

## *Question Your Actions*

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One of the reasons we suffer is because we crave what the Buddha calls becoming. It's the act of taking on an identity in a world of experience: in other words, trying to figure out who you are and where you are. One of the other ways we suffer is, once we've got an identity of that sort, we don't like it. We want to destroy it or see it destroyed. So we go back and forth, dropping one identity, taking on another, not liking that, trying another, trying another. The Buddha says, one of the ways to get out of this dilemma is to develop the right view that doesn't look at things in terms of identities and worlds, but looks at them in terms of actions.

That means you change your questions. The questions of identity are basically: Who am I? Where am I? Those questions get solidified when we hear other people trying to define themselves, too. Given the fact that we're trying to find our food in the same world as other people, the question of who you are, as opposed to who they are, what your relationship to them should be, becomes a big issue. Are you something separate, or are you interdependent? Or are you the one and the same?

These questions really have no answer—no useful answer, as far as the Buddha is concerned. You might think of them as a question of amnesia: Who am I? Where am I? The Buddha's questions have more to do with suddenly realizing that you're acting in a way that you didn't realize you were doing. That's the kind of ignorance he's talking about. So the question is: What am I doing? If you learn to ask that question right, you start peeling away a lot of the ignorance that leads to suffering in the mind and gets you to engage in actions that you end up later regretting.

So: What are you doing? Right now you're trying to focus on the breath, trying to maintain the mind with the breath, trying to breathe in a way that feels good. And you're talking to yourself about this: "How's this breath? How's the next breath? Where does it feel good in the body? Where does the breath feel clear in the body?" These are all questions worth asking, because they help develop a skill. They also make you more sensitive the extent to which you're shaping your experience right now.

These are the questions you want to apply to other areas of your life as well. When greed comes, you want to know: "What am I doing? Why am I going for the greed? What's attractive about it? Even though I don't want to be a slave to my things, why do I keep trying to get more things?" Or anger: We can all see the drawbacks to anger, yet there's part of the mind that wants to go there. Why is

that? It's something you want to look into. What's the appeal? We have all kinds of unskillful behavior, unskillful habits, that we keep coming back to again and again, and part of us says, "Well, it's because it's just habitual, it's what's familiar." But if you see that a habit is unpleasant and gives rise to bad results, there must be something else besides habit that keeps making you come back. There may be a habitual thought that goes through the mind when, say, the possibility of anger comes up. Another part of the mind says, "Yes, let's go with it." What is that? That's something you want to uncover.

So we meditate to understand what we're doing while we're meditating—to get more sensitive to the mind, the different processes in the mind. After all, you've got feelings in here. You've got form—the form of the body. That's not just the shape of the body, but also what the Buddha calls the *dhātu*, the properties or the elements of the body. The ways in which you provoke those properties can make you really irritable. When you get angry, you breathe in a certain way, and it's become habitual. It builds up tension, builds up pressure in different parts of the body. When that gets unbearable, and you decide, "I can't stand this any longer, I've got to get it out of my system," the anger has hijacked your breath.

So you want to learn how to get it back, to reclaim the breath, make it yours. Breathe in a way that breathes through the tension, that releases the pressure. If pressure builds up in the neck or the head, think of it dissipating down the shoulders. Think of Hakuin's image of a big ball of butter on top of your head, melting, and the butter is going down your head, down your neck, down your shoulders. If the pressure builds up in your chest, think of it going out the arms, out through the palms of the hands. We've had our habitual ways of working with the breath energies in the body, even when we didn't think of them as breath energies, that relate to the flow of the blood in the body, the pressure we put on the body as we breathe in.

We can learn how to undo those habits, to reclaim the breath. This also helps us deal with feelings. Like the feeling of irritability, something unpleasant someplace in the body, that aggravates the anger: All too often, we carry around a lot of tension in the body, so that when little things happen, they seem much bigger than they are. It's like a person carrying a huge load, and then someone puts another box or two on top. Ordinarily the box would not be too much, but placing the boxes on top of the load that the first person is already carrying makes the load too much. So the person weighed down just throws everything back at the other person: "How do you expect me to carry all this?" The second person didn't know the first person was carrying so much. If you carry a lot of tension around in the body, a lot of irritability, your fuse gets shorter.

So make it a habit to breathe through any tension in the body, and make that your default mode as you go through the day. Can you go through the day with a sense of your spot in the body where you stay focused? Keep that open and relaxed.

It's as if there were networks of roads in the body. Tension builds up at one spot, and then it goes down the road to another spot. Then another spot, and there are some places where these different roads in the body intersect. The tip of the breast bone is a very typical one, or sometimes in the middle of the chest. Each of us has our own spot. But if you can find one of these intersections and keep the intersection clear, then everything else, all the different roads, get cleared as well. It's like making sure there are no traffic jams in major intersections in the cities, so the traffic flows smoothly throughout the city.

Go through the day and try to keep that spot open and clear, with a sense of ease. That way, you're carrying fewer burdens around. At the same time, you get sensitive to things that do set you off—the things that will build up a little bit of tension there. What did somebody say? What was your reaction? What was the image you had in mind? Drop it. This relates to the next of the aggregates, which is perception.

What are the perceptions you're carrying around, the images you have in the back of your mind? When someone does something, and you ask them, "Why do you always do that?" actually, they're not always doing it. It comes and goes and comes and goes, but there's a perception in the mind, and the last time that it happened is still reverberating around in the mind. So try to catch these perceptions and see what images you're holding in the mind that are really not helpful.

Then, of course, there's fabrication: What do you say to yourself, *how* do you talk to yourself about these things? Can you talk about them in a new way?

So you take things apart like this. This is the Buddha's reason for talking about the aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, consciousness—because they help you take your suffering apart. You're just not trying to define who you are, although we do tend to define ourselves around the aggregates. But we have to remember they, too, are activities; they, too, are actions. They're things you're doing.

So we get the mind still, learn how to do these things in the concentration, and then try to bring that knowledge, that skill, that awareness, into our daily lives, so that we can see what we're doing, why we're doing it, where it's stupid, why we don't want to do it anymore. That's when you can let go.

So the questions aren't, "Who are you?" or "Where are you?" The questions are, "What are you doing? And why?" If you ask the right questions about your actions, you find you can really let down a lot of your burdens. Because that's something else we're doing as well: We're holding on to things. Our suffering is not something we're simply on the receiving end of. It's something we're doing. And we're doing it because we like doing it. We turn a blind eye to the suffering, so that we can focus on the part we like. The Buddha is asking you to look at the whole thing—the pluses and the minuses, the gains and the losses—until you see that it's more loss than gain, more minus than plus. It's not worth doing.

After all, we act because we hope that our actions will bring well-being. So why are we doing things that are not, or are actually bringing on suffering? Asking these questions clears up a lot of the confusion in mind.