

## *Questioning Your Way to Certainty*

*September 25, 2009*

We all know that uncertainty is one of the hindrances. It gets in the way of concentration. We know this from reading it in the texts, from hearing it in Dhamma talks, and also from our own experience. You find yourself wondering, is this really the right meditation for me? Is the Dhamma really right? Did the Buddha know what he was talking about? Those thoughts can really get in the way of the mind settling down.

But it's interesting to note that the Buddha's solution for uncertainty is not just to ramp up your conviction, saying, "I believe, I believe, I believe," and somehow hoping that that's going to drive your uncertainty away. His solution is not to stop asking questions, but to ask different questions, questions you can actually answer. Try to look at what in your mind is skillful and what's unskillful, try to notice the qualities that lead to skillful action and unskillful action.

You can start by asking those questions about your breath: What way of breathing feels good? What way of breathing doesn't feel good? Pose that question in your mind and then experiment with different kinds of breathing. You'll start noticing that certain rhythms of breathing or certain ways of conceiving the breath feel better than others. Then you ask yourself, "How can I maintain those ways of breathing? And how I you ride with the waves of change that go through your body?" Sometimes a particular rhythm feels good for a while, but then the body doesn't need that rhythm anymore. It needs a different rhythm. How do you sense that? It's like riding a surfboard. How do you sense shifts in the wave so you can stay balanced? And when you can maintain that sense of ease, how do you spread it through the body?

This involves asking yourself how you conceive of the breath energy in the body. What's actually happening when you breathe in? How does this breath energy flow? And when Ajaan Lee talks about breath energy, exactly what is he talking about? How can you sense the breath in your own body? How do you let comfortable energy spread? What way of forcing it through the body actually makes it uncomfortable? What way of forcing it through actually works? Do you need to use force? Sometimes you do; sometimes you don't. And how do you learn to read the signs of what's working and what's not working?

These questions are helpful. They help you to read what's actually going on, and they overcome your uncertainty because you begin to gain your own evidence as to what works and what doesn't. You start looking at how the breath affects the

mind, what kind of breathing goes along with unskillful mental states and what kind of breathing goes along with skillful ones. Here you look for cause and effect going in both directions. Some mental states will come and bring along a catch or a tightness in the breath, or a blockage in the breath energy in different parts of the body. Other times, you'll find that certain ways of breathing aggravate unskillful mental states. So the question is, how do you cut through those feedback loops? How do you breathe in a way that helps to nourish skillful mental states?

Notice that the solution to uncertainty here isn't coming into the meditation armed with lots of answers. Instead, you come to the meditation armed with the right questions, questions that focus your attention on what you can actually see happening right here and now in terms of cause and effect. That's how you overcome your uncertainty. You know from experience that this works, that that doesn't work. You learn to evaluate things on your own.

In this way, the questions direct your thoughts in the right direction. Then you watch and evaluate. This is how you get the mind into the first jhana—not by pretending that there's no uncertainty, but by realizing that you don't know but you're willing to learn, and that the way you're going to learn is by looking right here, to see what's happening in terms of cause and effect.

A certain amount of conviction does have to come into play here: the conviction that you can learn from what's actually happening in your own body and mind, that you have the necessary powers of observation, and that right here is where you're going to learn about these things. You don't have to depend on some text or some god or some outside being telling you what to do. You learn from your own actions.

So, it is true that a certain amount of conviction is needed here, but it's coupled with an inquisitive mind. It's not the kind of conviction or faith that refuses to ask questions or refuses to entertain a questioning mindset. It's one that realizes that the only way you're going to gain knowledge is by asking the right questions. This, as the Buddha said, is how the Dhamma becomes visible here and now. Someone once asked him, "What does it mean, 'visible here and now'?" He responded, "Do you know in your mind when passion has not been abandoned?" "Yes." "Okay, there it is: the Dhamma that's visible here and now. And do you know when passion is abandoned?" Well, you would know if you practiced. The same with aversion and delusion: You know for yourself here and now when these things are present and when they're absent. You also know what you've done to bring them on and you know what you've done to get rid of them.

So, seeing the Dhamma here and now is a question of noticing your actions and the result of those actions as they're happening. This principle applies all through the practice, beginning with the Buddha's teachings to Rahula. Look at your intentions. Do you know when you have a skillful intention? In the beginning, you know to a certain extent, but there may be some delusion. So you have to keep watching your actual actions. If you know that an intention is unskillful, you don't act on it. If you're not quite sure, go ahead and act on it and see what happens. Then you learn from the results, both while you're doing the action and after it's done.

As you stick with this, you begin to read your mind states more and more clearly, so that you can know when a particular mind state is going to lead to an unskillful action and you drop it. You get a better and better sense of when the mind states are skillful.

It's by looking at things in terms of action and result that you overcome your uncertainty, and that your knowledge becomes more and more firm. It's the process of directing your thought in the right directions, and asking the right questions and evaluating what you're actually experiencing. This brings the mind to a greater and greater peace and stillness.

The same principle applies all the way through those questions that the Buddha asks people on the verge of becoming arahants. You see form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness, and you ask yourself, "Are these things constant?" Well, no. And the Buddha here is not asking in the abstract. He's asking you to look: to look at your sense of form, your sense of the body that you're experiencing right here as you sit here. Look at the feelings that arise and pass away, the perceptions, fabrications, sensory consciousness: Do they last or not? Do they change or not? If they're changing, then the next question is, can you find happiness in what's unstable and changing like this? Well no. Then as for the conclusion with regard to questions of self and not-self, notice that he doesn't come to the conclusion that you should conclude that there is no self. The concluding question is: Is it fitting to regard these things as self, as what you are, as what your self is?

In other words, he's asking whether the action of regarding these things as self is a skillful action. And the answer is No. So you stop doing it. Now, as we all know, it's not easy to stop doing it, but that's what you learn how to do. When you finally get to the point where it really hits home that you've been trying to base your happiness on these things that shift around and change on you, that's when you see for yourself that the activity of labeling that as self is an unskillful activity, something you've got to learn how to stop.

And that's it. It's a question of actions and results, not trying to come to some conclusion about whether there is a self or is no self, but simply answering the question of how skillful it is to regard this particular activity as you or yours, as what you are or what yourself is. That activity you can see clearly is not skillful. And when the conditions come together just right, you can really stop it. That's where awakening comes.

So, notice that it's questions all the way to the end. It's not blind trust, or blind conviction, blind faith. The trust is in the questioning process and in your own ability to look at your own actions and see their results. In the beginning, it may be kind of blurry, but you learn to perfect your powers of observation. The more truthful you are, the more observant, then the better the results. This is why the Buddha said, "Let a person come who is truthful and observant, and I'll teach that person the Dhamma." He's not saying, "Let a person come who believes everything I say, or a person who wouldn't admit his doubts."

A truthful and observant person has to know how to question. What the Buddha's going to teach you is how to ask the right questions at the right time and the right place in such way that they actually lead to knowledge. When you can question your way to that first experience of the deathless—where you let go of the activity of creating a self around these the aggregates for the first time—then the deathless opens up. As the Buddha says, that's when your conviction becomes verified, when you see that this process really does work. Up to that point, of course there are going to be doubts; of course there are going to be questions. And the Buddha doesn't have you deny those doubts or deny those questions. He simply says, learn how to question in a way that's productive, that leads to knowledge that allows you to verify for yourself what he has taught.

This is why the solution to uncertainty is not blind conviction or forced conviction. It's learning how to pay appropriate attention to what's skillful and what's unskillful in your own behavior, and then pursuing that line of questioning as far as it can go.