

God is a question¹

Let's begin with the assumption that most of us, since the beginning of civilization, when we first learned to live together and work with the forces of nature, have believed in some kind of an all-powerful external power or agency that many of us call God. We can also safely say that God seems to be a pervasive idea that has evolved ever since we first learned to question.

Notice I've simply written "learned to *question*," and not "to question what." It makes even less sense here, if we had thought "to question who." In other words, this is an *open* question, and the emphasis is on our ability to keep an open mind, because we do not know the answers. We also do not even know what the questions really are.

We may rightly say that **human evolution** (which is earlier than human civilization) began when we started to wonder about others and things around us, when we began to question. What does it mean to "**question**"? It means to think, ask, investigate, examine, seek, test, challenge, dispute, to want to know. This has kept us going as humans. In an important sense, we are less than human if we do not question when we do not understand. It helps to reflect on this remark for as long as it takes.

Even today, every human child grows with questions. Children become more human when they learn to question things. We (most of us, anyway) rejoice to see a child beginning to question things. We have a good idea that he or she is learning to think for himself or herself. If we continue to allow the child to question intelligently, and to grow from question to question, then, we are likely to bring out the best of the child's potential to become a truly wise and great individual, someone whose goodness will benefit even the rest of humanity.

We may even say that we stop growing when we find an answer. We need to keep questioning if we want to continue growing.

Now let us look deeper into how we today deal with our natural inclination to question. Let us now add an object to it: "to question things." What are "things" here? We do not need to be scientists to understand and accept that it refers to our **physical senses** (the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body) and our **mind**; or, better, we can simply say, the "sense-faculties," that is, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking. These are the ways we know things; indeed, these are the only sources of knowledge for us.

We can now ask: What can we know? Since all that we *are* are our sense-faculties, then we can only know sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and thoughts. These are our **sense-objects**, the data we call "knowledge." How we view this knowledge is what diversify us according to our temperaments, occupations, and preoccupations.²

Let me explain "preoccupation." It means how we deal with these sense-data before us: how we think about them, and what we *do* with them. In simple terms, we can say that **scientists** go on *questioning* what they find in these data. Then, our scientific mind observes, tests, studies, and questions their findings. Now we can work with a hypothesis (a useful but unproven idea); and finally, propose a theory (a proven idea or natural law).

However, such a theory can be proven wrong by new observations, testings, studies and questions. In fact, science is a history of such changes and learning. Scientists are still questioning and learning. Yet, there is no visible end of knowledge. So, there is really no end to our questioning and learning.

¹ This reflection is inspired by William Irwin, "God is a question, not an answer," [New York Times](#), 26 March 2016; reprinted in [The Straits Times](#), 3 April 2016. It's best to first read through this reflection and simply let it sink in. Then, at your leisure, look up the various sutta or essay references.

² See **Sabba Sutta** (S 35.23), [SD 7.1](#).

Take the number pi, for example – it is a non-repeating decimal, and has all the numbers in our lives – in fact, *all* the numbers in the universe. We can keep on calculating the value of pi to millions, even billions, of decimal places, but we still would not reach the end of it. We can never know everything in this universe, nor do we need to.

But we need to know enough about ourself – what we truly are – so that we are free from our own self-limitation – this self-limiting condition is called self-centredness – an almighty dot or decimal point we see as our self, but is really non-existent. In this way, it gives us an ever better understanding about the world and true reality. When we understand this we are more likely to make our lives simpler, yet more creative and comfortable, and the world safer and more beautiful.

However, when science is used to control, manipulate, even destroy, lives and things, then science is no more a question, but a problem. This is something we, scientists and non-scientists alike, have to constantly address. A promising sign is that now science is delving deeper into the mind, the final frontier of human experience and knowledge. We are already seeing the immense and lasting benefits of this new convergence of science and the mind, especially in terms of meditation or “mindfulness.”³

Religion, as a rule, only uses questions where the answers would fit its preconceived ideas – they ask the wrong questions. When religions ask the right questions, they are more likely to agree and accept one another. Otherwise, religion generally teaches, even psychs, followers not to question their beliefs, but to accept its teachings and practices on faith. Only in religion, the saying, “To believe is to understand,”⁴ seems to make sense. Whereas common sense would tell us that we need to understand before we can believe.

Religion is rooted in how we think and believe, and how we act or react on such ideas and beliefs. Religion is at its best when it allows, indeed, encourages, us to question itself, to think for ourself, and to feel the whole process affecting our being. As long as we go on questioning, and are allowed to do so, we are heading in the right direction – towards self-liberation and awakening.

Religion often thinks that it has all the answers about God. Such answers only define and limit it. God is merely an idea (a creation of the mind) that cannot really or truly be “sensed.” Unlike a scientific or pragmatic idea, we cannot really experience “God”: it cannot be tested by way of the 5 physical senses. We can only *think* that we feel it, or *feel* as we think it. In short, God is all in the mind, even then, in very limited minds.

