

Who, What, Why, How?¹

THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. The Buddha teaches us to ask the right questions, especially about ourselves and life. If we ask the wrong questions, we will only get the wrong answers. Questions like “Who created the world?” and “Do you believe in God?” are the proverbial wrong questions, as they are loaded and tricky with assumptions of which we (and perhaps the questioner, too) might not be aware of.

When we ask “who” created the world, we are assuming that “someone” did it; but we do not really know this, except of course through scripture or belief (which are not helpful in any serious open questioning about life and liberation). Even the word “world” needs definition: Are we here talking about the physical universe of space and time (what about other universes), or the “living” world (of people and other life-forms), of the self-constructed world of our senses and mind (called “formations”)?²

The question, “Do you believe in God?” is a wrong question, too (assuming that it is asked by a God-believer who wishes to convert another or defend his view). It assumes that to “believe” is a right or good thing to do. A “belief” is simply a view that is based on neither knowledge nor experience, but on imagination or wishful thinking (say, for power, that is, for controlling others, or solving a certain problem). Again the notion “God” can mean anything to anyone. All the God-believing religions have their own definitions of God, and each think that only he is right, and everyone else is wrong. Since not everyone can be right here, could it mean that everyone is wrong?

To frame a **right question**, then, we must begin with what is before us. For example, we might ask “How do we know things?” or “What can we know?” or “Why do we know?” or “Why am I asking this question (or these questions)?” The simple answers for these questions are respectively:

- (1) We have only our five physical senses and the mind to know with (that is, the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind).
- (2) All that we can know are the experiences of these six senses, that is, the six sense-objects (forms, sounds, smells, tastes, touches, and thoughts).
- (3) Things happen because of impermanence and conditionality, which helps us to understand the situation, the conditions behind it, the solution, and how to go about solving it.
- (4) The last question is also known as a “thought-reduction” self-healing process. We begin by openly asking ourselves why we think this way; an answer arises; then we question that answer and so on, until we come to the root of the problem.³

“WHO” ASSUMES AN AGENT. As an interrogative pronoun, **who** always refers to people or to other beings treated as humans (such as in stories). In Buddhist terms, this is wrong because we assume that there is a person or abiding “being” or self acting as an agent behind the action.

In our normal social communications, when we ask a “who” question, we generally expect the answer to be a name (Who are you?) or someone who is identifiable (Who did this?). This works in the daily (that is, worldly and conventional) sense, but on a Dharma level, we need to understand that this wrongly implies some kind of identity behind the action, such as someone to praise or to blame, to reward or to punish, and so on. The reality is that there are neither “actors” nor “doers,” only actions and deeds.

¹ This is abridged from the introduction to **Moliya Phagguna Sutta** (S 12,12/2:12-14) @ SD 20.5 (3.3): [link](#).

² On “world,” see **Rohitassa Sutta** (S 2.26) = SD 7.2 (1): [link](#).

³ On this “thought-reduction” method, see **Vitakka Saṅḥāna Sutta** (M 20.6/1:120) @ SD 1.6 ([link](#)) & **Gadhabha Samaṇa Sutta** (A 3.81) = SD 24.10b (2.1.3): [link](#).

The Buddha teaches conditionality. Events do not arise of themselves, but as results of component conditions. There is no first cause, as there is only arising and passing away of events. When the conditions are right, an event occurs. These occur so seamlessly to our eyes that we think such events are connected so that they go back to some point in the past. But the past is as infinite as the future: past, present and future are all our awareness of time. Whatever exists, exists in time: it is conditioned and necessarily impermanent.

“WHAT” REFERS TO A STATE OR EVENT. In conventional language, the interrogative pronoun **what** refers mostly to something not human, but it can refer to people when it comes before a noun (eg “What kind of person did this?”). In Buddhist terms, *what* is often taken in the instrumental mood (“with what?”), that is, we are looking for the conditions that bring about the arising of an event (here a person or being, too, is regarded as an *event* or *process*).

