

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Art of Self-Inquiry: Asking the Essential Questions

August 19, 2018



Hello and welcome everybody. Today we're going to be talking about one of my favorite subjects, which is self-inquiry and the great importance of asking essential questions in our lives; existential questions, primary questions. Who am I? Where did I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? We are not prepared to ask these kinds of questions in a culture like ours that's based on scientific materialism. In scientific materialism, investigating unprovable questions, empirically unprovable questions, is mostly seen as a fool's errand. But for us, as seekers, questions of this kind really are the tools of the trade, because they're invitations to inquire into the mystery of our existence and our unique human role in creation.

Now, of all the things that people do, that other animals can't, the ability to ask questions is among the most evolutionary. The drive to explore, to understand, to uncover and to transcend the mere drive for physical survival. The drive to ask existential questions is often related, of course, to our need for meaning. We have an ingrained longing, as human beings, to place ourselves in a larger context and to gain insight into life from the microscopic to the cosmic dimensions. This drive is really as important, as anthropologists tell us and psychologists, as the human need for food and drink and shelter and sex. *Homo sapiens*, the wise species, only gets that way by interrogating reality. Since the dawn of time, when our earliest ancestors gazed up at the sky and wondered who and what they were, and why they had been placed on this mysterious world, humans have been seekers and adventurers of both the visible and the invisible world.

As we matured as a species, we discovered different ways of knowing, different ways of uncovering and questioning, starting with the intuitive paths and leading up to the development of the scientific method a few hundred years ago. Now, of course, there are distinct differences between spiritual and scientific pursuits. Science aims at finding objective answers, provable and repeatable through experimental means, whereas the practice of spirituality is much closer to art than it is to science. Like art, spirituality operates on intuition more than tuition (in other words, inner knowledge over outer education). Spirituality advances by ineffable steps that can only be known and recognized through direct subjective experience.

Unlike the scientific method, one answer never fits all in spiritual life. In spiritual life, many paths are found to lead to the truth. Just as many kinds of art lead to esthetic satisfaction, depending on the mood, or the needs, or the expectations of the present moment, many forms of spiritual practice lead to awakened awareness.

In Indian culture, they speak of the Mother – the divine feminine – preparing her food in different ways for the wide variety of different types of children, different types of spiritual seekers. One child may like her dish flavored with lots of devotion while another may prefer hers to focus on charitable works. Another seeker may find insight and inspiration focused on the body's physical energies while another kind of child may enjoy its divine food, so to speak, plain and direct and without any dressing.

This last kind of seeker, the plain direct kind, which I have always been personally, tends to focus most on self-inquiry, and on questioning as the essential foundation of the path to awakening. Not devotion, not necessarily service, but, rather, questioning.

Known as the path of the jnana – the path of knowledge – this orientation is almost always most drawn to what’s known as non-duality. Non-duality is the mystic hub that joins all of the world’s faiths in the awareness that God and creation are inseparable; that reality is a single, seamless phenomenon – Not Two but One. As manifestations of the divine ourselves, humans are born to be self-reflective because consciousness itself, as the sages tell us, is self-reflective by nature.

Apparently, this is the divine game, the lila or the play of the divine universe, that God, the divine incarnate in human form or in physical form, rather, then loses awareness of itself at the moment of coming into creation, in order to find its way back to self-awareness, awareness of its divine quality in the marrow of a physical body. This is so extraordinary to think about, that this would be the possibility, the purpose of a human life. As Emerson said, “Know yourself a man and be a god.” And that really is non-duality in a nutshell. To know ourselves as divine is the purpose of this human birth.

So, that’s a very brief and general response to the question of why we are here: to know ourselves as the children of the divine. The closer we come to awareness of our own divinity, of our own transcendental nature, the more intimate we become with all of creation, and the less pain of separation we feel. There’s a wonderful parable in Hindu literature, where the unenlightened person is compared to a baby sobbing in its mother’s lap. The mother rocks the child patiently as it cries until finally the baby’s tears stop and it looks up into the smiling face of the one who has been holding it safe all along. Seeing the mother smile, the baby learns to smile too and remembers what it is, progeny of this great mother, never abandoned and never alone.

Though connected inextricably to the body of the earth, spiritual seekers come to see that their physical body is not the totality of what they are; within them dwells the eternal spirit, the breath of God, the internal witness. It’s this witness in us that asks the questions and that questioning faculty is eternal, not mortal, in nature. In other words, the part of you that asks the questions never dies.

That’s the paradox at the center of our existence: spiritual awareness in biological form. This paradox is what makes us the wonderful, mixed-up creatures that we are. But where the average person is unaware of this paradox, a seeker embodies it consciously and is fascinated by how these various parts interact.

We see the specter of our own divinity, a kind of glimmer of God, shining through our clumsy human actions, and in those moments, it reminds us of who we are, who we are. We recognize this in some moment of confusion, of animalistic fragmentation. We are reminded of who we are, by seeing a glimmer of God, by getting a glimmer of our own divinity, hearing the voice beyond the babble of the mind. And in those moments, we’re grateful, if we’re aware enough, not to be dependent in this physical realm.

As Emerson put it, “There is in every mind a power greater than that mind.” We come to know this greater mind by subduing the voice of the chattering ego with its endless self-obsessions and whining and judgments. The ego judges, after all, in order to protect itself, to assert its existence, and when we can remember that, we are not quite as brainwashed by the distortions of the little me, the little ego mind. We can hear the voice of intuition when it speaks to us.

