The Great Question, Investigation and Doubt

Winnie Nazarko · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2010) · 41:54

I wanted to talk tonight about the great question, about investigation, and about doubt.

In order to sustain the amount of effort and energy required for the spiritual quest, there has to be a very powerful individual motivator. In Zen practice, this is sometimes referred to as the great question or the great matter of life and death. This is a kind of inquiry that's very personal to us, very much at the heart of the matter as far as we're concerned.

I talked last week about the Buddha's own discovery of old age, sickness, and death, and how it affected him. After these things completely became real for him, his mind was totally changed. It could no longer rest in the kind of comfort and day-to-day routine, the set of everyday assumptions that he had grown up in. His mind completely lost the vanity of youth, of health, and he realized that something was going on—something that was in the background for most people but for him became the question at the foreground, the whole context of his life from that point forward.

This great question is something that many people who come to spiritual practice have known for themselves. You might be able to, in your own mind, think about what it actually was that caused the quest, that triggered the whole search, that moved you in the direction of wanting to know and wanting to understand.

For myself, I can remember being in my early teens. One member of my extended family that I was close to, and that we sometimes lived with, got sick with throat cancer and went through a period of very painful decline and then died. Shortly after that happened, the war in Vietnam was picking up steam, and my father was in the military. That had all kinds of implications about what was happening, where would he go, what would he do, would he be all right. Then another member of my extended family got sick and passed away.

When I was a junior in high school, my father did indeed go to Vietnam. By this point, I had many reservations about the rightness of that. And then another member of my extended family died.

By this point, I was asking: What's going on here? What is this? What is the nature of this world that we live in, that people you love die, and there are wars, and people you love might die or they might kill? And then the question: Am I the only one noticing this? Is it just me?

We don't necessarily see the depth of these questions reflected back to us in the larger culture because the larger culture is so bound up in seeking what is pleasant, trying to paper over the quicksand that seems to be everywhere when these aspects of life become vivid to us.

When I look at the roots of my search, the roots of my inquiry, they were really during that period of my life. From that point on, I had to know, I had to look. If there was an answer, I would find it. And if there was no answer, I would have to find the courage to live with the knowledge of these realities and use my life in a constructive way to assert at least what I could assert in the face of this kind of difficulty and suffering, which seemed to so pervade the world.

This is the great question. And the great question for those who have it is very energizing, very motivating, because the fire is so hot that it's unbearable to think about just sitting in it and staying there. You have a great question of your own, all of you, whether you've ever thought of it that way or not—a kind of inner drive that propels your search.

Buddhism endorses the great question, the holding of the great question, the penetration of the great question. I talked last Saturday about the Four Noble Truths. But Buddhism leaves aside many other questions as not being directly pertinent. It doesn't seek to answer all questions.

The Buddha once was walking in a forest with a group of his monks. As they walked along, he reached down, picked up a handful of leaves, and said to them, "How many leaves are there in the forest, bhikkhus? Are there more leaves in the forest than there are in my hand, or less?" They said, "Oh, more, Lord." And he said, "Exactly so. What I have in my hand represents what you need to know, what you need to learn to find liberation. The rest of the forest reflects what I know but will not speak because it does not pertain."

Buddhism endorses the question, the great question, and the search for an answer to this, but it doesn't seek to answer everything. As we saw in the conversation about the Four Noble Truths last week, this great question in the Buddhist system is answered through individual understanding gained through direct knowledge—your individual direct knowledge.

Another way of putting this is that the answer or answers to this arise within our own mindstream, our individual mindstreams, as a result of our own skillful and persistent search for truth.

Related to the great question and the answering of the great question is what you might call its offspring: investigation. Investigation is the second factor of enlightenment.

It's meant to be keen investigation of the Dharma. If you remember the seven factors of enlightenment, mindfulness is first, then investigation, and then energy.

If we were to define investigation, we might say it's something like that actively curious, noticing, noting capacity of mind which focuses on experiential reality. It wants to know the Dharma directly—to see it working and manifesting in what is observable. That's what we mean when we talk about investigation.

Focused to this end, investigation is a sharp tool for coming to liberating understanding. Its field of exploration is very broad because it is utilized across the four foundations of mindfulness. And contained

within the four foundations of mindfulness is every human experience you could ever have. In other words, it pertains to everything that could be part of your life and experience. Investigation has at least the potential to be there and be part of how you know and hold that experience. It's oriented towards this whole question of suffering and the end of suffering, which is the Buddha's question. Investigation is really key, and understanding can't arise without it. Many questions are answered by this factor alone, by your direct knowing and seeing.

