

Cross-questioning

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The Buddha once made a distinction between two types of groups of practitioners: those trained in bombast, and those trained in cross-questioning. The ones trained in bombast are those who like to listen to beautiful flowery talks, and just bathe in how nice the words sound. They're not encouraged to ask, "What do these words mean, how are they supposed to be applied? How does it all fit together?"

As for the group trained in cross-questioning, they're encouraged to ask questions to get very clear about the meanings of things. They're not interested in flowery speeches or nice-sounding words. They want words that actually help, that can be used as tools in the practice. If they're not clear about the words, not clear about the concepts, they ask. And they're welcomed to ask, encouraged to ask. Of course, it's that second group that's identified with the group the Buddha himself taught, the way he taught.

And it's pretty obvious he's not referring only to listening to talks. You have to learn how to question yourself as well. He wants you to question the ideas you have, to question what's going on in your mind. The process in both cases is called the same thing: cross-questioning, *patipuccha*. It's also applied to times when you look at your mind, you say, "Where's the stress? Is this constant? Is this inconstant? Is it stressful? Is it not? Is it self? Is it not? What's the cause of this? When I have this feeling, where does it lead?" So he encourages people to ask questions about Dhamma talks, about concepts, about how his teachings all fit together so as to encourage them to look at their own minds and start asking questions there.

There's another process that's also called cross-questioning, in which the Buddha gets asked a question, and it's obvious that the person asking the question is really confused, not only about a term, but also how things fit together, what something can mean. An example was when someone asked the Buddha, "Why is it that when you teach people, some of them gain awakening, and some of them don't?" The Buddha cross-questions him and says, "I'll give you an example. What do you think of this? Do you know the road to Rajgir?"

"Yes, I know the road to Rajgir," the guy said.

"And if someone asks you the way there, what do you tell him?"

He said, "Well, you go to this village and then you follow the road through that village and then you get to this park and then you finally get to Rajgir."

The Buddha asked, “Now, does everybody to whom you tell those instructions actually get to Rajgir?”

“Well, no,” said the man. “Some people follow the instructions, and others don’t. I’m just the one who points out the way.”

So the Buddha here was preparing him for an analogy. He said, “In the same way, I tell people to follow the practice of virtue, concentration, and discernment. Some people follow it and they get the results. Some people don’t follow it and they don’t get the results. I’m just the one who points out the way.”

What the Buddha is doing here is giving the man an analogy to make it easier to grasp and accept his answer. Somewhere in his mind the man was probably thinking that if the Buddha was really enlightened, all he had to do was give the words, give the teaching to people, and bingo! They’d all get there. Whereas the Buddha was pointing out the principle of karma: The words themselves are not going to do the work. It was the actual activity of following the instructions, doing the work yourself: That’s what’s going to take you to awakening.

So this is another kind of cross-questioning: seeing what analogies you’re using in the practice, what ways of thinking about the practice that get in the way of your making progress. Those are things you have to question as well. Because when we think, we tend to think in analogies. When you take abstract thought and you trace it back, you find it refers to very concrete things. The abstractions we deal with tend to have a basis in concrete activities. For instance, when we talk about grasping the concept, we’re thinking about the hand grasping an object. When talk about resonating with an idea, that’s an analogy to music. If you look carefully, you find when you come to the practice, you have certain ideas about how the practice should go based on analogies like this. Sometimes they’re helpful; sometime they’re not.

I had one student one time who said he came to practice with the idea that he’d have to get his breath totally still before he could spread the breath sensations through his body. He had a picture in his mind about how the practice was supposed to go, even though I had told him many, many times, that as soon as the breath is comfortable, start spreading that sense of comfort. But he had an analogy in his mind to something else, I don’t know what. He couldn’t even hear what I said.

What all this comes down to is that while you’re practicing and you find yourself facing difficulties, stop and think. Ask yourself, “How is the way I’m thinking about the problem actually getting in the way? What if I thought in a different way?” Try to think of some skills you have, manual skills, like cooking or carpentry, playing a musical instrument, and ask yourself, “When you developed

the skill, how did you approach it? What made you more skillful in that skill?" Then see if you can apply that lesson to what you're doing in the meditation.

Or as the Buddha said, look at the things you're holding on to. This is the whole point of trying to comprehend suffering. Remember that suffering is defined as five clinging-aggregates. The Buddha right there is giving you a key. It's the clinging that you're going to have to understand. When he's talking about comprehending suffering, that's what he means: comprehend the clinging. See where it is, what it is you're clinging to, and why you want to cling to it even though it's causing suffering. Then see how you can look at it in a way that helps you let go.

So this ability to cross-question yourself, to look at things you take for granted, and say, "Is it really true? What if I made a different assumption and acted on that? What would that do?": This is how you use your ingenuity in the practice.

Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of the time when he was trying to figure out a statement that Ajaan Mun had made in one of his Dhamma talks. He thought about it for three days and couldn't come to any conclusion. So he went to ask Ajaan Mun what he meant when he said that. He told him, "I've been thinking about this for three days and can't come to any conclusion."

Ajaan Mun smiled and said, "Oh, someone's actually thinking about what I said?" Ajaan Maha Boowa said, "Well, thinking about it, but without any intelligence." Ajaan Mun said, "Well, that's okay. We're not all born with intelligence. It's something we have to develop." And of course, he didn't explain what he meant by that statement that Ajaan Maha Boowa had been thinking about.

What this means is that Ajaan Mun was encouraging him to keep on thinking. When you come to a conclusion, test it for yourself, because it doesn't matter whether that was what was intended by the speaker or not. Sometimes words can have unintended fortunate consequences. He just threw it back at Ajaan Maha Boowa himself: What answer to that question was most helpful? That's something you have to learn how to judge for yourself.

The question is, can you trust your conclusions? You have to test them, test them again, test them again. Because the only real standard we have here is our own honesty. If you're not sure whether you're honest with yourself, just keep testing it. After a while, you begin to see, "Oh, this really works. That doesn't work. This gets results. That doesn't get results. I can see that this interpretation helps to reduce suffering, reduce stress, and leads to good long-term consequences."

Because some things will reduce stress for a little while, but then they lead to

long-term pain. You've got to watch out for that, too. That old fallacy that if you have a goal in mind and you haven't reached the goal, you're going to suffer, so just don't have any goals: That may work for a weekend retreat, but as a long-term policy, it doesn't work at all. Or the idea if you put effort into the practice, you're going to suffer, so learn not to put in any effort and then you'll feel better: Well, you'll feel better, but it's not going to take you anywhere.

It's like that old analogy of trying to get milk out of a cow by twisting its horn. You twist it and twist it and twist it and nothing comes. Then you finally realize that when you no longer twist the horn, you feel better, the cow feels better. So you say, "Okay, I've learned that lesson. Don't put any effort in." But that's not the lesson to take. You still don't have any milk. If you want the milk, you've got to twist another part of the cow. You pull the udder. And that effort gets results.

So you're looking not only at being relaxed in the present moment, but learning how to find a way of acting that ultimately leads to a deeper freedom from suffering, a deeper freedom from stress, which may involve some effort right now, but actually leads to results.

This is why this principle of repeated testing is important. You don't come to quick conclusions and say, "This must be it, so let's move on to the next lesson." It's good to review what you think you've learned to see if maybe you've got some unskillful or inaccurate ideas mixed up with the accurate ones. Those are the hardest ones. If your idea is totally out in left field, it's pretty easy to straighten it out. But if you've got skillful ideas mixed up with unskillful ones, it takes a lot of care to pull out which ones are causing the problems right now and which ones are not. But the repeated testing, the repeated questioning: That's what brings clear conclusions and clear long-term results

This is why the Buddha encouraged among his students: Anything you don't understand, you question, you ask, "How is this? What is the meaning of this?" As you learn how to question the words, you can carry that skill over into your practice. "If things aren't settling down, why? Why is this not settling down? What attitudes am I bringing in that are really not helpful?" That's the kind of cross-questioning that leads to awakening.

There are many cases throughout the Canon where after a cross-questioning like that, people gain awakening: "Is the eye constant? Is eye-consciousness constant? Is eye-contact constant? The feelings that arise based on the eye, are they constant?" As you chase these things down, you begin to realize they're not worth hanging on to, not worth claiming to be your self. Then you go through the other kinds of sensory input, until you've covered the whole range. And what's left when you let go of everything? You've arrived at non-clinging. And non-clinging

is how you gain awakening, how you gain freedom.

So you can't gain awakening simply by putting the mind through the process of one method that discourages thought and discourages questioning. It's like putting your mind into a sausage factory. What comes out is sausage, but is it really what you want? The techniques are here for you to use as a basis for observing what's working and what's not working, to give you a good baseline from which to compare things. If you're working with the breath every day, it's a lot easier to detect changes in the mind. Or if you're working with any particular topic consistently, it's easier to see changes in the mind, because you've got the breath as your baseline, or *buddho* as your baseline, or contemplation of the body as a baseline. That makes it easier to detect and measure the differences in the mind.

But you don't stop there. You try to figure out what's wrong when things aren't going well. And when things are going right, at the end of the meditation session sit and think about it for a while: What happened right this time? The breath was the same breath. But somehow the results came out differently.

When you learn how to do that kind of questioning and evaluation, that's when the practice leads to insight, and when insight can be liberating.