Most of us know that experience of being visited in some tumultuous moment by the voice of wisdom, as if the God within us were tuning in through the babble of voices toward a higher frequency.

I see this with students all the time, my writing students. They will turn in a piece of work that is an answer to some self-inquiry question. Almost invariably, these pieces start with how confused, and incapable, and how powerless they feel to even approach the question. They then go on to explain in detail why they are so confused, why they’re so befuddled, how this has come to be in their lives, through some early experience, or wound, or a brainwashing. But by the end of the piece, their voices change, they become clear. They become wise. Very often in the very last paragraph, it is as if they have become their own guru. The tone is as clear as a bell because they, through questioning, have come to an awareness of who they are.

Knowing who we are and why we’re here, more or less, leads us then to the next question which is even more pressing in our immediate lives, which is where are we going, where do we hope to arrive in our lives? What do we hope to discover on our particular journey? What is the shape of our unique dharma, that destiny that enters life with an individual, as pure potential. Are we arcing toward that innate potential as individuals? Are we following the voice of our higher angels and staying more focused on freedom than on judgment and separation? How can we not be petty or foolish, or wasteful, or ungrateful, or counter-productive? How can we make our lives count? These are the questions that seekers focus on as we gravitate slowly and painstakingly toward wisdom.

The collective answer to that question, of how can we manifest our destiny, is by learning how to be here fully, to be here in our lives fully and to savor the moments of our own existence; allowing ourselves to be awed by life and fluid in our responses, sensitive, enlivened, even joyful. That’s how we reach our destiny, through that kind of presence. Emerson said, “The earth laughs in flowers.” Isn’t that beautiful? “The earth laughs in flowers.”

“The proper emotion is wonder.”

So, by inhabiting wonder, by being where we are, by hearing the voice of the divine within, or call it intuition, whatever you like, you’re guided toward your own fruition, toward that unique potential that is born with you. In the emotion of wonder, we come into a greater communion with creation. We recognize the blessing of being here, with all the ups and downs of our lives, because we have encountered the God within. In the

silence of the heart, in the presence of beauty, in the moments of self-forgetting, sometimes even moments of heartbreak, every person has met that presence that is inscrutable but undeniably there, even if we don't realize it. We have, even at one time or another, been aware of that witness in ourselves that's watching and registering its impressions through the body, while not being the body.

This can all sound very highfalutin and abstract in a talk like this but the experience itself is actually very simple and often familiar; so, familiar that we rarely pay attention to it – this awareness, of internal presence – of the thing that's watching from behind our eyes.

When we attend to this presence, which speaks uniquely to each one of us, it guides us toward our higher ground. Most of us know this experience as well, of being in our groove, in our flow; and we know how easeful it is, how natural. But that state can't be arrived at by thinking; it can only be arrived at by subduing thought and allowing the voice of God, of the witness, of intuition to come through.

Once again, in order to tune into the higher mind, the ordinary discursive mind, the voice in the head, needs to leave the room, you could say, because spiritual presence doesn't require thinking.

Of course, questions themselves are thoughts, questions are thoughts, but the difference between a question and an ordinary thought is that questions by their nature are aimed at discovering a truth. Questions are thinking put to its best use, you could say, because they always have liberation and awareness as the goal. Having said that, I also have to add that not all questions are wise. We can torment others and ourselves with our questions as well as doing real damage through timings, or crossing boundaries or actual aggression. Like all major powers, questioning can cut both ways and it needs to be engaged in mindfully. What is the intention behind the question? Are we factoring others into our timing? Are we using the question as a form of evasion from taking action or making a decision, or as a form of engagement because there's such a thing as pathological questioning, when questions actually prevent progress.

I know someone like that, who questions every single thing he does. Nothing stands firm. No sooner has he planted his flag somewhere than he's digging it up again. He always reminds me of Odysseus's wife Penelope knitting and then undoing her knitting as she waits for Odysseus's return.

With my friend, the questions are, to me, evasions of the larger inquiries that he seems to avoid in his life. Who am I? What is my purpose? Where am I going? So in lieu of facing his primal questions, he lives in an ongoing state of dubiousness that doesn't allow for any progress or peace of mind. Since he's not introspective by nature, he's never been a seeker and he finds himself in a difficult rut, unable to move forward and hard-pressed to be with himself as he is.

So, ask yourself, do you take the time to explore deep questions in your life? Do you cultivate curiosity? Do you penetrate to the heart of things or do you lose yourself on the

surface level? Do you allow yourself to wonder and investigate the inner world? Or do you use questions self-defeatingly to feed self-doubt rather than to free yourself? This is one of our commonest mistakes as ego-based beings. Instead of questioning the voice of craziness with the wisdom mind, we question the wisdom mind with the voice of craziness. In other words, we have our inquiry inside out.

We doubt the thing that can set us free and we give credibility and credence to the thing that drives us crazy and keeps us ignorant and in bondage. So, when we turn that around and recognize where our strength is it changes the whole game.

Once we use the wisdom mind to untangle the web of the ego, we gain enormous mastery over our lives and we also come to know ourselves as what we truly are, which is enlightened beings in the making. We are aspects of the divine observing ourselves through the eyes of God. And when we come to see that, when we come to live that and experience that, it makes all the difference.

So, that's what I wanted to say to you today about self-inquiry.