Questioning Assumptions

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It’s a beautiful moonlit night. The temperature’s not too cold, not too hot. Things are quiet outside. The only problem is that the mind is still creating problems for itself. When you really think about it, the mind is a real troublemaker. You could sit here and you could be perfectly happy, and yet the mind always thinks up something else. This thought, that thought, this desire, that urge. It’s probably proof that the mind is not one big unity here. It’s more like a whole committee, all these different voices, all these different urges. You’re just kind of popping into consciousness. If everything were unified, there wouldn’t be this lack of harmony within the mind. Things would all work together. A large part of the meditation is just that, creating the harmony in the mind, bringing everything to peace, bringing everything to a state of balance and equilibrium. We start out by focusing the mind here in the present moment on the breath. First you’ve got to bring the body and the mind into alignment. When the body is in one place and the mind is in all sorts of other places, there’s no real harmony. There’s no contentment. The only true contentment comes when the mind can finally settle down and be at peace, both with the body and with itself. The reason it’s not at peace is because it has all kinds of assumptions. Assuming that the body should be like this, the body should be like that, there shouldn’t be pain, there shouldn’t be this, there shouldn’t be that. Once you’ve got a body there, these things are going to happen. You can’t avoid them. As we chant every morning, aging, illness, and death are unavoidable. Separation is unavoidable. So we’ve got to learn how to make peace with these things by not basing our happiness on them. That’s the trick. We always assume that in order to be happy, things have to be a certain way. You have to be able to control them this way and that way. They’re things that just don’t lie under your control. So you have to turn around and question those assumptions. Is there another way for the mind to find happiness? Is there another basis for your happiness? That’s why we look right here, right now. First bring the mind in alignment with the body. When the body breathes in, the mind should be there with it. When the body breathes out, the mind should be there with it. This is a good place to question some very basic assumptions. There’s a passage in Dogon where he says, “Just sitting there.” Who’s doing the sitting? Is the mind sitting in the body? Is the body sitting in the mind? What exactly is the sitting? It’s a really basic function like that, just sitting. You begin to realize that the mind has all kinds of weird assumptions about the relationship of this knowing quality and the body that’s sitting here. The same holds true with the breath. In fact, even more so, because the breath is a more complicated process. It’s this energy flow in the body. We have certain preconceived notions about how the energy comes in, how it goes out, what you have to do in order to make the energy come in, what you have to do in order to make it go out. A good place to explore is just these assumptions you have. What if you changed your assumptions? Would that change the way you experience the breath? If you think of the energy, say, coming in at those resting spots that Ajahn Lee talks about, that the breath comes in, the energy comes in at the navel, the energy comes in at the tip of the breastbone. When the breath comes in, it goes into the body, and then when it goes out, it spreads out through your pores. If you conceive the breath energy in that way, how does that change your experience of breathing? What kind of mental pictures can you have of the breath that make it most satisfying, most fulfilling, just to sit here and breathe? As you explore this process, you begin to realize what rule your assumptions play in your experience of things. How important it is to be able to question those assumptions, to try alternative assumptions, until you find a set that’s just right for here and now. Then maybe that set will not be quite right for the next time you meditate. So you keep questioning, experimenting. It’s not questioning just in the sense of doubt. “Is this right? Is that wrong? Let’s see what happens.” It’s a very pragmatic approach. Then you begin to realize that even your basic assumptions about sitting, breathing, can be called into question. What does that say about your more abstract assumptions about who you are, what’s in here, what your desires are, what you need for happiness? You begin to realize a lot of the problem is right there with your assumptions. Once you assume something, then your quest follows the outlines of those assumptions. This has to be that way, that has to be this way, and then you just follow out the implications. So an important part of the meditation, once the mind gets still, is to start looking and seeing exactly where these assumptions are and what happens when you change them. That area where the mind says, “Well, this has got to be like this. It can’t be another way.” “That has got to be like that. It can’t be any other way.” “Have you tested it?” “I have to conceive of the mind this way. I have to conceive of the body that way. I have to conceive of my happiness in these terms, those terms.” It’s healthy to be able to question those things. In a way, meditation is like going into a different culture. You talk about travel being a broadening experience. It’s for the people who go into another culture and, instead of passing judgment on that culture, just