

Questions & Answers

ALBA Day of Practice 24 July 2021



Are you Sure?



Martin Evans

Doubting

I find myself doubting a lot of the time which I perceive as a problem. Isn't asking oneself 'Are you sure?' all the time going to make that even worse?

Asking 'Are you sure' is for letting go of our attachment to conceptual thinking - the way of thinking that assumes we can make sense of the world by reasoning it out. We can't. We just get trapped in a knot of views that get tighter the more we tangle with them. This kind of doubt is a problem - it ultimately leads to inaction - we call it sceptical doubt - it is one of the Five Hindrances in Buddhism. It becomes an excuse for inaction - you don't get to take any decisions and don't do anything - hiding behind 'I'm not sure'.

This is what climate change denial is - continually using the fact that there is always a margin of uncertainty in predictions for global warming, or for the reasons why it is happening - as an excuse for taking no action to avoid it. It is a problem. Yes, asking 'Are you sure' just means we can put off doing anything until the next government comes into power - or the next generation. But the art of living is to know what to do, and when - and doing it. Because otherwise we miss the opportunity. If this is the right time act, and we don't act, the opportunity might not come back. Even if we are not absolutely sure, we can listen to expert advice and weigh up probabilities and then take the best action we can, and accept the consequences. Doing nothing is a choice - it is a kind of action - even by doing nothing you have to accept the consequences of that.

It is the same in every part of our lives. Maybe the time to say 'No' is now and if we don't do that, we miss the opportunity. And we can't go back and put it right. Or it may be 'Yes'. We may not be sure - but the time to act is now. But because we know everything is uncertain - we don't attach to an outcome. We simply receive the next moment wholeheartedly, whatever it is - and we are willing to act in that moment - always acknowledging we're doing our best, even though we're not sure what the outcome will be. And so we receive the next moment in the same spirit of uncertainty. We are not demanding certainty out of what is uncertain - and there's freedom in that. We are not carrying a burden from one moment to the next.



Relating to bowing and chanting

Thank you and all the lay people for organizing and joining this day of practice. This is my question: is it normal to have doubt about bowing, chanting and praying? One part of the mind is in doubt if this is really necessary for a good practice. This is probably because the mind associates this with a very strict catholic education. I do it because I respect all of you and I see that you put it to the test and it works 😊. But part of my mind rejects bowing, chanting and praying sometimes. In advance thank you for your advice about this.

A – Noticing is what matters – this is what practicing Buddhism is. Not bowing or chanting or praying – but noticing our experience of doing it – or not doing it. So you don't need to think I'm only a Buddhist if I bow. Because if you are noticing how it feels to 'reject' bowing – that's all it takes to practice Buddhism. It really is that simple. It's not about the outward form – we don't become a Buddhist by bowing and chanting, however good we get at it, but by waking up to our experience. Look at that resistance for as long as you can – because sooner or later you will have to let it go – so enjoy it while you can. Because eventually, we let go of our resistance – full stop. We stop pushing things away and we let them in – and we let more in, until we let everything in. Bowing or not bowing makes no difference then.

Sometimes I used to deliberately not bow, just to see how it felt. Or even, not being sure whether I had bowed three times or not, would wonder whether I should bow again in case I had lost count. How does that feel? That's bringing our practice alive – not to blame ourselves for not being mindful enough to keep count, but to be in the present with our experience, whatever it is, right now.



Communicating insight

Thank you for a wonderful morning of meditation and reflections. I have often found this sort of questioning useful. I might already know the answer to my question (!) but would just like to hear your views:

When we feel we know something at the heart level from experience (e.g. I feel I know when I experience compassion, as it can be very strong and direct and feels like it comes from the heart) or some kind of insight, by the time our mind has got hold of it and interpreted it intellectually/formulated it as concepts and words, does it automatically become unsure or uncertain in terms of knowledge? Presumably we can only trust the original feeling or knowing, not our mind's interpretation of it? I hope you understand what I mean?!

Yes, when we experience insight it happens without words, and then the mind tries to make sense of it and 'fills the void' with concepts to describe it with, but it is a hopeless task. We know this when we get home after a retreat and our partner asks how it went, and we start to try to describe some great insight we had - and we look up and find they have gone to sleep. Insight is a shift in our perception, we see things from a different perspective, and we'll never see them the same way again. But how do you put that into words? Some people never can - and it doesn't mean they haven't had an insight. Their lives have changed, they are happier, more at ease with themselves and in the world - more loving and less demanding. But they can't put into words what shifted. And it doesn't matter. The realisation is what matters.

