

The Buddha's Questions

September 9, 2009

When you read the Buddha's accounts of his own quest for awakening, it's hard not to be struck by how many times he asked questions of himself, and how his quest was directed by his questions.

It starts when he sees a problem: Here he is, subject to aging, illness and death, and yet he seeks happiness in things that are also subject to aging, illness, and death. He asks himself, "What if you were to seek happiness in things that didn't die?" The question suggests a possibility he hadn't thought of before. And so, as he says, he goes off in search of what is skillful. This shows that he already had some assumptions there: that there was a way, a method of human action that would lead to the deathless, and he wanted to find the skillful means to get there.

First he went to study with a couple of teachers who claimed to know the path to true happiness, but he wasn't satisfied with their teachings. So he asked himself, "What if I were to go off and practice on my own, practice austerities?" Then he had a vision of those three similes of the wood: sappy wood near water, sappy wood away from the water, and then the dry wood away from the water, which is the only type of wood that you can actually use to give rise to fire.

So he decided that he had to do without pleasure entirely. That's how he interpreted the meaning of that simile. So he tried the trance of suppressing his breathing. He felt horrible pains in his head, pains in his body. He asked himself, "What if I were to go without food entirely?" And the devas came and said, "If you go without food entirely, we're going to infuse divine food in through your pores." So he dismissed them. He asked himself, "In that case, what if I were not to go without food but take just a little tiny bit of food, say, a handful of beans every few days?" So he tried that. He did that for six years. He got so thin that he fell over every time he tried to urinate or defecate. When he touched his stomach, he could feel his spine.

And finally, after six years, he asked himself, "Could there be another way?" This way was obviously not working. Then he remembered when he was a child meditating under a tree, and had spontaneously entered the first jhana. "Could that be the way to awakening?" And the consciousness arose to him, yes, it would be. But even then, he tested it. As he says in one of his accounts, he first decided, "How about if I divide my thinking into two sorts: skillful and unskillful?" He tried that. When he noticed that his thinking was unskillful, that it was imbued with sensuality, ill will, or harmfulness, he would beat it down. Whenever his

thoughts were not imbued with those things, he would allow them to range freely, until he saw that all of his thoughts were skillful. But even then, the mind was tired of all that thinking. So he brought it to stillness and the jhanas. And even here, he was motivated by that original desire, that original question: “What is skillful?”

So when he attained the different levels of jhana, he looked at each level as an activity: “What here is still stressful, even in this jhana?” He could ferret out the different factors that were necessary in one level of jhana but would prevent his mind from going to a deeper level of jhana. They were a disturbance to the mind. So he would drop them, go into deeper levels of jhana. He got to the fourth jhana, and there he started directing his mind to different questions: “Is this the only life that there is, or have there been lives previous to this?” And he had memory of many many previous lifetimes, eons and eons.

But he didn’t stop there.

Some of the texts talk about other teachers who had attained a similar knowledge. Once they’d seen many previous lifetimes, they’d set themselves up as great philosophers, explaining that this is the way the world is: The world is eternal. Or sometimes, if they had memories going back to previous lifetimes, but then they hit a time when they were totally insentient beings, and they couldn’t remember past that, they’d say, “Well, there was a point where I didn’t exist, and then existence came to be, so the world must be not eternal.”

But the Buddha’s question again was: “What’s the most skillful use of this knowledge?” And he didn’t stop just with that knowledge. He moved on, to knowledge of all beings dying and being reborn, because the question was: “Does rebirth happen only to me or does it affect other beings? And what’s the basic underlying pattern underlying rebirth?” He saw beings dying and being reborn all over the cosmos in line with their kamma, their intentional actions. And again, he didn’t stop there and set himself up as an expert on kamma, teaching just that much about kamma. He said, “There must be some other use for this knowledge. What’s the most skillful use?”

He applied it to his own intentions, the kamma of the mind in the present moment: He traced the suffering he was feeling—the aging, illness, and death he was trying to get past—back through his intentions, and from there all the way back to ignorance. In this case, it turned out to be ignorance of what he later taught as the four noble truths: suffering, its origination, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. What was he to do with those truths? He realized that there were duties that you had to fulfill with regard to them. Again: “What’s the most skillful use of this knowledge?” That was the question that kept directing his

practice. From there he fulfilled the duties with regard to the truths: comprehended stress, abandoned its origination, realized the cessation from having developed the path.

So all along the way, he kept questioning himself: “What is this? What’s the cause of this? What’s the best use of this?” He kept questioning, questioning, questioning, until he finally got to awakening through questioning.

That’s why, when he taught, he encouraged his students to question as well. He realized that some questions were useful, whereas other questions would lead you astray. Because after all, what is a question? It’s the framework of a sentence, but it’s got a big gap. When you ask a question, you’re either hoping to find knowledge yourself or you’re trying to get other people to fill in the gap for themselves.

But the question is not totally amorphous. It has a frame. And he saw that some frames would give you skillful information, and others would give you more unskillful information. For example, there’s that frame about which type of life is better: the life of sensual indulgence or the life of self-torment? At first he had answered, “The life of self-torment,” but later he realized that that was a poorly formed question. Or the question of what is the origin of the world: If that had been the question that had originally motivated him, then he would have stopped with the first or the second knowledge. So he realized he had to properly frame his questions in order to get something useful out of them.

This taught him several things. One is that questioning is what motivates you to find awakening. After all, as a prince, if he had simply accepted what everybody had told him—“Hey, you’re a great prince. Have a good time. Go out and do some battles like princes do, and then come home to enjoy your sensuality”: If he hadn’t questioned that advice, we never would have had a Buddha.

