when you're doing the dishes, ask when you think you're supposed to do the dishes and you are not, ask when you're at a party, ask when you are at the computer, ask when you're texting, ask when you are having a conversation with someone, ask when you're lonely, ask when you're really happy.

It's essential in taking up this particular practice, the art of questioning, to ask under all situations. Ask when you're miserable, ask when you're bored. Don't leave any condition out.

How to ask is really important as well. One way to ask is as if you were throwing a stone into a still pool of water. In this case, the still pool of water is the environment of calm and Sumati that



we have encouraged and cultivated and nourished. And then we throw a meditative question into the depths, listening after we throw the question in too. Whatever arises, whatever the ripples are, whatever the intimations are, we want to listen as deeply as we possibly can, opening up all of the sense doors and listening, looking, sensing, intuiting, calmly, quietly engaged in deep listening.

I want to advise you not to believe any verbal answers that arise. Of course, they are going to arise. That's natural. Thinking is out of our control. But to not stop there, to not get behind an answer that might seem to easily solve what you are asking.

When an answer, a verbal answer, arises, keep listening and continue to listen with sustained and loving affection and attentiveness. Remember that asking in and of itself awakes an innate wisdom. There is an intuitive knowing that is distinct from intellectual conditioning, and that's what meditative questioning elicits.

Let go of the desire for an answer and try to trust the sincerity of the asking in and of itself. Just ask the question innocently, with simplicity of heart, with sincerity, and then just listen. Don't ask questions that cause unnecessary agitation. That's not necessarily.

I mentioned in an earlier talk that asking a meditative question may indeed be provocative. But provocative does not mean agitating. Provocative means that there's some sense of steadiness and surety behind whatever our question may be. And it doesn't lead us into greater confusion and agitation.

Provocative means that we're asking something that we have not previously thought to ask, and so it's something that because it's fresh, and because it's here and now, and because we are practicing genuinely not knowing the answer, that in and of itself can be provocative.

But it's not provocative in that it brings about greater discursive thinking or agitation or restlessness or worry. That is not a good meditative question to ask.

I'd also suggest that you not ask too many. One meditative question during a particular period of time, over time in your life, is enough.

Everyone has different questions. When you find a good question for yourself, keep it alive. You might choose a question, and I'll give you some examples in a few minutes, you may choose a question that you've heard from the teachings that has inspired you or encouraged you, or



brought about a kind of interest and curiosity. You might use a question like that, a question that a teacher has offered to you. Or, one may inadvertently come along on its own. Either is fine.

Keep with whatever question inspires and encourages and provokes and makes you more alive. Enlivens you and enlivens your practice and enlivens your life, touches an inner sense of vitality.

An authentic question is one that is not filtered through conditioning. It is fresh and alive here and now. And it takes one to an even deeper silence, peace, ease, and spaciousness.

We can see its impact and its expression in our daily life experiences and activities, in the quality of life. We can see the impact that a meditative question is having.

Some examples of meditative questions that you might think about taking up for yourself.

When upset, to ask who is it that is upset right now? Or who is upset? Doesn't have a conceptual answer. Maybe you've read many books and you can come up with conceptual answers, but if we ask it as something we are genuinely interested in, something real comes to being. We are responded to by our own innate wisdom.

Another might be, what is the mind aware of right now? Just a very basic question that orients one's self to what is happening now. Is there any moment better than this one? This is a question I really love.

When upset, what are the stakes? And if you answer the stakes are really high, which you may because we always want to be honest, if the stakes do seem high you may follow up with this question; what do I want to contribute? Do I want to contribute more stress to this world? More anger? More sorrow? Or do I want to contribute more peace and more understanding?

Another question, when I experience emotional turbulence, what do I do? How does thinking affect sensations and emotions? How do emotions affect thoughts? Is this thought both true and useful? Given the conditions in my life right now, what is wise effort? Only you know the answer to this.

How am I reacting to this experience? Is it possible to approach it with wisdom and with compassion? Where is kindness? Is there love for this too? Whatever the this might be.

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What is the quality of my heart right now? What does love, free of attachment, actually look like?

To use the example of one of the questions, is it possible to love even this, one would hold this question lightly as experiences both pleasant and unpleasant come and go. As life offers beautiful experiences, as well as challenging and difficult experiences. And all of those ordinary, mundane experiences as well. Is it possible to love even this?

Every so often, dropping the question in and then listening as deeply as one can, free from the attempt to try to find an answer, but rather letting the question itself guide you into greater love and acceptance.

It is important to ask what you are genuinely interested in. In taking this up as a practice, there will be a growing sense of which questions bring peace and lead to even greater peace and a release of suffering, and which to confusion and only more confusion.

Asking meditative questions is a way to guide your life and your practice. We develop a natural inclination towards investigation. When this happens, use whatever naturally arises. The brain doesn't hold the answer to our lives. Let the right question arise for you. Let the right question, the wise question, the meditative question, bring you to silence.

I'd like to end this last talk with a poem by Rumi called A Voice through the Door.

Sometimes you hear a voice through the door calling you, as fish out of water hear the waves, or a hunting falcon hears the drums. "Come back, come back." This turning toward what you deeply love saves you. Read the book of your life which has been given you. A voice comes to your soul saying, "Lift your foot, cross over, move into the emptiness of question and answer and question."

This talk is the end of this series of talks entitled Good Question: The Art of Meditative Inquiry. And in this talk, I spoke about how to ask a meditative question in a skillful way, a way in which greater understanding about the nature of happiness, and the nature of inner liberation, can be realized within our own hearts.

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If you are interested in reading about these themes, and others, you may want to check out my new book, *The Magnanimous Heart*, which was written as a love letter to those experienced on this path as well as to those of you who are just beginning.

I hope to see you alive one day. We are ever increasingly connected as a dharma family. In the meantime, take care of yourself and take care of one another, and keep practicing. Bye.