



questions
that help us

Wake

Trying to push away our emotional distress can throw us into “cognitive shock” that turns our mind into a muddle. **EZRA BAYDA** shares five simple questions to help us cut through confusion.

On a recent trip to Alcatraz prison I had the fascinating experience of walking through the halls, standing in the cells, and imagining what it would be like to be confined there. Before Alcatraz was closed as a functioning prison, it was unique in that it kept all of its prisoners isolated in solitary cells. I heard the story of one prisoner, who when put into a pitch-black solitary cell as punishment, ripped a button off his shirt and threw it in the air. He would then get on his knees and look for it, then throw it again—just to avoid going crazy in the dark.

This example may sound like it has nothing to do with us, but the fact is we all have our own ways of avoiding the dark, and our own strategies for throwing buttons. They may look more sane and more productive, but they're still attempts to push away our difficulties.

Trying to avoid what's unpleasant seems to be deeply ingrained in the human psyche. After all, when life feels out of sync we naturally seek

comfort and relief. But the feeling that life is out of sync is hardly new. As Buddha pointed out more than 2,500 years ago, we'll always have to deal with the fact that life entails discomfort and disappointment. We will always have our many problems—concerns about financial security, relationship difficulties, fears about our health, anxious striving toward success and acceptance, and so on. Yet, perhaps the most basic problem is that we don't really want to have any problems; perhaps that's what, in part, makes our current time seem so full of distress.

Many people come to meditation practice with the expectation that it will calm them and relieve the feelings of distress. Certainly meditation can do this to some extent; however, when we're knee-deep in emotional distress, we're fortunate if we can remember these tools. Even if we could remember to meditate, simply sitting down to follow the breath, without directly addressing our difficulties, is unlikely to bring a deep or lasting peace of mind. The difficulties remain.

Sometimes, when emotions are particularly intense, when we feel the very uncomfortable feelings of groundlessness and helplessness, it is especially difficult to remember what we know. And there's a good reason for this. When we're distressed, the “new” or conceptual brain tends to stop working. This is called “cognitive shock,” which turns off the cognitive mind's basic ability to function. When the thinking brain is on sabbatical, we simply can't think clearly. During cognitive shock, the “old” brain, which is based on survival and defense,

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takes over. At this point we're likely to attack, withdraw, or go numb, none of which are conducive to awareness. To be honest, when caught in cognitive shock, we're fortunate if we can even remember that we want to be awake.

When clarity becomes obscured by the dark and swirling energy of emotional distress, it is useful to have some concise reminders to bring us back to reality. The real question is: *What helps us awaken?* The answer to this overarching question can be broken down into five very straightforward and specific smaller questions, each of which points us in the direction of clarity.

It is absolutely fundamental for us to realize that difficult situations and feelings are our opportunity to awaken into a more genuine way of living. This point can't be overemphasized.

1 What Is Going On Right Now?

THIS SIMPLY REQUIRES HONESTLY acknowledging the objective situation. But to do this we have to be able to see the difference between our view of what is happening and the actual facts of the situation.

For instance, when we experience the panic of losing our job or seeing our investments disappear overnight, it is easy to get so caught up in our fears that we lose all sense of perspective. But what is actually happening in the present moment? Aren't we usually hijacked by the thoughts we've added of the impending doom of homelessness or hunger, rather than actually experiencing homelessness or hunger? Clearly seeing our believed thoughts—often based in negative imaginings about the future—allows us to come back to the objective reality of what is happening.

Another example: when we're caught in the swirl of emotional distress, we almost always add the thought "something is wrong"—either wrong in general, or, more likely, wrong with another person or with ourselves. In addition, we will almost always think about how to escape from the distress—through trying to fix the situation, or through blaming or analyzing. In short, working effectively with our emotional difficulties requires that we first see clearly not only what is actually happening, but also what we're adding to the situation, through our detours, escapes, and judgments.

How much of our distress is rooted in the stories we weave around our experiences? Dropping our storyline is critical in being aware of what is actually happening in the present moment. We need to see the storyline for what it is and stop rehashing it over and over with our believed thoughts, since all they do is sustain and solidify our painful experiences. This is especially true when we are self-justifying and blaming. Asking the first practice question—*What is going on right now?*—can help us get out of the poisonous loop of our stories.

3 What Is My Most Believed Thought?

2 Can I See This as My Path?

IF WE DON'T ASK THIS CRUCIAL QUESTION, we're unlikely even to remember that this is our opportunity to awaken. Yet, it is essential that we understand that our distressful situation is exactly what we need to work with in order to be free. For example, the person we find most irritating becomes a mirror—you could call this person "irritating Buddha"—reflecting back to us exactly where we're stuck. After all, the irritation is what we add.