Now, having discussed the great question and talked a little bit about investigation, let's turn to something that you might think is directly related when it comes up in your practice, but which really is a kind of faux version of this lineage of inquiry. We could call this the not-so-great question, better known as skeptical doubt.

Skeptical doubt is different from just asking questions or wanting to know about a particular topic. As I just said, wanting to know, wanting to understand—that's the essence of the practice in many ways. But skeptical doubt is a hindrance. What's a hindrance? It's the kind of experience which, if not held mindfully, actually causes a weakening of concentration. If allowed to run along unhindered, it can get in the middle of your meditative process and send it into a spiral. All of the hindrances are essentially hindrances to the mind becoming concentrated—meaning one-pointed and steadily present to what's being observed. If your mind isn't there and connected in a continuous kind of way with what you are directly knowing, you're not going to be able to come to the clear observation that allows realization to emerge.

So what is doubt and how can it be recognized? Here's a simile the Buddha used:

If there's a pot of water which is turbid, stirred up and muddy, and this pot is put into a dark place, then a man with a normal faculty of sight could not properly recognize and see the image of his own face. In the same way, when one's mind is possessed by doubt, overpowered by doubt, then one cannot properly see the escape from doubt which has arisen. Then one does not properly understand one's own welfare, nor that of another, nor that of both, and also texts memorized a long time ago do not come into one's mind, not to speak of those not memorized.

When I read this, I think it sounds like you just kind of lose it. You forget what's going on. The meditation instructions seem like they're not accessible to you. *What was that? I was supposed to do what?* Doubt in action. This is what it looks like, to help you identify it.

Like the rest of the hindrances—sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry—doubt arises when there's a lapse in mindfulness or when mindfulness is weak. It's kind of like the gates open and the goat escapes from the pen.

Where I've noticed this tends to happen is when we have an experience in meditation and something that is experienced isn't the way we think it should be. Often this isn't even fully conscious. But we're there,

we're connecting, we're connecting. And then there's an expectation of what should be known next or how it should feel or how it should be. And it doesn't go like that. Then there's a kind of disconnection. Mindfulness weakens. There's been a confounding of our assumptions, and then doubt comes in. That's how I've often seen it anyway.

Mindfulness weakens and then there's loss of direct contact with the mindstream. The observing ability goes offline. This is very characteristic: when doubt is present, mindfulness is always weak or absent, and there's a lack of direct connection with experience or clarity. This is when doubt is present as a hindrance.

I'll talk later about doubt being present and mindfully known.

Very often there's a kind of inner dialogue which can be repetitive, or which links on and on from one thing to another. Often this involves asking questions in a confused or repetitive manner, circling them again and again with nothing new being added to the situation. This repetitive cycling or questioning usually involves a kind of thinking that goes around and around, but it doesn't have an answer available to it.

While this spinning is going on, the door opens to the other hindrances, and they often come flooding in. At least from my own observation of doubt in my practice, it rarely comes alone. It very often brings friends—sometimes it brings all of them. But restlessness and worry almost always seem to be part of it, for sure. You could have agitation and worry and restlessness and wanting and fear and desire circling through the mind stream as part of this as well.

The thing about doubt is that it exists in its own kind of self-contained nervous reality, disconnected from the stream of experience. It has a large element of speculation in it. And it doesn't know itself. It runs on a self-contained loop.

One image that came up for me when I was preparing this talk was of a balloon. You may have had the experience of getting ready for a party, blowing up a balloon, getting ready to tie it off at the end, and it escapes from you and goes careening around the room until it completely exhausts itself and falls to the ground, devoid of buoyancy and energy. Doubt can be like that. It can do that to your practice—put a lot of energy into it, and then collapse.

Doubt can take up a lot of different topics for its confused attention. Just to make this a little three-dimensional for you, I'm going to talk about some of these. There can be doubts about the self and self-capacity. I'll read you some examples. Just to reassure you, none of these came directly from any one of you. They're composites of things that have been heard or that have gone through my mind at one time or another.

So, doubts about self-capacities: "It's too late in life to be doing this. I should have started earlier. But how could I? No, it's okay. Calm, calm—like hell calm. My back hurts. My knees hurt. And I don't know what those questions mean in the morning. I'll never get it. But maybe they're wrong. Is it stupid? I paid all that

money to get here. I wonder what the teachers think about my practice. No, they would say so. Maybe they just want to be nice. No, I'm not sure. Should I pay attention, or is it self-hatred? Okay, doubt."