So that’s one of the important functions of questioning: It shows that there’s a gap, something’s missing in life—true happiness, and knowledge about how to find true happiness. These are the missing parts. Without a sense of that gap, you get very complacent.

But it’s also important, when you ask these questions, that you learn how to frame the gap and give it the right shape. You can think of a question as a tool or instrument with a missing part. If you’re using the wrong tool, then no matter how many wise people tell you about which part you’re missing, it still doesn’t solve the problem. You may get the missing piece to the tool, but it’s the wrong tool for your purpose. You haven’t really benefited.

This is why, when the Buddha taught, he not only encouraged people to ask questions; he also encouraged them to frame their questions in the right way. The

questions he encouraged basically come down to this issue of what's skillful, and then how to understand the four noble truths, how to develop the skills appropriate to those four noble truths—in other words, how to put those truths to the most skillful use. Those are the questions he asked you to focus on.

And you look at other questions he encourages: When you go to see a teacher, one, ask yourself about the teacher. Is this the sort of person who would tell a falsehood, pretend to know something he didn't know because of passion, greed, aversion, or delusion? Would he try to get someone to do something that wasn't in that person's best interest? You've got to check out the teacher first, realizing you can't just trust anybody you come across, no matter how good they look on paper. You've got to look at that person's behavior. When you feel confident that this is the sort of person you can trust, then you listen to that person's Dhamma.

One of the first questions he has you ask of a teacher is: "What is skillful and what is unskillful?" Then when you've learned that from the teacher, you go off and practice on your own, but you keep on asking questions. Because you don't just stop with the definition of what's skillful or a few rules about what's skillful. You actually look at your own behavior.

This is the essence of his teachings to Rahula: how to check your behavior, check your motivation, check the actual results you get from your actions. If you see anything harmful coming from them, you've got to go back and learn how to act in another way, how to speak in another way, how to think in another way, both through your own observations and through getting advice from other people on the path.

At the same time, you support that quest for skillfulness with questions that are meant to inspire heedfulness. After all, the Buddha didn't say that we become skillful because we're innately good or because it just comes naturally to us, so that once we somehow scrub away all social conditioning we'll find our wonderful true nature that we can trust. That's complacency, and complacency is one of the things he warned against. Skillfulness comes because you realize that your actions make a difference between harm and no harm, and that you have a tendency to act in unskillful ways.

This principle lies behind those questions he has you ask at the beginning and the end of the day. At the beginning of the day, as the sun rises: "My death could happen today. Is there anything in my mind that would cause me to do something unskillful? Is there any unfinished business in the mind?" And if there is unfinished business, he says quickly to try straighten out the mind, with the same sense of urgency as you'd feel if your head were on fire. Then ask yourself the same question at sunset: "I might die tonight. Am I ready to go?" If not, quickly work

on what you need to do. In particular, focus on your mind. As he says at one point, even though you can't read other people's minds, learn how to read your own mind. Look for the skillful and unskillful qualities you have there. If you sense anything that's unskillful, again, as if your head were on fire, try to straighten it out. If you sense skillful qualities, try to develop them even further.

When you learn how to read your mind in this way, developing both that sense of heedfulness and greater and greater skill in how you manage your practice of virtue, concentration and discernment, then you finally get to those questions that he asked the five brethren: "Is form constant?" They say, "It's inconstant." "If it's inconstant, is it something pleasant or stressful?" "Well, if you're trying to find true happiness there, it's going to be stressful." "If it's inconstant and stressful, is it worthy of being called yourself?" He asked the same questions of feeling, perceptions, fabrications, and consciousness.

The asking of the questions is meant to open up your attention to an area where there's been a gap, where there has been something missing in your knowledge. And as you learn how to see, as you learn how to fill in that gap in your knowledge, then you can let go.

This is how awakening comes. It comes through questioning, having a sense of these gaps—gaps in your heedfulness, gaps in your skillfulness, gaps in your understanding. Without that sense of those gaps, you stay as complacent as ever. Nothing ever develops. It's when you sense the gaps and the need to fill in those gaps, that's when freedom can come about.

So just as the Buddha's quest was shaped by his questions, our practice should be shaped by questions as well, asking ourselves: "Are we heedful enough? Are we skillful enough? What skills still remain to be developed? What causes of suffering are we still holding on to? What factors of the path still need to be developed?"

This is why the Buddha never encouraged a dogmatic attitude, pretending to know things that you don't know. He wanted you to be very clear about where your knowledge lies and where the gaps in your knowledge lie. This gives focus to your practice. And it's meant to keep on expanding your imagination, expanding your concept of what true happiness might be.

This is one of the biggest pitfalls you see in the path: when people hit a particular level of practice and reach, say, a state of concentration, and then tell themselves, "This must be it. I'm just going to hang out right here." Their imagination isn't large enough to conceive of something better.

This is why it's important to follow the Buddha's example: Keep your practice alive with questions—so that whatever comes up, any state of concentration, you ask yourself, "What is this? Where is there stress still here in this state? What's the

skillful use of this state?” Any knowledge or insight that comes up: “What’s the skillful use of this knowledge?” At the same time, keep your imagination open to the possibility that there might be total release from suffering and that you might be capable of it. Because when the Buddha tells his life story, this is what he’s trying to encourage: what he calls the craving that leads to the end of craving, the conceit that leads to the end of conceit. You want the same awakening that he had. And you ask yourself: “If he could do it, why can’t I?” Those are the questions he wants you to ask, so that you can find the same freedom he did.