It is absolutely fundamental that we learn that when difficult situations and feelings arise they are not obstacles to be avoided, but rather these very difficulties are, in fact, the path itself. They're our opportunity to wake up out of our little protected world; they're our opportunity to awaken into a more genuine way of living. This point can't be overemphasized.

Of course, you may have heard this idea before—that our difficulties are our path. But it's a lot easier to understand this intellectually than it is to remember it when we're in the middle of the muddiness of life. Why? Because, again, we instinctively want a life that is problem free. So we usually continue seeking comfort and safety until, at some point, if we're fortunate, we get disappointed enough by life's blows to realize that our strategies—control, trying harder, withdrawing, blaming, whatever they are—will never give us the quality in life that all of us want. At that point—with life's disappointments as our teacher—we can start to use our difficulties as our path to awakening. Remembering the importance of this allows us to make the critical practice step of welcoming our distress, because we understand that as long as we continue to resist our experience we will stay stuck.

ANSWERING THIS IS LIKE TAKING A SNAPSHOT of the mind. This question is tempting to skip over, especially since we often take our opinions as Truth, and it can be difficult to see what we're really believing. Even though observation of the mind allows us to see our superficial or surface thoughts with clarity, the deepest beliefs often stay below the surface. Thus, these deep-seated beliefs often dictate how we feel and act, and they continue to run almost unconsciously.

For example, our deeply believed thoughts of personal insecurity may not be evident on the surface in a given situation; truthfully, we're often unaware of their presence. But their poisonous footprints often manifest themselves in our anger, blame, depression, and shame. These deeply believed and well-hidden thoughts of insecurity thus act like radar, and we often seek out experiences that confirm that our beliefs are true—the classic self-fulfilling prophecy. For example, if you believe that life is not safe, all you have to do is get a bill that's a little bigger than you expected, and your mind will start weaving scenarios of doom.

We have to know where we get stuck in our particular radar-like beliefs. And we have to know how to work with them. Again, the process begins with asking yourself, *What is my most believed thought?* However, if the answer doesn't come, you drop it, and return to your physical experience, rather than trying to figure it out with the mind. Then, a little while later, you ask the question again. Sooner or later, with perseverance, the answer will present itself, sometimes with an "aha!" quality.

For instance, your surface thought may be, "No one should have to put up with this." This thought expresses the protective voice of anger and frustration. But when we go deeper, a more strongly held thought, like "I can't do this," may be revealed with the "aha" of discovery. Then, as we get to know ourselves, there may be an "of course" quality. Haven't we seen this belief many times before? It's at this point that we begin to remove some of our investment in our deeply seated negative beliefs about ourselves. But to get to this place, first we must inquire into what our most believed thoughts are.

4 What Is This?

THIS QUESTION, PERHAPS THE MOST important one, is actually a Zen koan, in that it can't be answered by the thinking mind. The only answer comes from entering directly into the immediate, physical experience of the present moment. Right now, ask yourself, "What is this?" Even if you don't feel any distress, this question can apply to whatever the present moment holds. Become aware of your physical posture. Feel the overall quality of physical sensations in the body. Feel the tension in the face, chest, and stomach. Include awareness of the environment—the temperature, the quality of light, the surrounding sounds. Feel the body breathing in and out as you take in this felt sense of the moment. Feel the energy in the body as you focus on the "whatness" (rather than the "whyness") of your experience. Only by doing this will you answer the question *What is this?*

Admittedly, it is difficult to maintain awareness in the present moment when distress is present, because to truly experience the present as it is means we have to refrain from our most habitual defenses, such as justifying, trying to get control, going numb, seeking diversions, and so on. The sole purpose of these strategies is to protect us from feeling the pain we don't want to feel. But until we can refrain from these defenses, and feel the physical experience directly, we will stay stuck in the storyline of "me," unaware of what life really is in the moment.

For example, if we feel anxiety, it's natural to want to avoid feeling it. We may get busy to occupy ourselves, or try harder, or try to figure it out. But if we can ask ourselves *What is this?* the only important and real answer comes from the actual physical experience of anxiety in the present moment. Remember, we're not asking what it's about, which is analyzing—the opposite of being physically present. We're simply asking what it actually is.

Asking the question—koan *What is this?* is the essence of awakening the quality of curiosity, in that the only "answer" comes from being open to actually experiencing the truth of each moment. Curiosity means that we're willing to explore unknown territory—the places the ego doesn't want to go. Curiosity allows us to take a step at our edge, toward our deepest fears. Being truly curious means we're willing to say "Yes" to our experience, even the hard parts, instead of indulging the "No" of our habitual resistance.

Saying "Yes" doesn't mean we like our experience, or that we necessarily feel accepting. It doesn't even mean we override the "No." Saying "Yes" simply means that we pay attention—metic-

ulous attention—to the "No." It means we're no longer resisting the people, things, and fears we don't like; instead we're learning to open to them, to invite them in, to welcome them with curiosity, in order to experience what's actually going on.