Here's another one: "I'm too young to be here. Everybody else has been doing this for twenty years at least. They're all so old. I need to be with people my age. The teachers could be my grandparents. They have no idea what my life is like. Out of it, truly. I should have gone to Burning Man. At least you can have sex there. And drugs too. Maybe I should leave. But would I be a quitter? Is that bad? Or would that be wise?"

Or maybe I could do yoga all day and take walks. That could be wise effort. I'm not sure. But would I have to say that in an interview? Is that wise speech? Would it be wrong to take care of myself to end my suffering?

Doubt.

And then we get the comparing mind. Everyone here is so quiet. They're so peaceful and tranquil. So far ahead of me. My mind is a mess. I can't stand the breath. All I do is think, think, think. If I were better, I would be quiet. But maybe they're asleep. Is that a hindrance? Maybe people are too tired because of the schedule. If I slept in, I might have more energy. Is there a rule? But what if I go home and I'm still a mess? No, it will still be okay. Right, right. It's doing me good. Or is it making me worse? I'm not sure. That would be insight, right?

Do any of these sound familiar?

Another frequent area is doubt about teachings. Whether they're right, whether they're complete, various points of Abhidharma. How can they know what the Buddha really taught? It was so long ago. He didn't know anything about science. How about that past life stuff? Do you need to believe it all? Those stories all seem farfetched. I don't want to drink the Kool-Aid. If Buddhism is so good, how come Burma is such a basket case? Didn't this practice come from Burma? Or is it Thai? Does Joseph speak Burmese? How do we know we got the right instructions? It might be better to get a monk from Sri Lanka. But is that the same thing? All this encouragement to effort—how does that fit with letting go? Isn't that just no effort? And who's getting liberated if there's no self? Or maybe it's the same self as the Hindus mean. Is that non-dualism? Maybe it's like the Tibetans, but they came later. Or were they before the Zen people? Do the Zen people have a self? Maybe that would be better. But is that non-dual?

Then there's doubt about teachers. I don't think any of them have children.

Are they married? Well, Sally and Guy are, I think. But don't you need somebody with your own experiences to understand? But maybe that's the relative level. Is that part of this? Or is that different? The Buddha left his family. Is that what we should do to be enlightened? I don't want to leave my family. Maybe this isn't good for me. Are they just teaching aversion to life? Joy is part of it, I think. But all I hear about is suffering. Shouldn't this be more fun? Where are the happy parts? What's wrong with wanting to

be happy?

There's another image of skeptical doubt in the texts, and it's the feeling of a person stumbling through a desert and arriving at an unmarked crossroads. A desert—flat, no features, no Google maps. The person wonders which way to go. There's no way to tell, so they just stand there vacillating. That's the experience of skeptical doubt.

Very often with these other hindrances coming up in association with it, you don't know where to grab hold. It's just swirling. The uncertainty demotivates effort, and then confidence and energy really drop. And that, of course, is the opposite of the great question, which, as I said earlier, is very highly motivational.

So that brings us to the question of how to work with doubt when it comes up. I'll reiterate at this point what I said earlier: not all questions are skeptical doubt. Sometimes they're just questions. You can know skeptical doubt by how it functions. When it arises in your mind stream and you don't see it, it functions as a hindrance.

If you wanted to grow skeptical doubt, the Buddha says, you would give it unwise attention. He says, "There are things causing doubt; frequently giving unwise attention to them—that is the nourishment for the arising of doubt that has not yet arisen and for the increase and strengthening of doubt that has already arisen."

So what's the unwise attention piece of this? It's basically being lost in or identified with the content of the doubt. We could say that doubt is delusion operating under the vague appearance of inquiry or investigation, but it's not investigation. When it becomes the primary experience and it's not known mindfully, it can be destabilizing to the whole process of what you're trying to do. And if it's not seen, you have what I call the fallout of meditation experience.

Probably a lot of people have had this experience in the course of the retreat. Most people, maybe all, have had it. You're going along, doing the meditation. You kind of have your object—or maybe it's slippery, maybe it goes away—but you're in there, you're trying, you get it. Maybe the mindfulness lapses. But you're engaged in the process, you're meditating, or you're attempting to meditate. And then something happens—something like skeptical doubt arises as a strong hindrance and it's not seen.