Having said that, we still need to understand the “what” question: that it looks for conditions, not for an agent or entity behind the event. To ask “What is that?” in this case, is to seek for such an abiding entity or fixed quality. In fact, when we keep on looking for some kind of “that.” we are identifying with “it,” meaning that there is some kind of measuring or conceit, and we wish to appropriate *that* if we see it as pleasurable, or to reject *that*, if we think it is painful. This is called “thatness.”⁴

“WHY” LOOKS FOR CONDITIONS. If we look deeper into such events or processes, questioning them as we have done, as taught by the Buddha, we invariably come to a point where we would ask **why** questions. In conventional, even philosophical, language, a *why* question usually seeks a reason or cause or meaning. In the daily or worldly situation, how we answer a *why* question inevitably depends on our personal views and what we know (and what we do not know). Here, we are all biased, since we are each looking at the situation from our own personal angle.

In the Buddhist teachings, the why question is a closer look into the conditionality behind an event. We look at the event or process first and then ask “Why does this happen?” or “Why is this so?” Let us for example ask: “Why is there birth or rebirth?” or better, “Why does birth or rebirth arise?” Answer: It arises on account of our sense-consciousness, which in turn arises on account of formations (*saṅkhārā*) or our karma of body, speech and mind; which in turn arise from ignorance. And why is there ignorance? The best answer: I don’t know!⁵

“HOW” IS THE WAY OUT. Now that we have the right questions (so far), we can go on to look for the right answers: How do we solve the problem, or overcome suffering, or how do we become truly happy? This is not about changing the world: nobody has been able to do that! We may not be able to change the world, but we can and need to change ourselves. This self-change or mental evolution begins with asking the right questions, and then reflecting on the answers.

On a practical level, let us begin with the basics. We have a conscious body and there are other living bodies, and we all feel special about this body: we love life. Hence, it makes sense for us to respect life, our own and those of others. To respect life means to understand the meaning and purpose of life. The meaning of life is that it is impermanent but capable of boundless happiness, physical and mental. The purpose of life then is to grow or evolve into better beings. This also means a wholesome use of our speech and other means of communicating with others. In this sense, we can say that we are living **morally virtuous lives**.

When our body is healthy and our communication with others is healthy, too, a good society or community is possible. Our society should not just be a herd of beings, but an ideal or at least workable en-

⁴ See *Atammayatā* = SD 19.13: [link](#).

⁵ On formations, see *Saṅkhārā* = SD 17.6: [link](#).

vironment for **mental development**, not just for the betterment of our society, but our personal or spiritual growth.

In other words, we have a better self-understanding so that we can tap the depths of our minds and hearts, so that we directly see truth and enjoy beauty. We are only wise and truly liberated when we understand the nature of truth and beauty. This is the cultivation of **wisdom**, which frees us from the limits and frailties of our physical bodies and societies, to realize the best of our minds and hearts so that we live as fully liberated beings even beyond what we have imagined heaven or paradise to be.

THE TRUTH OF THESE QUESTIONS. All this analysis is not novel at all, for it is an application of the 4 noble truths. This is how the truths and the questions are related:

	<u>Essence of the truth</u>	<u>Question</u>
(1) The state of suffering	unsatisfactoriness	“who”
(2) The second noble truth craving		“what”
(3) The third noble truth	nirvana	“why”
(4) The fourth noble truth	the noble eightfold path	“how”

The essence of the first noble truth is found in our constant “who” questions: Who am I? Who are you? Who was I? Who will I be? and so on. Such questions are based on the notion of an abiding ego or self. It brings about a profound sense of **unsatisfactoriness** because we think in terms of an unchanging personality and mental fixation. As a result, we are unable to see that something is wrong. The idea of an abiding entity is based on craving, and not knowing what this is all about is ignorance.

The second noble truth centres around the “what” questions. We tend to look at ourselves, others and life as a whole as consisting of things which we measure and desire to collect. We often ask: What am I worth? What are you worth to me? Is this worth doing? These only involve *thinking* and calculating, without any wholesome *feeling*, certainly lacking lovingkindness. The “what” fixation is a result of **craving**.

The end of suffering begins with our asking: “Why” do we think this way? All answers are provisional, and need to further question *why*, until we come to a “eureka” moment, a realization that our personality, tendencies and fixations are all past conditionings reacting negatively what is before us. We envision how without such mental fetters we become spiritually liberated and awakened beings. We also realize that these fetters are all mind-made, and as such can be unmade by the mind.

“How” do we liberate ourselves and awaken to true reality? This is the fourth noble truth: the way to the end of suffering, the noble eightfold path. With this understanding, we empower ourselves to deconstruct these conditions and conditionings, so that we become free of them, at least temporarily, and feel the joy of spiritual freedom, which in turn reinforces our inner strength until we are fully awakened.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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