try it on for size. And then once they’ve tried it on for size, travel down and look at their own home culture. And they begin to see a lot of things that are very arbitrary about their own home culture, and things that seem so real, so important. Suddenly they take on a different perspective. They begin to loosen up a lot of your old assumptions. We’re trying to do the same sort of thing as we meditate. This new world that we’re exploring here is the world inside. It’s being inside your body, being in touch with what’s right here, right now, on its own terms. What happens when you drop your outside points of reference? In other words, looking at the body not in terms of how attractive it is to other people, or how healthy it is, or how strong it is, or how young it is, or how old it is, or whatever, but just in its bodiness right here, right now. How do you know you’ve got a body sitting here? Sitting here with your eyes closed. Well, there’s just this sense of a kind of a presence, a shape, a heaviness, a warmth, feelings of energy flowing throughout the body. What happens if you look at the body just in those terms? Without identifying it as “me” or “mine,” but just these feelings of energy that let you know you’ve got this body here. What happens when the breath energy grows stiller and stiller? How does that change your experience of the body? In other words, you look at things right as they’re present to your awareness with the least amount of assumptions, and it begins to unsettle and take apart a lot of other things that are sort of hardened and encrusted in the mind. Now, all this would just be kind of a curiosity. It isn’t interesting that you can look at these things in these different ways, but the real point of it all is that you begin to find that there are other perspectives that can lead you to total freedom from suffering, lead you totally out of the limitations of time and space. And it’s your assumption that keeps you there. Jon Swart was once talking about the meaning of the word “sannyā,” which we translate as “perception.” It’s kind of the labels the mind places on things. One interesting side to all this is that when the word “sannyā” got into the Time Language, it also came to mean an agreement, like when you sign a contract with someone. This side agrees to that, that side agrees to this. Okay, then there’s our sannyā. This is the mind acting just the same way. There’s this agreement inside the mind, “Well, this is going to be this, and that’s going to be that.” And when you learn to drop those agreements and see what’s just there without the agreements, these little make-believe contracts that the mind has for itself, like little kids saying, “Okay, I’ll be the doctor and you’ll be the patient,” and they play doctor and patient. The mind plays these kind of games with itself, and it creates a lot of suffering for itself. That’s the problem. So we have to learn how to look at the processes of the mind to find that you can get beyond these little agreements. And that’s when things really open up in the mind. You realize there’s another dimension outside of what you’ve been experiencing so far, outside of time, outside of space, and there’s no suffering. Once that becomes the basis for happiness, because it’s totally independent of any causal factors, anything that could change it, then there’s a real peace with everything else. Because you’re not trying to turn anything into anything that it’s not. This is why there’s a struggle with the mind. It’s trying to create something out of things that just can’t be created in that direction. Try to create a basis of happiness out of things that are going to change. Try to hold on to things that are going to slip out of your grasp. That’s why you’re at war. That’s why, even living in a really peaceful environment like this, the mind can create all kinds of trouble, because it’s trying to turn things into things that they can’t be. But once the mind has its own inner source of happiness, its own inner basis for happiness, then there’s no need to be at war with anything, no need to create trouble. So this is the direction our practice goes in. You settle the mind down, try to bring it to at least a beginning level of peace with the breath, and then you use that level of peace to pry loose your attachments, question them, see what happens if you change your assumptions, that this has to be that and that has to be this. You find which assumptions are most useful for the practice. It’s not that you just drop everything. You find that some things are stress-causing and other things are actually part of the path. You see, that process of sannyāsa, the agreements and the labels the mind creates, there’s also a whole series of sannyāsa that are part of the path—the perception of impermanence, the perception of non-self, and so on down the list. You find, okay, these assumptions are useful for certain purposes at certain times, and then ultimately, when the job gets done, then you can put everything away. You can bring them out whenever you need them again, but their purpose now is no longer to find happiness for the mind. The mind already has found its basis. Just whatever needs to be done, whatever tasks there are, whatever purposes can be served, well, you’ve got your tools. But there’s a lot more freedom, there’s a lot more peace. In the using of the tools, the putting them aside, your whole approach to everything has undergone a major shift, because you’re aware of a different dimension. So the dimensions of time and space take on a new perspective, and it’s a lot more livable.

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