In fact, when we put it into words, that's when we start to argue - we attach to the language we use to describe an experience. And another tradition - or another religion - describes the same experience in a different way. And instead of finding common ground in the experience, we create division in attaching to the way we describe it. How sad that is. Wherever I look, I find the words differ, but I think they are describing the same thing. The words just get in the way.



Not harming

Could you please say something about the first precept, regarding not taking the life of any living being. I have been thinking about this for a long time. The fact is that I do kill things, although I am very careful not to in most cases, I do kill midges, and horseflies when they bit me, and I do kill things which are harming some of the plants I grow. I don't feel ready to stop theses killings, although I feel bad about not adhering to the precept. Could you please say something about this.

If we feel bad about breaking a precept, that is taking a precept like a rule - and you feel bad about breaking the rule. But we shouldn't feel bad about breaking the precepts - they are not there so we can beat ourselves up and create suffering out of them - they are training tools, they are developmental. It's like learning to garden. You just learn as you go along. If you feel like you've failed, and you fail often enough, you are likely to give up.

I would rather you felt bad about causing suffering to the beings you killed. When we really empathise with the suffering of other beings - we realise; why would we, who so much don't want to suffer, cause suffering to others. Gradually over time we feel so bad about it we have to stop doing it. We just think of better ways to live which are more in harmony with other living beings. We stop harming life out of wisdom, not because we are attaching to a rule.



Trusting the heart

Thanks for your reflections. Would you be able to reflect on:

- *Can the mind be trained to trust the heart?*
- *Is there a duality between mind and heart? Or are they both part of knowing?*
- *Does the heart sometimes make choices which are unwise?*
- *Can we ever know another person's heart?*

The mind can be trained not to trust conceptual thinking – that is what the question ‘Are you sure’ is for – to undermine our attachment to what the mind creates out of the intellect. So what are we left with? We can call it the heart, but then we start to conceptualise what this means – so we challenge this with ‘Are you sure’. Over time we loosen our attachment to concepts and we start to let go of the conditioning which says we can reason it all out if we just keep trying, and we let go. All we are left with is the heart. And over time we come to trust it more and more. Even when it takes us into uncharted waters, to the very edge of our conditioned world – we still trust it, because we know that’s where insight arises.

But this doesn’t mean we can always trust the heart. I once went to visit a project in Calcutta with the Chair of a charity – we were invited to an unveiling ceremony of a new building the charity had paid for – it was a lovely occasion – there were banners with the charity’s name over the entrance and lots of street children came for a meal. But I was travelling in India for a few months so I took the opportunity to visit Calcutta again a few weeks later – and I came back to take another look. The banners had been taken down and the name of another charity was up on the building – and I discovered that they had paid for it too. But when I told the Chair what I had discovered she wouldn’t believe me. She was so attached to her connection with the heart to what she had seen, she wasn’t willing to accept that she had been taken in. So convincing her of the reality became a very painful process, and in the end she had to stand down as Chair. I learnt a lot from that – about not accepting everything at face value – and also how much suffering we can create when we can’t face up to reality.



Using Are you sure? In meditation

In day to day life I think when asking the question "are you sure" is a good way of letting things go. However during meditation practice, when you focus on your breathing or "hear and now" mindfulness, does it not create doubt in your mind and making it busy, which could be a creation of hindrance?

A - When you are trying to focus on the breath, any mental activity is a distraction. But I still think it is useful to investigate using 'Are you sure?' Focussing is very goal orientated - and asking 'Are you sure?' is a way of undermining that - because you are never really sure what level of concentration you have attained or whether you are concentrated enough etc. And Buddhist meditation is not about attaining anything - it is for understanding things as they really are. It is more important to develop the capacity to reflect than it is to be able to attain high levels of concentration.



Right attention

What are the characteristics to discriminate right attention from sluggish attention?

Only by being aware. All we can do is notice. This is a good time to investigate the sluggish mind - in the afternoon, after our meal. What can you do? We just listened to some wonderful chanting - the Buddha's first sermon. I asked Randula to chant it at the start of the afternoon session deliberately - as a way of energising the mind. The best way to overcome the sluggish mind is through cultivating interest and curiosity. Chanting is a way of doing this.



Right view

Is Right View the understanding that all things are unsure/uncertain? Is it anything else?

A - Right view - which I prefer to call right understanding (when we say 'view' it can sound like a belief) - is the keystone of the eightfold path. It is more than the understanding that everything is uncertain. There are three insights that form the basis of right understanding: That everything is impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self'. Understanding that everything is uncertain falls into the insight about impermanence - if everything is continually changing it is like shifting sand - you can't find any solid ground to stand on - and so everything is uncertain.

But we don't have to gain an insight into all three - we can walk through any one of those doors and we will understand the other two. So the insight into uncertainty is one way to realise right understanding.