Now, if we go on thinking about something in a certain fixed way – and we are encouraged to do so by religion – we are likely to end up *believing* (*not* knowing) that it “actually” exists. But this is only a virtual reality we have created for ourself. A desert mirage is real all right, but it does *not* exist. In other words, even if we can “prove” that our senses “actually” experience it, it is not really so. Our mind has projected the idea. Hence, it is a very personal truth, a very private reality: the most private of realities, incidentally, is madness.

Since people tend to think differently – our religious thinkers think differently – we have so many different religions. It may be good that they all swear by the same God; but it is bad when they swear at each other and violate others by the same God!

As long as God remains a question, then we are free to grow as a true individual. The next question is how do we ask such a question? Let’s try a simple problem-solving approach and ask these four questions and see how their answers are helpful.

³ See “Meditation and consciousness,” [SD 17.8c](#).

⁴ See [Kesa,puttiya Sutta](#) (A 3.65) @ [SD 35.4a \(4.1\)](#).

(1) What am I? Notice: we do not ask “who” am I, because *who* assumes a “person,” a fixed entity. But we are changing all the time – we are but what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and think. We are only body and mind. Our body is the 5 physical senses; our mind is our thoughts.⁵ All these must change. In their change, we see the true meaning of life. Meaning is change; change is meaning. The purpose of life, then, is to understand this change, and so awaken to true reality and be free of its power – which is really our own ignorance!⁶

(2) Why am I? When we ask “why,” we are seeking reasons, causes or conditions. This is tricky because we tend to reason each in our own way: we are each a religion unto ourself. First, we come up with an idea; next, we believe in it; and then, we want others to believe in it, too. *Reasoning* – when we don’t really understand how our mind works – is often a mask or tinted lenses that further mislead us and others.

We may say that a burning cigarette butt *caused* a house fire, which is like a “first cause.” The point is that the fire occurred because of many *conditions* (the building was old, it housed a lot of combustible things, no one was looking after it, and so on). Come to think of it, nothing happens or happens to us for any *single* reason.

Even if we do *find* a reason, it is *we* who have made up that reason. There is no reason outside of ourself. So, there’s really no reason blaming anyone for our problems – we can only find the contributing conditions and correct them.⁷

(3) How am I? When we understand the question or problem, we also understand the conditions behind it. Then, we also understand better *how* to solve it. The best way of dealing with a problem is to know how things work, how our mind works. This means that no matter how much or how often we get help from outside, we still need to work at the problem *ourself*. If we do not help ourself, then who can?⁸

(4) When am I? This is a very deep question: When was there ever a moment when I was *really* myself? Notice we use the past tense “was” because we can only look back at the situation. Am I really myself right now? Just as I thought it, that moment is gone. The point is that we often change our minds, even about our own past. Yet, notice how when we are really happy, our past, no matter how bad, doesn’t really matter. Otherwise, we try to find something or someone to blame (but we must remember “conditions”).⁹

Notice how we have been asking questions throughout this reflection. Any system that tells us to stop questioning is telling us to stop growing, to stop evolving, to stop being human. A religion that claims to provide all the answers, without knowing what the real questions are, is simply trying to hijack our mind and empty our hearts.

The Buddha first left home with the question, “Why suffering?” And he found the answers. We can only understand what the Buddha has awakened to by asking the right questions ourself. We can begin our quest for self-awakening by asking basic questions like these: (1) Why do I question? (2) Why do I question? (3) Why do I question? (4) Why do I question? (Note: This is neither a grammatical nor a linguistic analysis.)¹⁰

Sorry, I do not have any answer for these questions. And please do not write to me with your answers. I should not read them because they are not my answers. You have to understand these questions before you can ever answer them. Even after you think you have

⁵ “Thoughts” here is used as a shorthand for all our mental processes. On the Buddhist concepts of “conscious, preconscious, subconscious and unconscious,” see [SD 17.8a \(6.1\)](#) and [SD 41.6 \(2.3.5\)](#).

⁶ See **Dependent arising**, [SD 5.16](#).

⁷ On the 10 sources of information, see **Kesa,puttiya Sutta** (S 3.65) + [SD 35.4a](#) (1.1.3).

⁸ See **Dhammapada**: Dh 160, 380; see **Ādhipateyya Sutta** (A 3.40) @ [SD 27.3](#) (3.1.2).

⁹ See **Bhadd’eka,ratta Sutta** (M 131), [SD 8.9](#).

¹⁰ See **The notion of *ditthi***, [SD 40a.1](#).

answered any of them, in time to come, you will notice that you have changed your mind about them. In due course, you will really know the answer. I'm working on these questions right now myself. Buddhism is the question; you are the answer.

R445 Simple Joys 296
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