Yet, sometimes, when the mind is reeling in the panic of self-doubt and confusion, it is particularly difficult to come back to the heart that seeks to awaken. In these moments, how can we find the willingness to stay present with our own fears—the fears that will always limit our ability to love? When everything seems dark and unworkable, when we've even lost touch with the desire to move toward the light, the one thing we can do is take a deep breath into the center of the chest, on the in-breath, and on the out-breath extend to ourselves the same warmth and compassion we would to a friend or child in distress. Breathing into the heart, physically connecting with the center of our being, is a way to extend loving-kindness to ourselves even when there appears to be no loving-kindness in sight.

While remembering that our distress is also our path, and breathing the distressful sensations into the center of the chest—we can learn to stay with the actual sensations of distress. It's important to understand that being able to ask *What is this?*—and truly reside with what we find there—takes a great deal of patience and courage. Maybe we can only do it a little. But we persevere—even if it's just three breaths at a time. Ultimately, it's awareness that heals. It's awareness that allows us to reconnect with the heart, the heart that is the essence of our being.

Recently I was told I had to have a medical procedure to determine whether or not I had prostate cancer. Combined with the fear around the thought of having prostate cancer were the memories of painful experiences of prior similar medical procedures, leading to a feeling of dread and morbidity. Over the years I've become free of many of my fears and attachments, but each of us has our own particular edge—that place beyond which fear tells us not to go—so even though I had extensive experience practicing with illness and pain, there was no doubt that this particular set of circumstances put me at my personal edge.

It was helpful to answer the first question—*What is going on right now?*—because I could see that there was actually no physical discomfort other than the discomfort triggered by believing in my fear-based thoughts. It was also helpful to ask myself, "Can I see this situation as my path?"—pointing to the opportunity to work with my own particular attachments and fears. As well,

5 Can I Let This Experience Just Be?

When your mind is reeling in confusion, breathe deeply into the center of your chest. Connecting to the core of your being this way extends loving-kindness to yourself even when there's none in sight.

asking *What are my most believed thoughts?* allowed me to see that thoughts like, “This is too much” and “I can’t do this” were just thoughts—thoughts that were not the truth, no matter how true they felt in the moment.

But the real key to working with the panic and dread came from answering the koan—question *What is this?* The answer was to come back again and again to the physical experience of the present moment, such as the sensations of tightness in the chest and queasiness in the stomach. Sometimes I could only stay with it for the duration of three breaths. Sometimes the experience was so strong all I could do was breathe the sensations into the center of the chest, while remembering all those others who were suffering from the same or similar distress, and wishing compassion to all of us.

Staying with the *What is this?* question eventually allowed the self-imposed prison wall of fear to begin to dissolve, and I was able to experience the grace and freedom of surrender. When we can viscerally enter into the question *What is this?* we will see that our experience, however unpleasant, is constantly changing, and that at bottom, it is just a combination of believed thoughts, physical sensations, and old memories. Once we see this, the experience of distress begins to unravel into its individual aggregates, rather than seeming so solid. Again, it’s awareness that heals.

THIS IS NOT EASY TO DO, because our human compulsion toward comfort drives us to want to fix or get rid of our unpleasant experiences. To allow our experience to just be usually becomes possible only after we’ve become disappointed by the futility of trying to fix ourselves (and others). We have to realize that trying to change or let go of the feelings we don’t want to feel simply doesn’t work. Allowing our experience to just be requires a critical understanding: that it’s more painful to try to push away our own pain than it is to feel it. This understanding is not intellectual but something that eventually takes root in the core of our being.

Once we can really let our experience be as it is, awareness becomes a more spacious container, within which distress begins to dismantle on its own. Sometimes it helps to widen the container of awareness by intentionally including the awareness of air and sounds, or whatever we can connect with outside the skin boundary. Within this wider and more spacious container, the distress may even transform from something heavy and somber into pure, nondescript energy, which is more porous and light. The energy may then release on its own, without any need to try to get rid of it.

This final question—*Can I let this experience just be?*—also allows the quality of mercy or loving-kindness to come forth, because we’re no longer judging ourselves or our experience as defective. We’re finally willing to experience our life within the spaciousness of the heart, rather than through the self-limiting judgments of the mind.

THESE FIVE QUESTIONS—*What is going on right now? Can I welcome this as my path? What is my most believed thought? What is this? Can I let this experience just be?*—remind us of the key steps needed to work with our emotional distress. Some students carry little laminated cards with the five questions in their pockets for times when “cognitive shock” takes hold, when everything we know is temporarily forgotten.

Remember though, these questions are just pointers; it’s important not to get lost in the technique. In the bigger picture, we ask these questions because when we have emotional distress, we are usually caught in our own self-imposed prison walls—of anger, fear, and confusion. But when our self-imposed prison walls come down, all that remains is the connectedness that we are. ♦