You have this feeling that your meditation is gone. Like you were meditating and now you're not anymore. It's as if you've fallen out of the whole thing. Like somebody who's been thrown off a horse—you're no longer even in the saddle, holding on to the horn. You're off it, looking around trying to figure out what happened.

where it is and how you can get back on it. That's what I call falling out of meditation.

And it's easy to do with skeptical doubt because it cuts at the underpinnings of trust and confidence and

faith—that connection you have to maintain in order to even be willing to try to do what must be done.

So the answer to working with this, and this is probably something that's become a bit of a refrain for you at this point, is to see it clearly in a non-identified way as just another meditation object. To become aware of the mental state of wavering as a mental object. And it very often has physical correlates too.

Here's a key point: the remedy for doubt is investigation of the state of doubt, not enmeshment in its content. With skeptical doubt, you do not want to relate to it on its own terms. You cannot have a dialogue with skeptical doubt. It's just blabbering at you. The conversation doesn't go any place. It just feeds it.

This doubt has a particular tone, a kind of wavering quality. It's a little bit like gunning the motor but spinning the wheels. It keeps us ricocheting off the field of connection with direct experience, which is really what keeps us grounded. And it's the place from which understanding arises.

The difference between doubt and investigation is that investigation rests upon direct experience and takes that as the source of emerging insight—direct experience, not speculative thought.

Let's briefly consider the framework of the Four Noble Truths for perspective on how to work with doubt and why it makes no sense to follow skeptical doubt.

The first truth is that there is the truth of suffering. The second noble truth is that there is a cause of suffering, and it's craving born from ignorance. It's craving, the mind wanting, thirsting. But that has a root. The root is in ignorance, in the unknowing.

The question always comes up when people are really thinking upon this: if the root of craving is ignorance, then why don't we just get rid of ignorance? The answer is we're working on it. But inherent in the nature of ignorance is that you don't know what you don't know. It's kind of like trying to look at the back of your head. It just doesn't work.

Ignorance can't generally be resolved by thinking alone, especially agitated thinking. Ignorance is a lack of knowledge and understanding, and thinking alone, which doesn't supply anything new to clarify the basic confusion from which this kind of thinking proceeds, is not going to do the job. That's why I said you don't want to deal with skeptical doubt on its own terms.

Investigation is key in working with doubt, but it needs to be wise. And that means a direct knowing and experience—staying with what can be directly known and not with speculative thought, the kind of speculative thoughts I gave you examples of. In this case, the direct experience is the actual knowing of doubt, the experience of doubt. Doubt is like this.

We're in the same basic framework that we use to be mindfully aware of every other kind of experience. Tranquility is like this. Sensation is like this. Pain is like this. Happiness is like this. Despair is like this. Ease is like this. Well, doubt is like this.

So how do you do it? Basically the same methodology that you would use with any of the others. You relax, if you can, inviting the body to relaxation, because there's often some agitation going on with this particular state. You summon or invite mindfulness. And then you turn it towards the experience of doubt itself.

What is this experience of the wavering mind? What can be known of it? Well, there are thoughts. You almost always will notice thoughts, and lots of them.

So you want to know that thinking is happening, but don't follow the content. If there's emotion with it, you definitely want to know that. And as I said, doubt is often bound up with some of the other hindrances, so those are there to be known and named as well, along with the feeling of those states in the body. Notice identification with the whole mushroom cloud. Notice the strengthening and weakening of the system. Is it getting stronger? Is it coming in waves? Is it weakening? Is it coming and going? Get in as close as you can to it and just know it.

Whenever a hindrance arises, or we lose awareness, or we lose the right mindful connection with what is to be known, the general rule—the first general rule—is always to do what's necessary to restore mindfulness. That's the strategy in a nutshell. Then how you do it, working with particular combinations of things, is the technique. So that's how you would work with doubt.

To wrap it up: inquiry and direct observation are of great value in the whole Buddhist process of coming to understanding. There's the great question, there's investigation, and there's the bad imitator of skeptical doubt. It's good to be able to discern among these and relate to them appropriately. The great question is the source of your empowerment. Investigation is the source of many of the answers you are seeking. Skeptical doubt is the deluded mind doing its thing. Don't get them mixed up.

Know the doubt, but stick to the investigation, because it's with investigation that you will come to the resolution of the great question driving your search.

May you have the wisdom of discernment and the courage to follow the depth of your question to the shore of understanding and release from all suffering. May all your aspirations be completely fulfilled, and may you know emancipation from all sorrow.

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