

INQUIRY INTO INQUIRY

The field of inquiry is boundless, all inner and outer landscapes are open to it. Inquiry, particularly inner inquiry or investigation, has been advocated by philosophers and sages down through the ages.

“Know thyself” is an ancient Greek aphorism.

“The unexamined life is not worth living” said Socrates.

“This above all else, to thine own self be true, for it follows as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man”, spoke Polonius in Hamlet.

As children we start with a certain freedom. Cast into a world of wonder we sing, we dance, we play and explore. Over time, we become more self conscious and constrained. That sense of freedom can atrophy as external forces mould us.

This was certainly my experience as I grew up; freedom to sing, dance and play got severely curtailed. But curiosity and exploration, the joys of discovery and more profound understanding remained strong in me. Paradoxically, I think the pain of shutting down, of being limited by external and later internal censures, sharpened my need to know – why am I like this? How do I respond to life? How can freedom to be found here?

We do respond to life and its challenges, we have no choice. But the quality of our response, our understanding and awareness of what is happening (or lack thereof) directly influences our motivation and action. We see and feel the consequences of this every day. Many of our interactions are habitual, unexamined. This familiar patterned behaviour offers a degree of apparent certainty, but as circumstances inevitably change we find ourselves hanging on - caught in a trap of our own making.

Inquiry can help loosen the habits of mind and the views that lock us in. Inquiry can have many flavours, it can be focused and penetrating, it can be unhurried like water slowly dissolving a stain. Inquiry can carry the resolve not to turn from what is arising but to remain with the uncomfortable and ask ‘what can I learn here?’.

To a large extent inquiry asks us to drop the goal-focused mind set - and let the deeper questions float and dance. Here - curiosity, patience, trust, compassion and a certain unpressured tenacity, bring energy that supports the deepening of inquiry and opens the heart. Inquiry works in its own time in its own way, like peeling the layers of an onion. Not pushing to get deeper nor staying safe on the surface, but courageously staying steady with the process: letting all that arises in ones mind flow through a sharp but non-judgemental awareness as we work through the layers of fabrication and fear one by one.

The Noble Eightfold Path is not really a linear path, but it seems to me that *right understanding* to a large extent underpins the other steps along the Path: right intention manifests through right understanding which in turn supports right speech, right action and right livelihood. Therefore, developing right

understanding is key to walking the Path and reducing suffering. Inquiry assists us to mature in right understanding through reviewing and refining what we hold to be true. Inquiry keeps our understanding dynamic, ensuring it does not ossify into a series of views.

Sometimes, in Dharma circles, we are invited to ‘incline the mind toward freedom’ – what does that mean? Surely, in part at least, it is a leaning toward inquiry, to broaden and deepen understanding of where we are free and where we are not free. Much of dharma practice is an ‘unlearning’: the seeing and discarding of what no longer serves us well. In this process we can let go of more than we pick up, working to pull down the gross and subtle barriers that have taken so many years to erect. Therefore, inquiry is also a ‘disruptive technology’ for the mind. There is a risk: inquiry can shake us up, leading us into dark places as well as those filled with light – who knows what we may discover? However, for those who suffer and feel constrained, who long to set the mind free from the burden of rigidity and delusion... for them, the risk is worth taking.

It has been said we are here to ‘do our dharma’, to live the theatre of our dependently-arisen lives with as much skilfulness and wisdom as we can muster and to relieve suffering where we can. All well and good, but what does this actually mean in our daily lives and in dharma practice? Surely we must start close to home, with our immediate inner and outer world, the tangible things we contact everyday? We must know what they are, and what they are not. It does not help to be satisfied with fabrication, with the story and the ‘view’ – however comforting they may appear to be. I think we must inquire into our world unflinchingly if we are to genuinely lessen dukkha and not add to the karmic storm.

Entered into in this way, inquiry is not an exercise: it is an approach to life. Once embraced, it is a journey that offers no promise of a destination. There is no personal gain here – we only chance to lose our delusions. It can also be a journey touched by a child-like joy, a sense of wonder and mystery, deep contentment and much love.

The Quest within the Question

Can we let ‘the question’ drift like a cloud in the sky?

Can we let that cloud float by; though it holds the fire of the rising sun, or is heavy with a brewing storm?

The cloud, the question, moves and changes form – dancing in the mind.

Dance along whilst attention carries the tune; this attention that, like love, is pure and full yet undemanding.

Faced with a question we search for an answer, but surely the longing of the questioner is held in the question alone; not in the accumulation of answers.

Do we live in a world of finite questions and concrete answers? Or is this a world of questions alone?

Questions that shimmer, sparkle and delight; questions that are but fragments of that larger and ever mysterious question of which we, and all things, form a part.

Gently take each question, examine it with care. Stare into the evolving depths as if gazing into the eyes of a child.

If you see an answer gazing back – all well and good – but do not be seduced by the promise of mere conclusion; smile too upon this irritation of unknowing.

Above all, lean not heavily on the answers you receive, lest they dull your mind and become the crutch of easy certainty.

Remember there is no answer that remains erect in this unfolding world:

Only the living question can forever fill the yearning of the heart.

Some things to consider:

- Is 'dharma inquiry' something you deliberately do; can you even relate to the term?
- When deep questions do arise spontaneously in meditation or in life do you tend to see them as an opportunity or a distraction?
- Can you pick up an inquiry question and let it breathe in its own way, not getting fixated on resolutions and answers?
- In meditation how do you find a skilful balance between Samatha or calming – concentration practice and Vipassana or inquiry – insight practice?
- How do factors like courage, trust, curiosity, patience, non-judgement, open heartedness, and sitting with the uncomfortable play into all this?
- What do you do to approach your practice/life with an open heart and mind, to be alert but relaxed, engaged but not holding on?
- Can you be like a dancer both ardent and committed to your practice yet bring grace and flexibility, even playfulness, to it's unfolding?
- Can you think of an instance when a time of reflection has changed your view and brought about significant positive change?

With mutual support and encouragement may we walk a little easier on this dharma path.

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